Dwelling in the Wilderness: 
Place, Landscape and the Sacred among Catholic Monks 
in the American West

by

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Abstract

A monk’s purpose is to seek God, and contemplative monks in the Roman Catholic tradition are specifically called to seek God in *place*. Drawing from biblical motifs, religious symbols, spiritual teachings and monastic traditions, monastic communities have forged deep and abiding relationships with their rural and wild locales. While many of the studies concerning monasticism’s relationship to land engage historical and theological dimensions, far fewer give adequate voice to the range of lived perspectives of contemporary monks themselves. Exploring research questions focused on the relationship between environmental discourses and contemporary monastic spirituality, during field work conducted between December 2015 and May 2016, I interviewed 50 male monastics at four monastic communities through both seated and walking interviews. Embedded in the interdisciplinary literature of place and landscape studies, my findings are interpreted through the lens of recent debates regarding the role of cognitively or socially constructed discourses in the experience of landscape. Socially constructed or “representational” perspectives emphasize the semiotic character of experience and meaning making with place and landscape. Rooted in identity, gender, class, ideology or religion, we project meaning onto an otherwise meaningless objective landscape. More recent phenomenological approaches attempt to shift away from any vestiges of Cartesian dualism between subject and object by rejecting representational or symbolic understandings of experience for an emphasis on pre-cognitive, embodied, sensory experience as the fundamental driver of our experience of land and place. I argue that contemporary monasticism, rooted in both symbolic religious constructions and powerful spiritual experiences of land, has engaged environmental discourse through ‘bridging,’ a practice which attempts to assimilate environmental discourse into monastic spirituality on its own terms. The monastic sense of place, the question of ‘sacred’ land, and the observation of religious symbols in land demonstrate what I call an *embodied semiotics* wherein established religious and environmental discourses are relationally attached to and molded by embodied contact and experience with land.
Lay Summary

Drawing from biblical motifs, religious symbols, spiritual teachings and monastic traditions, monastic communities have forged deep and abiding relationships with their rural and wild locales. During field work conducted between December 2015 and May 2016, I interviewed 50 male monastics, at four monastic communities through both seated and walking interviews. Embedded in the interdisciplinary literatures of religion and ecology and place and landscape studies, my findings are interpreted through the lens of recent debates in these literatures regarding the nature of experience of place and landscape. I argue that contemporary monasticism, rooted in both religious ideas and powerful spiritual experiences of land, has incorporated environmental ideas into monastic spirituality on its own terms. The monastic sense of place, the question of ‘sacred’ land, and the observation of religious symbols in land demonstrate show that established religious and environmental ideas are relationally attached to and molded by embodied contact and experience with land.
Preface

This research and the analysis of the data collected was originated, carried out and conducted primarily by the author. My Supervisor was Theresa Satterfield, and my committee included Mike Meitner of UBC Forestry and John Robinson of CIRS (now at the University of Toronto). This dissertation has not as of yet resulted in any publications, though I hope it will soon. I am the sole researcher involved in collecting data and writing this dissertation. The Ethics review of this project was conducted through the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board, under the project title “Dwelling in the Wilderness,” Certificate Number H14-02005.
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This work is dedicated to the former, present and future monks of New Camaldoli Hermitage, New Clairvaux Abbey, Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey and Christ in the Desert Abbey.

Thank you.
Lauds

Chapter 1: Ora et Labora: Toward a Monastic Spiritual Ecology

“We were made by God. We were made for God, and we find our fulfillment in God. The work of our life on earth is to seek God. It’s not that God is missing. God is not lost. Our work is to open our heart to God who is already present and calling us and that’s the work of the monk.”

–Monk of New Clairvaux Abbey (2016)

“Monasticism, more than any other movement in the history of Christendom, has been associated with wilderness.”

–Susan P. Bratton (1993)

First Encounter

After a short presentation, and a few samples of liqueur, I wandered out of the gift shop of the 12th century Carthusian monastery which was nestled in the rolling hills of rural Slovenia and into a grove of trees that formed a green wall around the walled in cloister. I stood in silence, staring up into the leafy branches of a cruciform ash tree with meandering lianas climbing up a slender bole. It was 2011, the last year of my joint master’s degrees in forestry and theology at Yale, and was participating in the forestry school’s popular European forestry fieldtrip. As a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormons), I was in the midst of a crisis of faith, and many of my deeply held beliefs about God, the world, and the human soul were being called into question by doubts about historical and theological issues, dissatisfaction with Mormon worship, and a deep resentment of Mormonism’s recent political activism against gay rights. As I stood looking upward at the sparkling sun through dappled leaves I felt a sense of calm.

Monastic communities have been managing land both as material and spiritual resources for centuries, and in the present case, the land served as a green buffer around the monastic community, whose spirituality places a strong emphasis on silent prayer. The Carthusians are the most solitary of the Catholic orders, with members resembling solitary hermits more than traditionally communal monks. Standing in that grove of trees out of earshot of the tourists but close to the cloister wall, my sense of peace turned into curiosity.
What would possess someone to give up everything for a life of celibacy, rigorous prayer, fasting, and daily liturgy? Do all monasteries have this much land? What kinds of monastic land holdings might I find in the North American context? Were they receptive to environmental ideas about conservation? What kinds of spirituality did they develop around their land management practices?

Not only was my personal interest peaked in Catholicism and monasticism, but my academic interest as well. Two years later, as I weighed my options for a PhD dissertation, I was encouraged by my supervisor to further pursue “the monastic project.” As I began to search for monasteries with some kind of land holding or resource management operation, I discovered a network of monasteries in the North America that maintained fairly large acreages and a wide variety of community livelihoods. I had a project!

**Genesis**

There were two days left in my month-long ‘Monastic Life Retreat’ at Our Lady of Guadalupe, a Trappist Abbey of about twenty six monks, nestled in the mossy hills of Western Oregon. At 4:13 AM, just as I had done for the last 30 days, I stumbled toward my creaky choir stall. On this morning however, just before I reached my seat, I looked up and past the church tabernacle, through the dark west-facing church window. The cycle of the moon had shifted enough so that on that morning, May’s full moon was setting through a light haze, casting a pale glow over the monastery’s extensive wooded property. I had arrived on April 14, under the previous full moon, and though a coincidence of my arrival, my stay coincided with an entire lunar month. I have always enjoyed looking at the moon, and even in my modern busy-busy life have tried to keep track of whether or not it is waxing or waning. And yet I had never measured time using this most ancient of clocks. Nor had I punctuated days of manual work, silent prayer, and hiking with the communal chanting of the biblical Psalms. But this was life for the monks who call Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey home.

What compelled me to participate in this month long Monastic Life Retreat with the monks of Guadalupe Abbey was a desire to better understand how the land continues to shape and be shaped by a 2,000 year old spiritual tradition in the contemporary American West. I was seeking the Abbot’s blessing to return as a researcher, but had to prove that I could endure the rigors of the monastic life without getting in the way of the monk’s single-
purposed lives. Luckily, the Abbot was persuaded by my seemingly monastic countenance, and my ambitions to become something of a contemplative ethnographer were blessed to move forward. With this experience under my belt, I was also able to reach out to several other monastic communities in the region.

As I would learn, since its earliest days in the vast deserts of Egypt and Syria, the land has shaped monastic spirituality as much as monastic communities have shaped the physical ecologies and landscapes that surrounded them. This relationship between inner and outer landscapes is the heart of this study. In the third and fourth centuries, Christian solitaries began to swarm to the deserts in search of spiritual transformation through what was called a “white” martyrdom. From these desert beginnings the land informed a spiritual practice of prayer that was expressed through solitude, silence, and sacramental reverence. The land was an integral part of the monastic experience, and shaped the monastic sense of self.

Saint Jerome (347-420), an Italian, who fled to the desert to become an early Church Father once said that “the desert loves to strip bare,” meaning that the starkness of the land, aided the monastic in peeling away layers of perceived delusion, sin, vice and ignorance. Elaborating on this imagery, scholar of sacred landscapes Belden Lane writes, “The desert experience of silence was the soil out of which everything else eventually grew.” The monastic craving for absolute silence, was nourished by the desert ecology. The nakedness, stillness and quiet of the desert informed the spiritual practices of these solitary ascetics which stripped away words, metaphors and images leaving the seeker in the raw presence of the divine.

For medieval monks too, who took a much more active agrarian approach, nonetheless, the land proved to be a rich material and spiritual substrate in which to root the monastic life, while simultaneously orienting him or her toward the placelessness of eternity. In her excellent study of the Ardennes region of Belgium, environmental historian Ellen

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1 While early Christians were honored by the “red” martyrdom of dying for their beliefs, following in the footsteps of Jesus; after the establishment of Christianity, the “white” martyrdom of the desert hermits was accomplished through self-denial, renunciation of the world, and strict asceticism. See C. H. Lawrence ([1984] 2001). Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. (New York: Routledge), 6.

Arnold writes “nature, human labor, and religious practices, were all bound together under the rubric of monastic spirituality.” The present work will explore this relationship in depth through my experiences at four such monastic communities.

**The Meaning of Religion vs. Spirituality**

Even though I write this study from within an interdisciplinary environmental studies program, its contents are unavoidably religious. Let me then say a word about what I mean by religion and spirituality, since these words carry so much baggage in today’s world.

While Catholic monks generally ascribe to a conventional definition of religion, I want to say a word about it in this introductory chapter to orient my readers to what I mean when I say religion and spirituality. In recent years, religion and spirituality have taken on divergent meanings. Religion has become associated with institutions, dogmas, metaphysical claims, and morality, and is often said to be distinct from spirituality, which is more subjective, mystical, and personal. This distinction will be of little use in this study, where monks, who follow a rigorous spirituality, also belong to the Roman Catholic Church, and in many cases, are in fact priests. However, I want to ground the study in several axioms with respect to the study of religion as both institution and discourse and spirituality as a practice.

Religion as a phenomenon has been variously defined. The Latin root *religare* means to bind together. For Emile Durkheim, religion is a social phenomenon, that represents “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them.”

As a Western concept the word religion does not always capture the entirety of beliefs and practices of a given tradition. For example, Hinduism a religion named by English colonials was simple the name for those who lived along the Indus River, but whose religious practices spanned a vast constellation of practices, devotions, deities, metaphysical

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commitments sacred sites and temple retinues. In common parlance religion often refers to belief in dogmas, or the existence of supernatural beings such as a creator God. However, this definition is clearly lacking, for not all religions put belief in supernatural beings or gods at the center of their practice. Buddhist sects in general for example typically affirms the existence of gods and supernatural beings called Bodhisattvas, but does not necessarily worship them or believe that there is a single creator God, with some referring to Buddhism as atheist. In addition, many First Nations or Native American practitioners would deny that they are religious because their spirituality pervades every aspect of their daily lives.

Rather, religious traditions typically include but are not limited to metaphysical beliefs, practices, rituals and ethics organized into a coherent shape or tradition whose adherents self-identify with in some way. Sociologist, Benson Saler suggests that while there may be no single definition for what constitutes a religion, similarities in human tendencies can be bundled into what he calls “family resemblances.” This means that while Buddhism and Catholicism do not share a concept of a Creator Deity, they share many other aspects of human actions such as metaphysical commitments, ritual, ceremony, codes of ethics, organizations, etc. that lend themselves to comparison.

A more concrete definition to religion is offered by Theologian Paul Tillich who defines religion as that which makes up a given culture’s “Ultimate Concerns.” For Tillich, existential questions always come back to questions of being, of what it means to exist. Tillich writes, “Man (sic.), like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence.” A given religious tradition’s ultimate concern is that which it deems most sacred, and for Roman Catholics that universally points to the reality of God as the ontological ground for existence. For Catholic monks those concerns are acted on through their vocation of seeking God through a life of prayer.

Lastly, this combination of a suit of metaphysical and moral commitments set in an institutional milieu is also expressed through what anthropologist Clifford Geertz saw as a system of symbols which mediate the religion’s relationship with the sacred. For Geertz,

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religion is an organizing mechanism for interpreting the world as text, a way of making sense of reality through meaning.\textsuperscript{9} He writes:

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (sic.) by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.\textsuperscript{10}

In this view, religion is a subjective category used to make sense of the objective world. The world, which is everywhere the same, is constructed differently by different religions. While this definition is useful in a broad sense, because it deals with symbols, it tends to confine religion to the mind. Religions is not just a system of symbols, but a dynamic embodied encounter with that world, that is shaped and shapes the world.

Scholars of Religion and Ecology Mary John Grim and Evelyn Tucker define religion as a “functional cosmology” which orient and ground human beings to phenomenal reality, and its cosmological context.\textsuperscript{11} Grim and Tucker utilize the theory of Ernst Cassirer who saw science and religion as differing in their view of the world through “thing perception” in the case of science and “expressive perception” in the case of religion and culture generally. These distinct ways of knowing were not reconcilable, but complementary. For example, there are religious and scientific ways of knowing a Gingko tree.

This view is consistent with a Durkheimian approach to religion, wherein symbolic systems are concerned with delineating between sacred and profane, which was explored in more depth by Mircea Eliade, who saw the binary between sacred and profane as the heart of religious ontology.\textsuperscript{12} However, these generally binary, or dualistic modes of understanding religion and the world in general have been vigorously critiqued by philosophers, geographers and scholars in the Environmental Humanities. As scholar of Religion and Ecology Whitney Bauman writes, paraphrasing Martin Heidegger, “religion is then one of the ingredients of worlding,”\textsuperscript{13} by which he means that religious institutions and discourses

\textsuperscript{9} Geertz, Clifford. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. (New York: Basic books), 90.
\textsuperscript{10} Geertz, Clifford, The Interpretation of Cultures, 90.
are part of the a co-constructed world that includes the biophysical and psychic dimensions of reality. He continues,

I am not arguing that humans construct meaning out of nothing and create worlds or that language creates reality. This would be a monological process of imposing meaning onto the entire planet. Rather, humans are born into worlds of coconstructed meaning. These meanings are coconstructed by biohistories of humans living within a larger earth community.¹⁴

This study will take this hybrid approach, conceding a degree of constructedness to religious space and experience grounded in a dwelling perspective that pays close attention to affect and embodied experience as shapers of religious symbols. Religion is both a symbolic system and an embodied practice, a way of believing and a way of being.

*Spirit* entered English through the Old French *espirit*, as is commonly defined as the, animating or vital aspect of human beings, and sometimes life more generally. The word comes directly from the Latin *spiritus* which literally means breath or wind. It is also commonly used to describe a disposition or character of a person or even an era, as in the ‘spirit of the age.’ The Greek equivalents are *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah*. In contemporary religious usage, spirit refers to the non-physical aspect of a person that is the seat of one’s essential character, or true self, also referred to as one’s soul. Rough contemporary synonyms are psyche, self, inner being, mind and ego. In the wider anthropological context, spirits are supernatural actors or ancestors of a given ontological system or cosmology which can be associated with certain spatial domains such as sacred groves, tombs, mountains, rivers, plants, animals or caves.¹⁵

Using a simple definition, philosopher and scholar of Religion and Ecology Roger Gottlieb, defines spirituality as “An understanding of how life should be lived and an attempt to live that way.”¹⁶ Spirituality is primarily a practice, something that we engage in to discipline ourselves, or improve; or to deepen our connection to a broader truth or whole. Interdisciplinary scholar Rebecca Fox suggests that this often results in:

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An altered state of consciousness where an individual may experience a higher sense of self, inner feelings, inner knowledge, awareness and attainment to the world and one’s place in it, knowledge of personal relations and the relationship with the environment, or a belief in a power greater than imaginable.\textsuperscript{17}

States of consciousness, higher purpose and interiority are common components of the spiritualities of most if not all religious and mystical traditions. The purpose of those conscious experiences may differ, or the name for God may change, but spirituality is a process of personal transformation and realization that seeks to unite the individual with something larger that the individual ego.

**What is Christian Monasticism?**

Before I discuss the increasing interest in monastic communities within the Environmental Humanities, and further elaborate on the theoretical scope and methods of this work, I want to define Christian monasticism and its unique spirituality for a general readership. I will start with a famous scene in the Bible which has continually haunted Christians over their 2,000 year history, and which was often used by the monks in this study to talk about their unique vocations. In the New Testament book of Luke, the author narrates as Jesus arrives in the town of Bethany, where he is staying in the house of disciples Martha and her sister Mary.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”\textsuperscript{18}


The Christian monastic is, simply put, a person who follows the example of Mary. Mary represents a life devoted to contemplation and prayer, and Martha the world most of us live in, a world of stress and tasks over family, relationships, politics, society and money. This tension between prayer and work, contemplation and action, laity and clergy has been a central concern of Christian religious practice, and was a key point of departure during the Protestant reformation, which bucked at the corruption, power and wealth of the clergy, including many monastic communities with their vast feudal properties. While there are contemporary monastic traditions within Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, Christian monasticism is most diverse and numerous within the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Christian denomination. With headquarters at the Vatican, an independent State located in Rome, and under the sovereign authority of the Pope since at least the 5th century, Roman Catholicism accounts for just over half of the global Christian population.19

Roman Catholicism can be distinguished from other branches of Christianity such as the Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant branches. From the Greek words kata and holos, or, ‘according to the whole’, or universal, the church began to splinter around the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, during the fourth Ecumenical Council, when the churches in Ethiopia, India, and Egypt refused to endorse the doctrine that Christ was simultaneously fully human and fully divine.20 The supremacy of the Bishop of Rome as the Pope, solidified gradually, and the Papacy played a major role in medieval political disputes and intrigue. The second fissure in Christian unity came when the Greek Church in the east, split off in 1054, forming the Eastern and Western churches. And finally, the Protestant reformation, which celebrates its 500 year anniversary in the year this work was completed, began with Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, posted on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany.21

Within Catholic religious culture, a life of pure contemplation has always been held in special esteem. To provide for this life, there are numerous “Religious Orders” each following the path of a leader or founder, and each exhibiting a unique “charism” or spiritual

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Sorting out the differences between Catholic religious orders can be quite confusing. Within this vast terrain, there are generally speaking four groupings: Canons Regular, Monastics, Mendicants and Clerics Regular. Canons Regular are Priests living in a community under a ‘Regula,’ or, Rule that guides their daily lives and ministries. They are often attached to large Cathedrals or churches and live an active life, or a life that regularly engages with the wider diocese and public. Clerics Regular such as the Jesuit Order are similar to Canons Regular, but do not live under the same Rule, and are less attached to any specific parish or cathedral, which means they are freer to focus on various pastoral care and ministry efforts. For example, many Jesuits are spiritual directors, educators, or scientists. Mendicant Orders take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, but are generally not cloistered or enclosed within a monastic community to which they are tied through vow of stability. Their ministries often allow them to move from place to place, evangelizing or serving the people. Examples of Mendicant Orders include Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite and Servite Orders, each with their own unique history and spirituality.

Finally, to be a monk or nun one must belong to a monastic order or congregations of men or women that are in some way separated or cloistered from the affairs of the world. The word monk comes to us from the Greek monachos, for alone or solitary; and nun comes from the Latin nonnus which may derive from antecedents that mean mother. Roman Catholic, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, and Anglican traditions all house monastic orders, though Roman Catholics have by far the greatest number and variety. While there is a hermit tradition that harkens back to the desert fathers and mothers of the 3rd and 4th centuries, wherein a life of solitude is practiced, monastic orders tend to be cenobitic, or community-oriented. They live in community under a superior and take vows of obedience, stability and conversion of life. Male monks may or may not be ordained priests, and non-ordained men are simply called brothers rather than father. The monastic’s life is devoted to prayer and

24 In this work I use the word monastic and monastery in a gender neutral way. I will use Nun or Sister if referring specifically to female monastics.
25 Stability means to stay in one place throughout one’s life. However, it is still possible to “transfer” one’s stability to another monastery if one feels so called. The vow of ‘conversion of life’ simply means a commitment to grow and change in the monastic life.
contemplation and they often have no external apostolates or ministries. However as we will see, among Benedictine monks this is not always the case. There are of course lengthy treatments on the history of Catholic Religious life. For our purposes I will outline the basic contours of the monastic orders included in this study, which make up the most numerous orders located in the American West: The Order of Saint Benedict, The Camaldolese Benedictines and the Cistercian-Trappists.

*The Order of Saint Benedict*

Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-543) was raised in a wealthy family in Rome, but decided to leave the corruption of the city at an early age to live a more contemplative life. He eventually met a monk named Romanus who encouraged him to take up residence in a nearby cave as a hermit. Benedict’s reputation as a holy man and miracle worker drew many followers, and in around 520 he was persuaded to become the Abbot of a nearby monastic community whose Superior had died. This first foray as Abbot did not go very well, and the monks eventually attempted to poison him. His reputation as a holy man and worker of miracles persisted however, and he went on to found thirteen monastic communities including the famous Montecassino where he took up residence, wrote his famous Rule, and was eventually buried.26

In seventy three short chapters, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which borrows generously from the another monastic rule entitled the *Rule of the Master*, outlines the organization of monastic life, authority, decision-making, discipline, and the virtues of a good monastic. The Rule organizes the day around public prayer (the Divine Liturgy, or Liturgy of the Hours) and private prayer, communal eating, work, study and sleep. The monastery is to be a “school of love” modeled on the medieval family with the superior as parent and monastics as siblings. Its moderation and empathy for the limits of human beings has won it wide popularity. For example the passage on the consumption of wine is not as strict as some of the more ascetical movements of the time: “We read it is true, that wine is by no means a drink for monastics; but since the monastics of our day cannot be persuaded of this let us at least agree to drink sparingly and not to satiety, because ‘wine makes even the wise fall

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away’ (Ecclesiastes 19:2). The Rule thus strikes a middle ground between laxity and punishing asceticism, with an emphasis on compassion, understanding and love.

During the medieval period, Benedictine monasticism spread throughout Europe and within the feudal social order held massive influence over European landholding and politics. Monasteries were often gifted large landholdings by patrons in exchange for prayers and many monastic communities became drivers of local economies, where villages and cities eventually developed. This feudal arrangement drew on an even larger land base. And while monks were certainly encouraged to engage in meaningful work, they often relegated manual and farm labor to tenants, peasants and lay brothers.

After the dust had settled from the Reformation and the French Revolution, which left many monastic communities stripped of their lands, monasticism began a revival in the 19th century. This revival is responsible for the motto “Ora et Labora” which in its post-feudal context ennobled the vocation of working the land as a kind of spiritual practice. However, the question of what kind of work constitutes ‘Labora’ has not been well defined and was often a motivator in monastic reforms. The 19th century monastic revival also saw the birth of the contemporary organizational structure of Benedictine monasticism. Monasteries began to form themselves into “Congregations” that shared a similar interpretation of the Rule, apostolates (ministry such as running a university), or spirituality. In 1893, with the blessing of Pope Leo XIII, the Benedictine Confederation was formed, a union of all the Benedictine Congregations in the world. Today there are 19 Congregations in the Benedictine Confederation; with some running schools or seminaries, and others seeking to live a more contemplative life without external apostolates.

In North America, while Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and many other Catholic Religious Orders or missionaries were active from the first years of exploration and colonization, monastic orders did not arrive in the US until the 19th century. The first Benedictine Abbey to be established in North America was Saint Vincent Arch-abbey founded in 1832 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which was followed by many others.

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currently approximately 120 monastic communities in the Benedictine tradition in the US and Canada belonging to four main Congregations: American-Cassinese, Swiss-American, St. Scholastica, and St. Benedict.\textsuperscript{32}

Benedictines did not arrive in the American West until the 1880s, with waves of Catholic immigrants. Benedictine Abbey and Seminary Mount Angel was the first, founded in 1882 in western Oregon. Two Benedictine monasteries were included in this study: Christ in the Desert Abbey, founded from Mount Savior Monastery located in New York, Christ in the Desert is a member of the more contemplative Benedictine Congregation Cassinese-Subiaco Congregation. The other Benedictine monastery is part of a unique Congregation among Benedictines called the Camaldolese. Because they are a distinct lineage, I will say a word about them before discussing the Trappists.

\textit{Camaldolese Benedictines}

While they are members of the Benedictine Confederation, the Camaldolese have a distinct lineage and spirituality. Founded by the Italian monastic reformer Saint Romuald of Ravenna (951-1025), who established a monastery on Camaldoli Mountain, the order strives to balance the hermit tradition of the desert with the and cenobitic traditions of classical Benedictine monasticism. In Romuald’s ‘Brief Rule’ he writes, “Sit in your cell as in Paradise” emphasizing the importance of focusing on the inner landscape of the soul.\textsuperscript{33} In practical terms, this means that each Camaldolese monk typically has their own small hermitage, rather than living in cells in a cloister. This charism also results in less regular public services so that monks can spend time in solitude and silence. The Camaldolese Benedictines have three monasteries in North America, one of which is included in this study.

\textit{The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists)}

The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), or Trappists as they are more commonly known, are directly descended from the Benedictine lineage. Today they are a distinct religious order, with their own Rule but continue to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict. However, their origins stem from a monastic reform movement that flared up in

France during the late 11th century. Robert of Moslme (1028-1111) and several of his fellow monks broke with their Cluniac monastery, itself a monastic reform movement, for a more austere monastic community, one that returned to the simplicity and poverty of the Rule of Saint Benedict, including a return to manual labor and a more pronounced separation from the affairs of the world.34

Founding their monastery in the forested valley of Citeaux, these reformers eventually become known as Cistercians. With the ascension of the talented orator, polemicist and organizer Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the fledgling order gained traction and flourished throughout Europe until the reformation when much of their land was confiscated. In the 17th century, at a village called Le Trappe in France, the Cistercian Abbot Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé led another austere reform, and in 1892, the “Trappists” broke with the Cistercians to found their own Order.35

Unlike the Benedictines, contemporary Trappists do not form Congregations but, trace their lineage through a “Motherhouse”, or the monastery from which they were founded. And, unlike the Benedictines, Cistercians have a single global superior who resides in Rome and oversees the global order. In North America, fleeing the persecution of the French Revolution, Cistercian monks began to arrive as early as 1802. However, there no community was able to get off the ground until the mid-1800s. In 1825, Cistercians were sent to Nova Scotia, and founded the Abbey of Petit Clairvaux.36 This community eventually moved to Rhode Island after several fires, and then Spencer, Massachusetts where it was renamed Saint Joseph’s Abbey.37 The oldest continuously occupied Trappist community in North America is Gethsemani Abbey founded in Kentucky in 1848 from Notre Dame de Melleray in France. There are currently 22 Trappist monasteries in the US and Canada.38

In the American West, a Trappist monastic community was sent to Jordan, Oregon in 1904, but the community closed in 1910 due to a lack of business acumen. Our Lady of the Holy Trinity was the next Trappist monastery to be founded in the American West, with monks arriving in 1947 from the Abbey of Gethsemani. However, this monastery is closing at the end of 2017 due to languishing vocations. This study includes two Trappist Abbeys, New Clairvaux Abbey in Vina, California, founded from Gethsemani Abbey, and Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, founded from Saint Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts.

**Monastic Spirituality**

In the Roman Catholic context, spirituality has a definite institutional lineage and religious purpose, and even within Catholicism finds a diverse expression in the various Orders. In this work, *monastic spirituality* is the constellation of practices that seek to nourish and develop the inner spiritual life of the monk, who ultimately strives for union with God in anticipation of the heavenly life in the hereafter. Each of the religious orders in the Catholic Church have a unique spirituality, and monastic spirituality in the Benedictine mode is focused on seeking God through a set of practices rooted in the monastic community. There are Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Carthusian and Jesuit spiritualities, all with their sets of writers and practices. While the spirituality of Catholic laity often focuses on the Mass and devotions such as the Rosary, and other religious orders seek to balance prayer with their engaged apostolates, the monastic’s entire life is oriented toward prayer on behalf of the Church and the world as a whole. This life of prayer has several dimensions.

*Liturgy of the Hours*

Each week is divided into periods of prayer, known as the *Liturgy of the Hours*, which are based on the Psalms and other biblical texts. Each period is called an *Office*, and they are based on the weeks of ordinary time, the weeks of major liturgical observances, and the weeks of saints' days.

**Liturgical Prayer**

Liturgical prayer is an essential part of the monastic life, and it involves the public worship of the community. The Liturgy of the Hours is a daily prayer schedule that includes the chanting of the Psalms and other prayers. The Liturgy of the Hours is divided into eight periods, each corresponding to a different time of day, and each period includes readings from the Bible, prayers, and hymns. The Liturgy of the Hours is a way for the monks to engage in collective prayer and to connect with the rest of the Church.

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41 The weeks of year with no major liturgical observance, except the memorials and feasts of certain saints and other holy days.
“Divine Office” are said to sanctify the hours of the day, and fulfills the psalmist’s admonition that “Seven times a day I will praise you for your righteous laws” (119:164).

The Breviary, or book of prayers in use today in the Catholic Church, is adapted from the Rule of Saint Benedict, much of which is concerned with the Liturgy of the Hours. These Offices, which traditionally began at midnight, but now often begin between three and five in the morning start with Vigils (previously called Matins) and move through the hours of Lauds, Prime and Terce in the morning, Sext and None in the afternoon and finally Vespers and Compline in the evenings. Each Office begins with a short chanted refrain and includes hymns, chanted Psalms on a weekly or two week rotation, sung canticles from the Gospels such as the ‘Benedictus’ (Luke 1:68-79) and ‘Magnificat’ (Luke 1:46-55), and intercessory prayer, scripture readings and periods of silence.

Whether punctuating the hours of the day, or the seasons of the year, the unfolding of the Liturgy harmonizes with a deeply cherished monastic sense of place. In addition, being formed in the language and imagery of the Psalms, the Psalms become a kind of “template” as one monk put it for interpreting the land and the world around them.

Contemplative Prayer

In addition to the public prayer which occupies much of the monastic’s time, they are also expected to spend time in private prayer. While we often think of prayer as a kind of petition to God that uses words, contemplative prayer, or mental prayer as it is also known, is much closer to what one might think of as meditation. Contemplatio in the Latin means to look at or observe, and while some contemplatives prayer directs practitioners to focus on specific images such as the passion of Jesus, there is also a strong tradition of contemplative prayer that seeks to shed words, ideas, metaphors and concepts in order to dwell in the mystical presence of God who is believed to dwell in the human heart, but is ultimately beyond knowing. This “negative” or apophatic (Gk. meaning something like other than spoken) prayer complements the “positive” or cataphatic (Gk. according to the word) prayer in the liturgy and scriptures. Scholar of sacred landscapes Belden Lane gets at the impulse of apophatic prayer which is rooted in the metaphysical commitment to God as the ground to Christian ontology, when he wrote, “even the most deeply moving thoughts and feelings about God can get in the way of meeting God most intimately in shared silence.”

42 Lane, Belden, Solace of Fierce Landscapes, 13.
is the process of moving beyond even beautiful imagery and words, to a raw experience of God beyond descriptions. These experiences are richly represented in the Catholic monastic, contemplative and mystical traditions through analogy, metaphor and poetry that often includes images of ecstatic, or erotic encounter.

Seeking mystical union with God in the Christian mode, does not offer a total elimination of the self, but a realization of what is often called the “True Self.” Thus through ascetical practices such as solitude, silence, fasting and celibacy, contemporary monastics attempt to strip away the layers of superficial “false self” and reach the authentic, ‘true self’ that is said to be hidden beneath our human foibles and ignorance. The fourth century hermit-monk Evagrius of Pontus (346-399) wrote that when an aspirant has overcome the temptations of greed, lust, avarice, anger, melancholy, acedia (boredom), vanity and pride, they would advance to a state of apatheia, literally without passion. It is from this place of what Zen Buddhists might call emptiness, that agape or Christian love is born which leads to full gnosis, or knowledge of God. Evagrius’s interpreter John Cassian called this goal Purity of Heart.

For the anonymous 14th century author of The Cloud of Unknowing, probably an English monk, contemplatives should seek out a quiet place, free from distractions, and begin by settling the mind, shedding thoughts, images and desires. For this reason, remote, rural and wild places have often been sought out to practice contemplative prayer, because of their natural contributions to the practice of contemplation. However, while it might be said that the “goal” of contemplative prayer is union with God, the contemplative must not engage in the practice for any recompense, but to simply be in God’s presence without expectation of reward.

Contemplative monastic spirituality with its goal of union with God, is often described as a journey. Land, and particularly mountains are often common images invoked

47 See Lane, Belden, Solace of Fierce Landscapes, 14.
by this analogy. For example, God leads Old Testament prophet Moses and his people though tribulations and difficulties in the desert. Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the law, and the people eventually inherit the Promised Land. Spanish mystic John of the Cross (1542-1591) famously describes his experience of union with God as an ascent up a mountain in the dark of night. Monastic landscapes are often symbolic landscapes, filled with metaphors and symbols pointing to the spiritual journey and inner landscape, what Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins calls the *Inscape*. Hopkins wrote in this journal: “All the world is full of inscape,” meaning that each thing is unique and valued as a creation of God, and like a world unto itself.

This spiritual pilgrimage is also marked by phases of progression. Progress on the spiritual journey is marked by passage through Purgation, Illumination and finally Union. Purgation is the painful purification of the soul, in preparation for Illumination, the acquiring of virtues and some measure of knowledge of God. This is eventually followed by the ecstatic and indescribable phase of Union that is beyond words, images or descriptions, experienced by a very few mystics in the history of the Church.

In addition to this ambulatory language, in which the soul journeys toward God, Union with God has also been described in matrimonial language, with God and the soul as wedded lovers. The *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament has been interpreted in this way, and many mystics including John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Cistercian Abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux made frequent use of this trope to describe an ecstatic encounter that is ultimately beyond description.

*Lectio Divina*

*Lectio Divina* simply means divine reading, and in addition to the readings said during Mass, each monk is expected to engage in personal reading of the Bible. However, Lectio, as it is colloquially called is a unique kind of Biblical reading. Rather than reading to get through a certain number of passages or chapters during a given time, the monk reads

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49 Lane, Belden, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 6.

slowly a small passage seeking to uncover its deeper, hidden or personal meaning. Lectio is traditionally divided into four modes or steps, though one can jump between them while reading: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio and Contemplatio, or, Reading, Meditation, Prayer and Contemplation. Reading is the straightforward moving through a given passage, while meditation includes taking a deeper look at the characters, symbols, and meanings of the passage. Then, one can pick out certain phrases or ideas and use them as prayers, lifting the words back up to God. Finally in Contemplation, the words on the page lead one into the deeper well of spiritual silence wherein one encounters God beyond words and images.

**Ongoing Conversations: Theoretical Scope of this Study**

*Religion and Ecology’s ‘Monastic Moment’*

In Michael Pollan’s hit television series *Cooked*, based on the book of the same name, he visits Regina Laudis, a 450 acre Benedictine monastery of sisters in Connecticut who also care for beef and dairy herds. In classic Pollan style, the episode follows his efforts to learn traditional cheese making from the stern Sister Noella Marcellino, a PhD in microbiology and traditional cheesemaker. In her on-camera interviews, Marcellino speaks of the compatibility between her prayer life on the one hand, and her work on the land on the other. Specifically, she speaks of the importance of the Benedictine motto *Ora et Labora*, which she says “sets the tone” of their lives as monastics who are separate from the world, but not closed off from it.

We are living, it would seem through a *monastic moment* in which, paradoxically, while vocations to monastic communities are generally speaking declining, interest in monastic and contemplative spirituality is being explored, rediscovered, and repurposed by an ever-growing and wider variety of spiritual, social, political, and ecological movements. Pollen’s segment on Regina Laudis expresses this recent surge of popularity of monastic and contemplative spirituality. The fascination with monasticism in the popular imagination seems to stem from a perennial romanticism toward the juxtaposition of traditional values or

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lifeways in a contemporary setting, e.g. guided tours through Amish country, authentic Mormon Pioneer treks, homesteading, etc. Media portrayals of monastic communities are often tongue-in-cheek spotlights on a unique coming together of two seemingly distinct domains, with headlines like: “Nuns on the ranch give a heavenly twist to beef;” or, “These vintner monks turn wilderness into the divine gift of wine.”

We are fascinated by the recluse, cultural hold outs, or models communal living in a society that celebrates individuality, is on the move and changing fast.

Interest in monastic spirituality and lifestyle is not however, just a voyeuristic media’s fascination. A two thousand year tradition of manual work, craftsmanship, simple living, contemplative spirituality, living close to the land, and a communal existence are inspiring several notable contemporary social movements as well. As I write these words, a book entitled *The Benedict Option* by journalist Rod Dreher has generated a flurry of reviews, responses and counter responses on the thesis that an increasingly beleaguered Christianity needs to seriously consider following the example of the 5th century monk Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-543). Benedict’s Rule for monks was crafted during a time when the Roman Empire was falling apart, and Dreher joins a chorus of conservative Christian voices that see parallels with our own time—an increasingly secular, sexually permissive and anti-religious society. Inspired by the communitarian philosophy of Alasdair McIntyre, Dreher suggests that rather than seeking political gains in the public arena, Christians should circle the wagons and look to Benedict’s model of small, virtuous, self-reliant communities in order to preserve and reinvigorate Christianity from within. The Religious Right has lost the culture war Dreher argues, and Christians need to retreat to enclaves where Christian values are no longer compromised or subjected to secular ridicule. Striking a pessimistic tone, Dreher writes, “I have written *The Benedict Option* to wake up the church and to

encourage it to act to strengthen itself, while there is still time. If we want to survive, we have to return to the roots of our faith, both in thought and in practice.”

Monasticism is also getting attention within so-called ‘New Age’, seeker, and liberal Christian circles for its long history of contemplative spirituality. Classical treatments of contemplation such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and more contemporary treatments such as the writings of Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968), have converged with a surge in popularity of meditation and mindfulness practices. Merton was a convert to Catholicism who eventually moved to Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Merton along with many other writers is responsible for the surge in popularity of contemplative spirituality that began in the 1960s. Centering Prayer, popularized by Trappist monk Thomas Keating and Episcopal Priest Cynthia Bourgeault is not unlike Buddhist forms of mindfulness meditation. Contemplative spirituality emphasizes stillness, solitude, silence and immersion in nature, as a means to spiritual transformation, and ultimately, communion with the divine. Other monastic practices such as chanting the biblical Psalms, practicing lectio divina, going on silent or guided retreats, or using labyrinths for walking meditation, have also become popular. An increasing number of retreats, journals, books, seminars, summits, and workshops covering these topics are becoming available. Browsing a spiritual bookstore one is likely to find glossy new editions of classical monastic wisdom, mystics and contemplatives. There are how-to manuals for practicing monastic spirituality in our busy, modern lives. One of these was written by Hindu Sanyasi and Catholic contemplative Wayne Teasdale, inspired by the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, and encourages readers to be “monks in the world.” And more and more monastic devotionals, prayer books, and even cookbooks are being published every year.

Christianity has always had a communal and sometimes utopian wing. However through the lens of the Protestant reformation, monasticism has often been seen as escapist

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59 Lectio Divina includes reading the Bible in a slow, meditative and prayerful way that seeks to get at deeper or hidden meanings in the text. See for example, Michael Casey (1996). *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori: Triumph Books).
and quietist. Yet, in recent years the phrase “New Monasticism” has come into vogue and is being used deliberately by some Protestant Christians seeking to emulate monastic practices outside of traditional monastic communities. For example, Evangelical Christian Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove founded the ‘Rutba House’ in North Carolina, and Shane Claiborne founded the ‘Simple Way’ community in Philadelphia to model Christian communal living inspired by classical Benedictine monasticism. In Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko’s book *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*, the authors lay out a vision for aspiring contemplatives who want to develop a more monastic approach to their faith and spirituality, who are not necessarily rooted in any single religious tradition, but are committed to a rigorous spiritual path.

Monasticism has also become something of a muse for the environmental movement, especially among the currents of the environmental movement referred to as religion and ecology, ecotheology and spiritual ecology. With the rise of the environmental crisis in the 20th century, and historian Lynn White’s much discussed critique of Christian anthropocentrism as a contributing cause, Christian apologists have scrambled for fresh readings of scripture, engaged activism, and case studies of a more ecologically friendly Christianity. Even before Lynn White Jr.’s more public critique, but increasingly afterward, scholars of religion, theologians and environmentalists have sought to bring together religious teachings with environmental issues to both clarify the Christian approach to the world, and lend religious credibility to a variety of environmental causes. This process has been called “retrieval” by scholars of Religion and Ecology John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, and “bridging” or “bricolage” by sociologist Stephen Ellingson, wherein scholars and activists seek acceptable theological language to express environmental values.

With their deep sense of place, their often rural or wild locations, and agrarian work ethics, Christian monastic communities have sometimes been pointed to as models of

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ecological sustainability. In the early 1990s, Susan Bratton wrote in Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife that "monasticism, more than any other movement in the history of Christendom, has been associated with wilderness." Bratton’s work focused on the desert hermits and Irish monks and their penchant for remote, quiet places but applies these foundations to the whole of Western monasticism. Through their ascetical practices and frugal livelihoods, monks gained a deep knowledge of and spiritual appreciation for their local ecologies. Bratton thus argues that there is a natural fit between monasticism and the land, that land “offered an environment conducive to spiritual exercise” and that despite the sometimes other-worldly focus of monasticism and Christianity in general, monks have successfully cultivated a unique and abiding example of place-based, ecologically aware spirituality.

Conservationists are also increasingly recognizing the importance of monastic landscapes for their value in biodiversity conservation. The literature on Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) which are defined as a given “area of land or water having special spiritual significance to people and communities,” frequently refer to monasteries. Monasteries often locate themselves in remote or rural locales, and maintain large acreages to provide for their sustenance, and protect their solitude. For example, the Delos Conferences published in 2007, 2008 and 2010 cite several monasteries as potentially significant locations for biodiversity conservation. This is because, many historical and currently occupied monasteries are now located within national protected areas established after the monasteries were in existence, or abandoned. There are 40 such Christian monasteries within the

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68 Bratton, Susan P., Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife, 175.


UNESCO World Heritage Site program in Europe including Mount Athos, Greece, Camaldoli, Italy and Montserrat, Spain.\textsuperscript{71}

Several writers within this genre have also suggested that the monastic lifestyle promote “harmony with the environment.” Independent Consultant Joseph-Maria Mallarach and colleagues suggest that their longevity and spirituality “coincide closely with those of environmental sustainability” and argue that this is because monastic communities employ best management practices to ensure long term survival, live frugal lifestyles and cultivate a deep sense of place. The authors even claim that this sense of place means that monastic communities have more in common with indigenous communities than modern “agnostic ecologists.”\textsuperscript{72}

In her study, Religious Studies scholar Sarah McFarland Taylor documents what she calls “Green Sisters,” or, vowed Catholic women who have adopted and blended ecological concerns into their religious cosmology and spiritual practices. These women are not necessarily monastic in the strict sense of the term, as defined below, but draw on the rich contemplative spirituality of Catholicism and the writings of contemporary ecotheologians. Taylor argues that a growing number of Women Religious are seeking to bridge religious and ecological values. “The Sisters’ green ideals and values reflect their spiritual ideals and religiocultural values, which in turn are reflected in their ecologically sustainable practices made manifest on the physical landscape of their communities.”\textsuperscript{73}

These communities of women are engaging with contemporary environmental problems in a number of ways, from adapting their liturgical and prayer practices to contemporary understandings of science and cosmology, to building more green buildings, to starting organic farms and gardens. One particularly successful case, is New Genesis Farm, established by Dominican Sister Miriam MacGillis. The 226 acre farm now has over 300 members of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program wherein subscribers receive weekly assortments of the farm’s seasonal produce. The Sisters are conscious of both their own religious traditions and the environmental problems we face, and seek to develop a

new approach to both religion and ecology. Particularly important to many of the Communities of Sisters has been the cosmological theology of Thomas Berry, a Passionist Priest and cultural historian. Another small community of Sisters has founded a monastery inspired by Berry called Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont, which has implemented some of his ideas into their liturgical and ritual practices. Religious Sisters have also been involved in stopping an oil pipeline in Kentucky.

Lastly, another writer who has incorporated monastic spirituality into a contemporary environmental manifesto of sorts is theologian Douglas Christie, whose encyclopedic, yet beautifully poetic work *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* draws from the monastic tradition to lay out a contemporary “contemplative” ecology. By this Christie means “an understanding of spiritual practice that places the well-being of the natural world at the center of its concerns, and an approach to ecology that understands the work of cultivating contemplative awareness as critical and necessary to its full meaning.” Christie’s work is a weaving together of his own visits to various monastic communities throughout the world, and his experience as a nature lover. Christie organizes the book around seven traditional monastic values or spiritual practices he sees as particularly relevant to contemporary ecological awareness. Primary among these are *Prosoche* the art of attention; *Logos*, a theology of creation that sees world as expressions, or ‘words’ spoken into being by God; *Topos*, or the relationship to land embodied in the monastic vow of stability and place-based spirituality; and *Telos*, the paradoxical emphasis on living in Paradise in the present moment. Christie’s work is a masterful bridge between monastic theology and contemporary environmental concern, and while Christie is not a monk, his encounters with various monasteries in the US, Europe and the Middle East illuminate each of his well-researched meditations.

Monasticism, with its 2,000 year history of chanting the biblical Psalms and practicing contemplative prayer in beautiful remote or rural locations, has emerged as a model of Christian communal living and prayer, place-based stewardship and spirituality and

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74 Taylor, Sara, *Green Sisters.*
even ecological sustainability in an era of globalism and climate change. The diverse authors, activists and practitioners that have explored monasticism in its contemporary modes span the range of political, spiritual and ecological projects, looking to monasticism as a potential case for more authentic or resilient living in uncertain times.

Seeking to “retrieve” sympathetic understandings of the environment has been premised on the hope that changing beliefs will change behavior. Monasticism’s long history of communal living, simplicity, rural/land-based locales, and frugality have garnered especially within the environmental humanities. Not only does the monastic way of life have something to teach us it is argued, but monastic institutions and land holdings could be untapped resources for conservation.

However, very few of these authors have explored monastic living through the words of the monks themselves. It would seem that my peers in divinity and theology schools, and those in the anthropology field schools have not had enough contact. Treatments of religion focus heavily on discourse and values, while studies of place and landscape on ethnographic accounts. Thus, this work seeks to add much needed qualitative detail to the monastic relationship to land, through the words and documented experiences of monks themselves. To my knowledge, until now none of the literature exploring monasticism and the land provides adequate ethnographic data from contemporary male monastics that gives voice to the range of on-the-ground approaches to land by particular monastic communities through their unique histories, theological perspectives, spiritual practices, or personal experiences.

Debates in Place and Landscape Study

In addition to ongoing discussions in religion and ecology, or spiritual ecology, I was drawn to place and landscape studies because I was fascinated by the debates between the different schools, but also because I felt a personal affective resonance with perspectives that embedded the human experience in broader ecological realities.

As I read the literature, it became clear that the religion and spirituality were peripheral concerns to those engaged with place and landscape studies, and that furthermore, the role of symbolic constructions in making meaning with landscape was often dismissed as destructive Cartesian dualism, which postulated an abstract self, experiencing an objective reality, one of many root causes of our ecological crisis. Yet, from my reading it was clear
that the Christian monastics had a rich religious and symbolic cosmology; I did not understand how it connected to their experience of landscape, or their theology of creation.

Geographer John Wylie, who has written an exhaustive study of the history and future of the landscape concept in geography asks, “Is landscape the world we are living \textit{in}, or a scene we are looking \textit{at}, from afar?”\textsuperscript{77} Do places and the broader landscape participate in the meanings we give to them? Or, are our ideas about land and landscape primarily cognitive layers we project onto otherwise meaningless physical substrate? Is the landscape a kind of \textit{text} or \textit{icon} that humans interpret and read? Or is it an extension of what it means to be embodied in the world? These questions are live within the broader social science landscape, but they are also of particular interest in this work, because of both the embodied and richly symbolic character of the monastic relationship to land.

With origins in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century Dutch painters, \textit{Landscape}, equivalent to the German \textit{Landschaft}, means simply \textit{the shape of the land}.\textsuperscript{78} While its origins emerge from the visual aesthetics of landscape painting, it has been taken up as a useful concept by geographers, anthropologists and more recently ecologists. Landscape in its broadest definitions includes the totality of physical nonhuman features of the world such as geology, soil, atmosphere, and multiple ecosystems, with human settlements, farms, management precincts, etc. as well. It is, in short, both the world, and what we as human beings make of it. It is nature, and scenery, and land, and ecology, and culture all rolled into one. It is the broader context for which place and space find their literal grounding.

In its most basic definition, \textit{place} is a specific location with special significance to a person or group. Sense of place, rootedness, and attachment to place are basic components to human existence, and \textit{home} is the quintessential place.\textsuperscript{79} Places as accumulators of human experience, affection and history are embedded within the wider landscape. There is a relationship between land, people and cultural meaning, and place and landscape studies are concerned with the contours, dimensions and relationships between them.

To say that human beings are capable of forging distinct kinds of relationships with same landscape seems intuitive. The same physical object can carry different meaning to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Wylie, John (2007). \textit{Landscape}. (New York: Routledge), 55.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Wylie, John, \textit{Landscape}.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} Lewicka, Maria. ‘Place Attachment: How Far Have we Come in the Last 40 Years?’ \textit{Journal of Environmental Psychology}. 31, no. 3 (2011): 207-230.
\end{itemize}
different people from different backgrounds. However, this perspective is in fact rooted in Western ontological assumptions that go back to the enlightenment. The general consensus of enlightenment thinkers that would persist into the modern period with respect to perception of landscape was solidified by the philosophy of René Descartes’ who postulated an ontological dualism between res extensa and res cogitans (matter and mind). Descartes drew on the work of Franciscan Friar William of Ockham’s (1287-1347) Nominalism, the argument that universals or Platonic forms did not exist in themselves, but that only particular things existed. This meant that reality was in fact devoid of objective, decipherable meaning, which was ultimately a construction of the human mind. His aim was of course theological, but the implications shattered the medieval cosmology which ensouled the world, and embedded it within a higher purpose. Historian of ideas Richard Tarnas summarizes this pivotal early pre-modern concept:

The central principle of Ockham’s thought, and the most consequential, was his denial of the reality of universals outside of the human mind and human language. Driving Aristotle’s stress on the ontological primacy of concrete particulars over Platonic Forms to its logical extreme, Ockham argued that nothing existed except individual beings, and that universals existed not as entities external to the mind by only as mental concepts.80

This fed into Descartes’s ontology that hypothesized that only mind and matter existed, and that human beings were the only creatures in this world with mind. Whereas the medievals, through Plato ascribed soul to all in existence, in hierarchical ascendancy, the Enlightenment saw the completion of the “disenchantment” of the world began by Christian monotheism.

Within the broader landscape and place studies literature, a debate has arisen as to the role of representations such as symbolic constructions within landscape experience. For example, at the turn of the century, a semiotic turn saw the landscape as yet another aspect of the socially and culturally constructed nature of reality, through a process of cognitive and cultural mechanisms which make use of land as a kind of symbolic substrate.81 For example, in their often cited study Iconography of Landscape, geographers Denis Cosgrove and

Stephen Daniels write that landscapes are “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings...a landscape park is more palpable but no more real, no less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem.” The world is the same physical object which human subjectivity constructs using culturally determined pathways.

Denis Cosgrove writes of this theoretical approach as compared to the sciences that:
A semiotic approach to landscape is skeptical of scientific claims to represent mimetically real processes shaping the world around us. It lays scholarly emphasis more on the context and processes through which cultural meanings are invested into and shape a world whose ‘nature’ is known only through human cognition and representation, and is thus always symbolically mediated.

Pushing back on former geographical determinist theories of land and place, Cosgrove’s and many other social theories of the 20th century was to postulate a kind of symbolic or textual theory of how we make meaning with and shape the world. For historian of landscape Simon Schama, this meant that landscape and place are “culture before they are nature;” that the landscape is a sort of raw material out of which cultural groups orient themselves and make meaning.

Historian William Cronon provoked intense criticism when he suggested in his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness” that wilderness was simply a social construction by mostly privileged white men seeking to reify their masculinity. And though it had done much to protect wild and beautiful places, did not in fact have much to say about those locales that did not fit within the wilderness mystique.

Historian John Gatta reaffirms this view when he writes that
Nature itself exists not as empirical fact so much as linguistic sign. “Nature” points toward a protean, elusive, highly subjective phenomenon that is inextricably wedded to cultural assumptions and human imaginings. If the nonhuman world has indeed, in Coleridge’s phrase and according to deep ecology, ‘a life of its own’ distinct from

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human culture and civilization, that life must nonetheless be interpreted by human beings mostly in human terms.\textsuperscript{85}

Referring to Romantic Poet Samuel Coleridge, Gatta sees nature as a cultural and social construction. Religious scholar Philip Sheldrake in referring to religious and spiritual landscapes agrees that “landscape has provided the physical features upon which human beings draw imaginatively in order to shape distinctive identities and the express worldviews. Inevitably, worldviews reflect the dominant values of a given time.”\textsuperscript{86} These views all suggest that the culture is somehow prior to the world, which is then imposed over the top of it.

This semiotic approach was popular within anthropology during much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as well. In anthropologist Keith Basso’s seminal work \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places}, Basso presents an impressive case study in the richly semiotic texture of the North American Apache landscape. Basso writes, “Long before the advent of literacy…places served humankind as durable symbols of distant events and as indispensable aids for remembering and imagining them.”\textsuperscript{87} Basso was responding to the vestiges of a kind of materialist environmental determinism by showing how the Western Apache make meaning with and extract moral teachings from their places and the wider Apache landscapes. Basso chastises environmental determinists for their reluctance to “deal openly and in close detail with the symbolic attributes of human environments and the effects of environmental constructions on patterns of social action.”\textsuperscript{88} For Basso, through human symbolic consciousness, our experiences attach memories, symbols, stories and morals to the physical landscape, and anthropologists are tasked with rendering thick descriptions of those semiotic texts to their academic and Western audiences.

For much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, this textual, symbolic approach understood place and landscape, and even culture as a phenomenon, as a product of human cognitive and social construction. That is, place, as a coordinate, emerges from undifferentiated space, making its features more or less semiotically neutral prior to human appropriation. Anthropologists and

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\textsuperscript{88} Basso, Keith, \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places}, 41.
geographers increasingly focused on culture as a symbolic code that was used to make sense of the world.\textsuperscript{89} As geographer Mitch Rose reflects, “The landscape was seen as the materialization of the ongoing struggle to represent the norms, values and meanings that define the community.”\textsuperscript{90} For independent scholar of American landscape John B. Jackson, “A landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space, a man-made (sic.) system of spaces superimposed on the face of the land, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community.”\textsuperscript{91} This representational view of place, meaning that it focuses on meaning-making as primarily a cognitive process of the mind, emphasized the symbolic and socially constructed dimensions of place and landscape.

This perspective provides important insights into the diverse ways that human beings make meaning with their surroundings, especially in circumstances where meanings and values might be radically different, such as between certain First Nations peoples and extractive industries or logging companies. In the environmental studies and resource management literature, this assumption is taken for granted, and illustrated by geographers Thomas Greider and Loraine Garkovich who write of landscape: “Meanings are not inherent in the nature of things.”\textsuperscript{92}

Since at least the 1970s, however, landscape and place studies have taken a phenomenological turn.\textsuperscript{93} Representational approaches to place and landscape have been deemed inadequate by more phenomenological, and even post-phenomenological schools of who consider experience of landscape to be primarily embodied. These perspectives borrow insights from the diverse branch of continental philosophy called phenomenology. Founded by mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology developed in order to better theorize how experiences present themselves to human consciousness.\textsuperscript{94} Rather than equating sense experience with reality, or consciousness as a phenomenon of the mind, phenomenology presumes that consciousness is made up by human intention and the objects

\textsuperscript{89} Geertz, Clifford (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books).
of consciousness. But to avoid a kind of solipsism, in which only the human mind exists, Husserl theorized that the body, which is both subject and object, experienced the world in a deeply inter-subjective\(^{95}\) way. Thus we dwell in a Lifeworld (Lebenswelt)—the world of human intention and experience in which all things, subject or object, participate.\(^{96}\)

For philosopher Martin Heidegger, who studied with Husserl, phenomenology is “the investigation of life itself,”\(^ {97}\) of what it means to be in the first place. A central concept for Heidegger that is relevant to place and landscape studies was ‘Dasein’ which is roughly translated as “being there” or “there-being.”\(^ {98}\) In his major work Being and Time and later essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ Heidegger lays out a foundation for a dwelling perspective which was later borrowed by geographers and anthropologists seeking to develop a nonrepresentational approach to landscape and place. Heidegger writes that human being “consists in dwelling.”\(^ {99}\) If being fundamentally means beings-in-the-world, then dwelling, which includes building habitations, is a primary act of human existence. As Paul Cloke and Owain Jones summarize, “Dwelling is about the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time.”\(^ {100}\)

With French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty the Lifeworld of Husserl is experienced by the ‘body-subject’, a deeper exploration of inter-subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty has Descartes in mind when he wrote, “The body stands between this fundamental distinction between subject and object, ambiguously existing as both.”\(^ {101}\) Bodies mediate experience of the world by refusing to restrict subjectivity to the mind alone. He continues, “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out toward it some idea of blue… I abandon myself to it and


\(^{96}\) Abrams, David, Spell of the Sensuous.


\(^{98}\) Malpas, Jeff, Heidegger’s Topology, 49.


plunge into this mystery, it thinks itself in me.”

This approach extends human consciousness out into the world, which simultaneously envelops and composes it.

This view was also taken up by psychologist Gregory Bateson, whose *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind* was influential during the 1980s and 90s. Bateson states that “The mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin.” The body and the environment (literally that which surrounds us) participates in perception. Anthropologist David Abrams summarizes the mutuality between body and world taken for granted in a dwelling perspective when he wrote, “To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time to experience one’s own tactility, to feel oneself touched by the tree. And to see the world is also, at the same time to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself seen…We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us.” As philosopher Edward Casey frames it, “body and landscape collude in the generation of what can be called ‘placescapes’”, and, “Just as there is no place without body—without the physical or psychical traces of body—so there is no body without place.”

To geographer David Seamon our experience of place and landscape is “dynamic inner-outer relationship. It is the variegated and fluctuating bond of attention between person and world, body and environment.” Seamon argued that sense of place develops through embodied movement, what he called the “body-ballet” of daily routines and familiar spaces punctuated by rest, leisure and stillness. Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu calls this *habitus*, or the constellation of skills, habits, stances, postures, tastes, and practices that a community develops together through in the day-to-day routines that make up life in the places we spend the most time. And Eduard Casey writes, “In residing we rely on the body’s capacity for forming ‘habit memories’; that is to say, memories formed by slow sedimentation and

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102 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 249.
107 Casey, Edward. *Getting Back into Place*, 104.
realized by the reenactment of bodily motions.”

Anthropologist Tim Ingold, whose work *The Perception of the Environment* is partly a critique of the representational approach to place and landscape, particularly that of Cosgrove and Daniels, writes that we do not construct a worldview, but dwell in a world. Responding directly to Cosgrove and Daniels’s assertion that the landscape is an icon, Ingold writes:

I do no share this view. To the contrary, I reject the division between inner and outer worlds—respectively of mind and matter, meaning and substance—upon which such distinctions rest. The landscape, I hold is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind’s eye; nor however is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order.

Thus, as opposed to the underlying Cartesian distinction between subject and object, mind and matter, phenomenological approaches seek to move from the self-contained subject, or abstract mind constructing meaning out of nothing, to a more Heideggerian ‘being-in-the-world’ as situated, contextual and co-constructed. Thus Ingold’s “Dwelling Perspective” is a kind of “wayfinding” through the landscape that temporally marked by various activities. For Ingold, “The landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along it’s the paths connecting them.” For Ingold, Basso’s Apache are not depositing layers of meaning, but wayfinding through and with the land. This ambulatory aspect leads Ingold to create a new term: *taskscape* or, “a pattern of activities collapsed into an array of features.” The taskscape goes beyond the visual aspects of place and landscape as static representations of the world, and incorporates not only what is seen but what is heard, smelt, felt, done and sensed through our activities within a given place. This is simply summarized by Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz who reflects that, “To dwell means to belong to a given place.”

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110 Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 117.
113 Ingold, Tim, *The Perception of the Environment*, 193
Research Questions

This work then represents an inquiry into the character of the contemporary monastic relationship to land. I began the study by discovering whether there even were monks in North America living on the land. As I discovered, dozens of communities still engage in this ancient way of life. As my research interests and questions began to narrow, I felt drawn to questions surrounding the shifting guises of traditional monastic motifs, religious symbols and spiritual practices, and how these interact with contemporary environmental discourses. I wanted to explore the monastic sense of place, whether or not monks believed their landscapes to be ‘sacred’ in some sense, and what they believed with respect to the spiritual nature of animals and plants. I wanted to understand the role of religious symbols in the daily lives and experiences of the monks outside of their cells, chapels and libraries, and I wanted to do so in person, walking alongside them as we spoke.

Yet, I was also aware that Christianity, with its reputation for causing the ecological crisis was much more nuanced than many Deep Ecologists were willing to give it credit, and as someone exploring ways to deepen the connections of Christianity and ecology, land-based monasticism seemed like an important and underexplored case study. However, I was not out to show that monks are inherently “Green”, or a perfect model of ecological sustainability. Rather, I wanted to understand how a deep commitment to both land and contemplative spirituality shaped the experience of land and place. I wanted to take an exploratory look at how powerful religious and environmental ideas were relating, and how actual people were applying these ideas in actual places.

This study seeks both to give voice to the unique monastic sense of place and land, but also to clarify the role of symbol, embodiment and experience in place and landscape studies. With these general interests in mind, this dissertation seeks to answer the following question: How are biblical motifs, religious symbols, and environmental discourses related and expressed in the monastic experience of place and landscape? Each chapter in turn points to this broader question by tackling several other related questions: How are environmental discourses being assimilated into contemporary monastic communities? (Ch. 2) What factors influence and give shape to the monastic sense of place? (Ch. 3) Do contemporary monastics experience their landscapes as intrinsically sacred? (Ch. 4) What role do religious motifs and symbols play in the monastic experience of landscape? (Ch. 5).
Research Methods

Research as Pilgrimage

In December of 2015, I packed a few of my things into my Ford Ranger and stuffed the rest into my cubicle at the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability (IRES) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and set out for a trip down the west Coast. On December 5th I arrived at my first stop, New Camaldoli Hermitage, a monastic community located just south of Big Sur, California. Over the next several months, I would visit three more monastic communities in Oregon, California and New Mexico following a similar schedule of working and praying with the monks, and interviewing those willing to speak with me.

I would of course carry out the research in my own skin as a Euro-American male. As an undergraduate researcher I had become skeptical of traditional cross-cultural ethnography for its colonial roots. But I was also drawn to monasticism for more personal reasons. I was a recent convert to the deep and wide tradition of Catholicism, having been baptized earlier in 2015. I was devouring the writings of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry and had begun a daily practice of Centering Prayer.115 I was also, I confess, secretly exploring the slight possibility that I had a vocation to monasticism because of the powerful spiritual experiences I had had at Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey. However, I was primarily interested in finding answers to my research questions in my current vocation as a PhD student.

The word research is rooted in the Old French recercher, to seek out, or find. As a Ph.D. candidate, recent convert to Catholicism, and practitioner of contemplative spirituality, my stay at each monastery was both personal and professional, field site and sacred site. If research is about seeking understanding, clarity and experience, then no word could better describe both my professional and spiritual orientations. A pilgrim is a religious seeker who goes on a journey to gain understanding, clarity and experience. The researcher then, is also a pilgrim of sorts, and my field work was both. It was a journey that enriched my understanding of how we forge relationships to land through embodied experience and constructed meaning but also enriched my contemplative prayer life, and deepened my

115 Centering Prayer is one of many forms of Christian meditation, which, similar to Zen Buddhism, strives for a more careful attention to the present moment by opening oneself to the divine presence.
commitment to continuing my connection with the divine. As I conducted my research, I wrestled with many personal demons, my own existential and religious questions, and navigated the beginnings of a romantic relationship that I worried would not weather the time apart. I learned numerous personal lessons from the wisdom of the monks and the land itself.

The four monastic communities in this study were all located in U.S. Western States. I chose to focus my efforts within this region because not only would it be a more manageable and accessible study area, but because of the relative similarities in land tenure distribution, history and management problems, as well as the length of monastic land tenure in the region, most of which were established in the mid-20th century.

There are approximately 21 Roman Catholic monastic communities (men and women) in the Benedictine and Trappist traditions living in the American West. The study does not include any Anglican, Carmelite, cloistered Franciscan, Dominican, Brigittine, Norbertine, Oriental or Eastern Orthodox communities. These monasteries are spread throughout the eleven states that make up the American West, with no monastic communities existing to my knowledge in Nevada, Montana or Wyoming. Because the study is concerned with land-based spiritual experience, I chose monastic lineages that have a tradition of land-based or place-based monasticism, as opposed to the more peripatetic mendicant orders.

The four communities visited in this study were selected based on the criteria that they own and manage some sizable portion of land which was in some way integrated into their spirituality or livelihoods. The communities tended to focus primarily on contemplative monasticism, rather than other ministries (also known as apostolates) such as universities, seminaries, or hospitals. None of the monasteries were sought out for a particular approach to land management or environmental focus however. Recruitment was conducted via email invitation. The four monasteries in this study each responded positively to an invitation to participate in the study. Though I was initially interested in comparing male and female communities, I decided against visiting women’s monasteries because of the limitations posed to my primary method of participant observation within such communities.

I limited the study to four communities based on the time I had available to conduct this research, the manageability of data analysis, and to ensure a broader basis for

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116 See Table 1.
comparISON THAN WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE HAD I VISITED A SINGLE OR EVEN TWO COMMUNITIES.

BASED ON MY OWN RESEARCH THROUGH PUBLICALLY AVAILABLE INFORMATION ONLINE, THROUGH IN
PERSON VISITS TO OTHER MONASTERSIES AND THROUGH PUBLISHED HISTORIES, THESE FOUR COMMUNITIES
ARE NOT ATYPICAL IN THE AMOUNT OF LAND THEY OWN, THE NUMBER OF MONASTICS THEY HOUSE, AND THE
ORDERS THEY BELONG TO. THIS STUDY DOES NOT HOWEVER CLAIM TO BE A STATISTICALLY REPRESENTATIVE
CROSS SECTION OF THE MONASTIC COMMUNITIES IN NORTH AMERICA, THOUGH BECAUSE OF THEIR
COMMON SPIRITUAL LINEAGES, I AM CONFIDENT THAT THEIR GENERAL THEOLOGICAL AND
PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES DO NOT DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM OTHER MONASTERSIES IN THESE
ORDERS.

RESEARCH AS PLACE-MAKING

MY FIELD VISITS FOLLOWED A SIMILAR PATTERN: AFTER ARRIVING AT EACH MONASTERY FROM A
LONG DRIVE, I WOULD MEET ONE OF THE MONKS OR VOLUNTEERS WHO WAS EXPECTING ME, AND GET
SETTLED INTO MY ROOM IN THE GUEST HOUSE, CELL IN THE MONASTERY, OR, IN ONE CASE, MY VERY OWN
HERMITAGE. AFTER A BRIEF ORIENTATION TO THE MONASTIC COMMUNITY SPACES AND CLOISTER AREA, I
WOUlD ARRANGE FOR THE MONKS TO VOLUNTARILy SIGN UP TO BE INTERVIEWED AT THEIR DISCRESSION
THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF MY STAY, WHICH TYPICALLY LASTED FROM TEN DAYS TO TWO WEEKS. I
RECEIVED A SCHEDULE OF THE MONASTIC CHANTED OFFICES, MEALS, MASS, DEVOTIONALS, AND WORK
PERIODS, AND WOULD USUALLY START EXPLORING A BIT ON MY OWN, GREETING MONKS AND VOLUNTEERS AS
I BECAME FAMILIAR WITH THE LAYOUT AND ORIENTATIONS OF EACH PROPERTY. EACH COMMUNITY WAS
ASKED TO PROVIDE A REPRESENTATIVE TO FILL OUT A SINGLE COMMUNITY SURVEY ON THE DEMOGRAPHICS,
HISTORY AND LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES OF THE MONASTERY SINCE THE TIME OF ITS FOUNDING THE
RESULTS OF WHICH ARE REFERENCED THROUGHOUT THIS WORK, MOSTLY IN THE TABLES REFERRED TO IN
CHAPTER 2. THE QUESTIONNAIRE IS ALSO AVAILABLE IN THE APPENDIX.

EPISTEMOLOGICALLY THIS STUDY IS ROOTED IN THE DISCIPLINE PHENOMENOLOGY DISCUSSED
ABOVE, AND THE ASSUMPTION THAT RESEARCH TOO IS AN INTERSUBJECTIVE PROCESS. FOR THIS REASON, MY
METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION WERE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND SEMI-STRUCTURED SEATED AND
WALKING INTERVIEWS. I CAME PREPARED WITH AN INTERVIEW SCHEDULE, BUT MODIFIED IT BASED ON THE
APPENDIX). I CONDUCTED 50 INTERVIEWS IN TOTAL, WHICH I RECORDED USING A DIGITAL RECORDER AND
SMALL LAPEL MICROPHONE.117 INTERVIEWS LASTED FROM BETWEEN 30 MINUTES TO TWO HOURS. I ALSO

117 SEE TABLE 2.
spent some extra interview time with monks that were knowledgeable about certain aspects of community history of land management. For example, if I asked a question about orchard management at New Clairvaux, I was directed to the former orchard director. If I needed to understand the history of forest management at Our Lady of Guadalupe, I had to talk to the forest manager. The vast majority of my data comes directly from these recorded dialogues. However, my field notes and personal observations were valuable in drawing out my analysis and for more fully entering the aesthetic spaces of the monks themselves, if only for a few weeks.

Because I was interested in understanding the monks’ sense of place, and relationship to the land, it was important to conduct my interviews in a way that reflected my research goals. Within the social sciences, interviewees’ words can sometimes become abstracted from their contexts. Some of this is of course inevitable, however, as scholar social science methodology Norman Denzin suggests, interviewing is not just information extraction, or even a dynamic between passive versus active interlocutors, but rather an intersubjective encounter in which both parties affect and are affected.118 I would also add that the particular landscape, the season, time of day, and weather added additional dynamics to these dialogues. This is why geographers Sara Elwood and Deborah Martins suggest that each interview presents its own ‘micro-geography’ through which a conversation unfolds.119 My interviews were not just an act of extracting ideas about meaning, value or even place, but rather, intersubjective encounters between me and my experiences, the monk and his, and the land where we were walking or sitting, the air we breathed and the sounds we heard. As I will argue throughout this work, they were an embodied semiotics.

To this end, many of my interviews were conducted either outside, or on walks within the monastery property. When I would meet a monk for our interview, I would ask him his preference for where we conducted the interview; if he was unsure, I would ask him to show me one or several of his favorite places on the property while we talked. This was of course limited or determined by age, weather, and the health of the monks. They were not “go-

along” style interviews, wherein I shadowed the monk as they worked or walked from chapel to cell throughout their day, but a mutually agreed upon common activity that was familiar to all of the monks: walking and talking about monasticism. As we walked, I asked the monks my questions and to talk about their memories and the places they had affection for, which in turn triggered my own stories and ideas. I recorded these walking interviews using a lapel mic attached to my left shoulder, with the consent of the monks of course.

During each interview, I inevitably brought my own expectations, distractions, ideas, responses, spirituality, gestures and personality to the interviews. As we walked, stood in a cloister garden, or sat by a river, I was also weighing whether or not I should interject my own experiences or stay silent, if I should skip a question, or move ahead with it even though it might be less relevant in that particular case. Walking the land, alone or with the monks, also opened it up to new forms of understanding. I saw things from my frame of reference as a former forester and amateur naturalist and as a budding spiritual ecologist. I was not only listening for meaningful words, but seeking to enter into the bodily experience of a place as I walked. I would often interrupt our interviews to point out a tree, flower, deer, or vista (much to my later chagrin during transcription and analysis). Some dialogues ended with long rambling discussions about the state of the world, the church or the future of the monastery in which I probably shared too much of my own perspective. My interview schedule is also available in the Appendix.

With respect to walking interviews as a method, several recent studies have suggested that walking interviews generate richer data about the people and places being researched. For example, geographer Jon Anderson suggests that doing walking interviews assists in conducting place-based research because identity and place are co-constituted. Walking, which is a fundamental aspect of human experience of place for able-bodied persons, provided for a deeper engagement of the monastic sense of place.

The act of walking the landscape with those who dwell there is also a basic instinct of anthropology and a primordial sensory activity. This is what Edward Casey meant when he

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120 Evans, James, and Phil Jones (2010). ‘The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place.’ *Applied Geography* 31, no. 2: 849-858.
says that “dwelling is accomplished not [just] by residing but by wandering.” As anthropologist Michel De Certeau has written, walking is a “spatial acting out of place.” Walking was my basic mode of transportation while I was at each monastery, and I hardly left the grounds during my stays. I became immersed, if only for a few weeks, in the sensory rhythms of a place set apart from, but porous to, the world.

As geographer Paul Adams writes, “To walk through a place is to become involved in that place with sight, hearing, touch, smell…and even taste.” My dialogue-interviews were therefore, each a form of nascent place-making between the monks’ ongoing relationship with the land, and my own introduction to it. As anthropologists Jo Lee Vergunst and Tim Ingold put it, “Through shared walking, we can see and feel what is really a learning process of being together, in adjusting one’s body and one’s speech to the rhythms of others, and of sharing (or at least coming to see) a point of view.” My own adjustment to the place was facilitated by the monks whose relationships to the land were themselves never static.

This phenomenological instinct, dubbed ‘sensory ethnography’ by ethnographer Sarah Pink, suggests that places at adept at gather memories, stories and experience, not only in retrospect, as recounted by interviewees, but in the present as experienced by the both ethnographer and interviewee. Sara Pink writes: “The co-presence of researcher and research subject is itself inscribed on place-as-event as it is simultaneously experienced and constituted.”

I often experienced this co-presence with the monks as we walked, talked or stood in silence. Sometimes there was even a sense that what we were experiencing was not shapeable into words. That a shift in light, or a setting sun was a thin veneer over the profound solitude of what lay beneath. We were creating a place, a reality, together; a process that was not predicated on getting to the bottom of what the world was really like, but what the world was like between us. The setting of a monastery among monks who spend

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123 Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 114.
much of their time in silence, might also be characterized as a kind of “contemplative”
ethnography not only because of the monastic attention to the relationship between inner and
outer landscapes, but also because monks recognize that words are often inadequate in
describing experiences and feelings about a place. While there were plenty of stories, ideas,
moral lessons, memories, theologies, and spiritual lessons during our conversations; there
were also instances of frustrated attempts by the monks to describe unrepeateable moments in
their walks that erased perceiver and perceived where they felt like they had melted into the
pot of wordless monastic prayer of which the land forms a seamless aspect. A contemplative
ethnography then pays particular attention not only to the senses, but to the silences, the
spaces between, and that which cannot or refuses to be named or understood with the mind—
the affective qualities of light, space and music, smells and sounds, boredom, distractions and
difficult to pinpoint feelings. I fear that writing and reflection will always fall short of
capturing these moments, but in several places in this work I have at least made an attempt,
particularly in Chapter 4, where I discuss what one monk called ‘charged moments.’

Doing several interviews per day, I would sometimes feel tired, or distracted, and I
found that interviewing was itself a kind of contemplative practice. I was constantly
reminding myself to bring my awareness back to my interview, to focus on what they were
saying, weighing whether I should continue with my list of questions, or ask a clarifying
question on the current question, or indulge a random question that had just popped into my
mind. In a way, this dialogical process of “being together” is in fact what monastic life is
about. Whether the monks were talking about being with God, the True Self, the community,
or the land, contemplative spirituality is a process of becoming more deeply rooted in the
self, the place, the community, and paradoxically the world.

In addition to engaging the monks in conversation within the monastery property, my
own participant observation in the rhythms of the monastic community added crucial context
to my understanding of the monastic lifestyle, and its relationship to the land. After getting
settled into the monastery, I would begin to immerse myself in the daily rhythm of the
communities’ prayer life with my own, out of place, body. I experienced the affect of ritual
and learned the rhythm of community with my own body: how to enter the church, when to
bow, when to make the sign of the cross, when to stand when to sit. Where I was allowed to
talk, or what spaces were appropriate for me to enter alone. I chanted with the monks in the
choir stall. I felt bored, or stiff, or missed a note, or started singing an antiphon too early. Praying with the body in this way, became its own kind of inquiry.

*Writing as Re-Presentation*

From about May of 2016 until mid-summer 2017, I attempted to make sense of my experiences with the monks through the lens of place and landscape studies. While my research methods were not all that complicated and designed to elicit rich place-based data, I am aware that this presents several challenges. Regardless, how rich my conversations with the monks were, leaving the monastery with only photographs and audio recordings inevitably render only partial re-presentations of my conversations. In addition, as the primary author of this work, I am only presenting reflections from one side of the conversation, a side that has been filtered through my own memory and life experience since the encounter. This is of course the limitation of all qualitative research, each exploration is a re-presentation of experiences filtered through the body and consciousness of one researcher. As I have said above, my research method was essentially a form of place-making, and thus writing about my experience, is inevitably a kind of reflection; this work is a re-presentation of experiences I had over several months with monks and their landscapes.

To mediate this, I took notes of my own impressions during field work, and painstakingly transcribed each interview personally, again taking notes as I did so. Each listening invoked aesthetic reflections, moods, smells, and nostalgias of their own. My interview transcripts were then coded using simple categories and subcategories that were anticipated in my research questions, and created based on patterns within the interviews. I paid particular attention to references to the environmental movement, the monastic tradition, biblical and spiritual symbolism, stories and memories, references to work, moral lessons, etc. I then organized these chunks of dialogue into approximately ten word documents per community, each with sub-themes and additional notes.

In a work that looks at the practice of dwelling in place, walking became an important part of not only my data collection, but writing as well. In Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” he celebrates the venerable tradition of aimless wandering, or sauntering. As I

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wrestled with this project, there were many mornings and evenings when I could be found on
the streets or parks of East Vancouver deep in thought over a particularly tricky section of
one of my chapters, and in a moment of clarity writing down my notes that would later go
into my revisions. Just as walking served to help me work out my questions in the field, it
also aided in articulating answers back home. In American philosopher Henry Bugbee’s
classical work on place and land entitled, *Inward Morning*, he reflects on the role of walking
to his philosophical work:

> During my years of graduate study before the war I studied philosophy in the
classroom and at the desk, but my philosophy took shape mainly on foot. It was truly
peripatetic, engendered not merely while walking, but through walking that was
essentially a meditation of the place. And the balance in which I weighed the ideas I
was studying was always that established in the experience of walking in the place.130

Thus, both the researching and the writing of this work were part of a single and continuous
act of place-making, of working out ideas, hopes for the future, and fears of failure.

**Toward an Embodied Semiotics of Place and Landscape**

Certainly there are cognitive dimensions to embodied experience, and embodied
dimensions to cognitive constructions. The physical features and conditions of place impact
our experiences of them, but the experiences, ideas and discourses we carry with us are also
an important component of any understanding of place and landscape. In particular, biblical
motifs, religious symbols and spiritual practices have simply not been given adequate
treatment from either paradigm. Thus, unlike phenomenological approaches which attempt to
shift analysis away from symbolic constructions toward a more continuous and embedded
spectrum between sensibilities and materialities, this study takes religious symbols as an
essential component to the interior landscape and meaning making in general, but not as
constructed by some disembodied or separate self.

The landscape is capable of producing multiple meanings but this does not mean that
it is capable of an infinite number of them. As Christopher Tilley later writes with co-author
Kate Cameron-Daum,

Mooney (ed.) *Wilderness and the Heart: Henry Bugbee’s Philosophy of Place, Presence, and Memory* (Athens:
University of Georgia Press), 6.
To acknowledge that landscape can have multiple meanings and produce different emotional responses does not support a claim that they can mean anything, that landscape exists only in the mind. This is to stress that the manner in which people think is not the product of an untrammeled human mind that can think in any way it likes but is derived from embodied, perceptual, sensory and kinaesthetic experiences. Consciousness and embodied social being are always materially situated.  

Like Tilley and Cameron-Daum, I observed landscapes that were invested with multiple meanings, even within a similar monastic theology based on the lived experiences of the monks on the land. Religious symbols and biblical motifs were dynamic components of this experience, molded and crafted embodied encounter, through constructed theological lenses and biases.

Through my interviews with the monks, my own experience as a participant observer in close quarters with the monks, and my firsthand experiences with their landscapes, in this work I argue that contemporary land-based monasticism demonstrates what I call an **embodied semiotics** wherein extant religious and monastic symbols, motifs, beliefs and values in conversation with wider environmental discourses are relationally attached to and molded by embodied contact and experience with landscape. The monastic sense of place which emerges from the vow of stability is given its character by liturgical and work-based experiences on the land that engage both semiotic and phenomenological dimensions. The sacramental quality of land is made real through unexpected transcendent encounters on the land. And, religious symbols are made more potent as they are attached to the monastic landscape through memory. Within the broader theoretical framework of the social sciences, this work is a synthesis between semiotic and phenomenological approaches to place and landscape.

**Chapter Summaries**

**Chapter 2**

In North America, religious and environmental discourses are deeply intertwined. However, in recent decades, the field of Religion and Ecology has demonstrated a surge in

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alliances between religious institutions, spirituality and the environmental movement.\textsuperscript{132} To engage with environmental issues, many religious groups and organizations are as sociologist Stephen Ellingson theorizes “bridging” their theological and environmental ideas in order to better tailor them to their respective religious audiences. Bridging is the practice of speaking to the goals of one discourse through the language of another. For example, Stewardship is a widely accepted discourse within Christianity because it focuses attention on God’s sovereignty, and human responsibility to care for creation.\textsuperscript{133}

I begin by introducing the long history of Christian monasticism’s relationship to the land and its purpose. I then introduce the four contemporary communities in this study by answering the question as to how monastic and environmental discourses interact in the management of these monastic communities. I show that while each of the monastic communities are formed by the principles of the same broadly Benedictine monastic tradition, each monastic community’s relationship to land is also informed first by their own particular lineages (E.g. Benedictine, Camaldolese or Trappist), and then by various regionally important environmental discourses such as preservationism or agrarianism.

Bridging as Ellingson defines it was a key strategy of the monastic communities in this study, as each monastic community affirmed that their primary purpose was to seek God above all else. Environmental discourse that was either outside the realm of practical implementation (such as organic certification), or contradicted core Catholic social teachings was not assimilated in any way. Broadly speaking this chapter shows how discourse interacts with the lived experience and management of land on the ground, and focuses mainly on each communities relationship to land rather than individual monks.

\textbf{Chapter 3}

Sense of place is an important topic of inquiry for contemporary environmental studies; \textit{how} we become attached to place is an under-examined aspect of this body of inquiry. As environmental psychologists Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford write, sense of


place is bound up in three factors: person/group, place, and process.\textsuperscript{134} The latter is made up of affective, cognitive and behavioral factors. However, while much attention has been paid to the person/group and place side of theory, less has been paid to the process by which attachment occurs.\textsuperscript{135}

In Ch. 3, I argue that in developing sense of place, monastic spiritual practices and traditions are an important motivating factor. For example, taking a vow of “stability,” requiring that each monk pass through a phase of rigorous formation, and regularly engaging in manual work provide a strong inventive for attachment to the land. These traditional monastic legacies bring a cognitive expectation to the idea of sense of place. However, it is only through the immersion in daily and seasonal liturgies, the attachment of memories, and the practice of manual work that monks are affectively attuned to the seasonal and diurnal cycles of the place. This attachment includes moral landscapes which attach memory, affect and moral lesson to the land, enforcing a deeper connection to place as the locus of their monastic journey. Thus, not only are beliefs and monastic spirituality an important factor in the process of place attachment, but the daily habitus of dwelling in that place. Person, place and process form a relational whole in the service of the monastic vocation of seeking God. In this chapter I also show that changes to the manual work regime threatens to diminish the monastic sense of place through a decrease in active contact with the land.

Chapter 4

Many contemporary environmentalists, particularly those labelling themselves Spiritual Ecologists, or Ecocentrists, are calling for the “reenchantment” of nature. Ecocentrism calls for an ontological-ethical shift toward the intrinsic worth of biodiversity and ecosystems, and in many instances insists on the sacredness of nature in and of itself. In asking the monks whether or not the land is ‘sacred’ in and of itself, I demonstrate the range of perspectives on monastic sacred space, sacramental theology and personal convictions. I show that the monks’ views of the earth in general and land in particular should primarily be characterized as \textit{sacramental}, meaning that because it was created by God and depends in each moment on God for existence, land participates in and points to God, whose indwelling

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presence is mysteriously imminent in all creation, but who remains ultimately transcendent of the world. However, there was a spectrum from a kind of ‘shallow’ sacramentalism which saw creation as a kind of image or symbol of God’s qualities, to a more ‘deep’ sacramentalism which saw creation as participating in God by its very existence. That is to say, that by and large, the land is ontologically sacramental which contains sacred dimensions and implications, but in keeping with Catholic social teachings, it is not in itself *divine*. This sacramental discourse was complemented by what several monks referred to as ‘charged moments’ wherein their sacramental theology and embodied experiences came together on the landscape. Thus an embodied semiotics includes similar theological traditions, embodied in unique and distinct ways by the monks who hold them.

**Chapter 5**

In rejecting semiotic theories of landscape, many phenomenological and post-phenomenological writers imply that symbolic construction ignores the importance of embodiment. While symbolic signs are certainly part of a constructed approach to landscape, other sign processes are also reinforced through memory attachment and experiences on the land. Rather than taking either a social constructivist or phenomenological approach this chapter clarifies and synthesizes these perspectives. Rooted in the theory outlined above, in Ch. 5, I demonstrate that biblical and monastic symbols and motifs play an important role in the monks’ understanding of the landscape. These act as a kind of template for understanding the landscape symbolically. However, the daily and seasonal liturgy, the chanting of the Psalms, and a regular practice of walking the landscape show that embodiment and symbolic aspects reinforce and strengthen one another, rather than account for or exclude one another. Symbols are an essential aspect of embodied experience, and experiences carries and enriches our symbolic understandings of land.

**Chapter 6**

In my concluding chapter, I draw out the implications of these findings for conversations related to the emerging concept of the Anthropocene, the age of human dominance of the planet. I suggest that in an era of uncertainty, where environmental discourses are more and more fragmented between more wilderness protections and embracing the Anthropocene, monasticism offers a middle way which is skeptical of technology, rooted in place and spiritually oriented toward the world. In addition, some
contemporary writers have challenged the romanticism of sense of place, and call for a more globally aware environmental ethic. I suggest however, that sense of place remains an important component of environmental thinking and action. In addition, while there has been a push toward ecocentrism within environmental ethics, I argue that a sacramental ontology is better characterized as Anthropocosmic, which maintains humans as central to God’s soteriological concerns, but embeds us within the wider cosmos. Emerging from Pope Francis’s ‘Integral Ecology’ sacramental ecology is well placed to respond to ecological pantheism. Lastly, I argue that whereas post-phenomenological approaches to landscape and place are seeking to move beyond the human subject, I show that monasticism’s emphasis on the inner landscape and symbol offers a more balanced approach to the idea of ‘self.’

A Note on the Monks’ Identities

In this work I have been granted permission to use the real names and locations of the monastic communities with whom I worked. This seemed a necessity for a study involving place and dwelling. However, I have decided to use Pseudonyms for all living monks referenced in this work. Several monks who have died since the study took place will retain their real names, to honor their lives, and because they can’t really object to what I say about them (at least in this life). For the majority of Pseudonyms I chose in random order from the list of characters in Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, a murder mystery set in a 16th century Cluniac monastery. The remainder of names, were taken at random from a list of ancient Irish saints, who have a reputation of their own for loving the land. I assure you however, that unlike Eco’s novel, there is no special pattern for decoding a meaning behind which name was assigned to which monks.
Chapter 2: Building Bridges: Biblical Motifs and Environmental Discourse Among Monastic Communities in the American West

“Land creates a context for the spiritual life, the development of prayer. You go out and the quiet natural beauty is conducive to prayer, there’s no distraction, just a natural beauty and a reminder of God’s presence. You have to sit somewhere, and you have to work somewhere, and you have to live and pray somewhere, and the best place for living and praying and contemplative prayer is a quiet natural setting.”

–Monk of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey (2016)

“Every one of our various metaphors for nature—‘wilderness,’ ‘ecosystem,’ ‘Gaia,’ ‘resource,’ ‘wasteland’—is already a kind of garden, an indissoluble mixture of our culture and whatever it is that’s really out there.”

–Michael Pollan (1991)

Introduction

Several monks lowered a simple pine box coffin into the deep rectangular grave among other graves in a grassy clearing between the church and the eastern cluster of cinder block hermitages. I had only arrived at New Camaldoli Hermitage the day before, December 8th 2015, and my interviews were being delayed until Father Bruno, the beloved former Prior of the community, was laid to rest in the ground. The tributes and homilies to Bruno spoke of his sharp intellect, his kind heart, and his affection for trees. Speaking with the monks about Father Bruno, they were both saddened by the void he left in the community, but almost chipper about their conviction that his soul persisted, even as his body now lay covered with the yellow clay soil of Big Sur’s chaparral hillsides.

And yet each of the monks that I met had already died. When they took their final vows as monks, they committed themselves not only to the community with whom they would live, but to the place where they would dwell, until they too would be laid to rest in the soil. Their lives of prayer were shaped not only by the cell, chapel, and other structures, but by the surrounding steep hillsides, canyons, groves and vistas. The monks committed
themselves to seeking paradise in the wilderness of the human heart, in places where visitors flock to because of their remote and paradiacal setting.

While there was once a time when the monks sought a more complete *fuga mundi*—fleeing from the world—Vatican II brought sweeping changes to Catholic clerical and liturgical life, and many monastic communities have since opened to the broader world, including the insights and convictions of what would become the environmental movement, which has found fertile ground in these land-based spiritual oases. In this chapter I explore how contemporary environmental discourses interact with the monastic spiritual tradition in the land management and spirituality of each monastic community. In answering, I will take the reader on a long journey through Catholic monasticism’s relationship to the land from its desert origins, through its medieval agrarian golden age, to its contemporary developments and changes in North America, in order to orient the reader to the historical context for contemporary monastic dwelling. I demonstrate that land has consistently affirmed and supported the monastic vocation through sustenance, silence, solitude and sacramental beauty, and that land-based motifs such as wilderness, garden, desert and paradise were central to historical monasticism’s sense of purpose and identity on the land, but also to a large extend emerged from their experience with land.

The chapter then enters the territory of the history of American environmental discourses from the colonial era to the Anthropocene, setting the stage for the introduction to the monastic communities in this study. I demonstrate the pervasiveness of the biblical motifs in American environmental discourse, and that these discourses are both cognitive framings and embodied experience which interact and inform one another.

I will then introduce the reader to the four communities in this study by outlining their history, lineages and regional settings. In addition to my conversations with the monks, this chapter draws more than others on the demographic surveys collected at each community, works published by the monks themselves, publically available websites, and several archival documents that were made available to me. I am of course also drawing on my own observations about the condition, setting, and management of the communities during my time there.

I will argue that monastic spirituality and contemporary environmental discourses are being “bridged” to use sociologist Stephen Ellingson’s term with monastic biblical motifs,
spirituality and traditions in unique, place- and lineage-based ways through the living out of the monastic vocation on the land. This is not an act of pure theological synthesis, but a lived working out of the monastic vocation in the contemporary world.

The heart of the monastic tradition, and the flavor of each community’s monastic lineage are primary lens through which environmental discourses are understood and assimilated. However regionally influential environmental discourses unquestionably play an important role in the monastic relationship to land. Unlike some more experimental communities who have blended environmental discourse with Catholic theology and liturgy (Ellingson’s ‘Bricolage’) to produce new institutions and practices, the communities in this study have maintained a much less porous boundary between core monastic practices and environmental discourses. This is because while land is an integral part of the monastic vocation, it is not the telos of that vocation. From the outset, it should be clearly stated that the monastic gaze is ultimately fixed on a place beyond place and a being beyond being. However, land is not peripheral to the monastic life, but woven into the very fabric of its lineages and spiritual practices.

Monasticism and the Land in Historical Context

The purpose of monastic life is to seek God. However, in seeking God, monastic communities have often sought some measure of separation from the world in order to do so. This fuga mundi, or flight from the world, was often enforced through the built structures of cloister walls and strict vigilance of monastic discipline. But it was also often expressed through the setting in which a contemplative, hermit or monastic community decided to establish itself. Fleeing to the deserts, wilderness or forests, monastics sought to be alone with God, like Jesus in the desert.

In this section, I will outline the historical context and religious discourses which shaped the monastic relationship to land. I will show that from its desert origins, through its classical agrarian expression, biblical and monastic stories, language, poetry and theology land served as a powerful discourse for shaping monastic ideas about place, but that the land itself was also a powerful actor in shaping monastic spirituality in place. This historic context

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1 This is not to say that communities that do engage in ‘bricolage’, such as the Sisters in Sara McFarland Taylor’s work, are somehow less ecologically minded. In fact, I think it is probable, though no the central interest of this study, that these communities are in fact more ecologically aware and focused on being ‘sustainable.’

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will set the stage for discussing the North American context, and finally the cross pollination between environmental discourse and land-based motifs among four monastic communities in this study.

Geographic Context for Biblical Peoples

It seems almost too obvious to mention, but monastic spirituality is rooted in the Bible. The stories and peoples of the Bible are deeply intertwined with the geographical and land-based context of the Middle East. In his book *A Natural History of the Bible*, Daniel Hillel argues that Mediterranean and Levant deserts had a considerable influence on the character of Jewish and later Christian religious symbolism. While he does not take an environmentally deterministic tone, the desert and steppe topography is an unquestionably powerful actor in the Jewish experience of their God, who required fierce loyalty of them.

Hillel categorizes the five major ecological zones that form the geography of the Biblical landscapes as the Nile Delta, the Arabian Desert, Mesopotamia, and the Israeliite-Palestinian Mediterranean coastline. In his words, they are the ‘Rainfed’ (relatively humid) domain of the lush Lebanese mountains; the ‘Pastoral’ (semi-arid) foothills surrounding Judea; the ‘Riverine’ zone around the River Jordan, which empties the Lake of Galilee into the Dead Sea; the ‘Maritime’ domain of the Mediterranean coast; and the ‘Desert’ domains of Egypt, Syria and Judea respectively. Each of these domains play an important role in the characters, stories, parables and poetic imagery contained in what we now call the Bible.

The harsh climate and unpredictable drought cycle, combined with the vast surrounding desert wildernesses, presented real danger to its peoples, where water and food sources were precarious, lions still regularly stalked, bandits roamed, demons haunted and sand storms could arise suddenly. To be able to carve out a field of wheat, an olive orchard, or a vineyard from this harsh environment was seen as possible only with God’s help. And while the Jewish people tried their luck with many deities over the years, after the Assyrian conquest (740 BCE) and the Babylonian Exile (605 BCE), what is referred to by scholars as Second Temple Judaism was devoted exclusively to Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, and the God referred to as *Abba*, or Father, by Jesus of Nazareth.

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The cosmological ontology of the ancient Hebrews had the flat earth set upon foundational pillars, which set the earth and sky tenuously between two bodies of water—the seas and the waters of heaven. The stars were lights set in the dome of the sky, and God was an anthropomorphic being who defended his devotees and rewarded their right praise, sacrifice and obedience, willing to crush Israel’s enemies. Human beings were brought to life by *Ruach*, the breath of life, which also sustained the rest of creation. Creation’s very existence offered up praise to God, which was mirrored and mimicked in the Temple sacrifices and offerings wherein Temple priests acted as stand in for creation. Human beings held a special position in creation, especially in later Christian interpretations, as created in God’s “image and likeness” essentially affirming the Platonic worldview, that human beings are a kind of rational animal, hybrids between angels and beasts.

Among Biblical peoples, there was no sense that religion was a private affair of the individual conscience. Israel was wedded to God *through the land* and many features of the land were points of contact with the unseen world. God was encountered through sacred natural sites such as desert altars, groves of trees, or, more frequently, mountains such as Sinai, Carmel, or Tabor. Abraham had visions of God among the Oaks of Mamre, Elijah lived in a cave and heard God’s voice. Jacob wrestled with a mysterious figure on the banks of the Jordan River. Mount Zion, later the location of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem would become the archetypal sacred mountain, even after it was destroyed by the Romans in 79 CE.5

With such a tenuous grip on life, Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann argues, the land was in fact the crucial expression and affirmation of the relationship between ancient Israel and God. The land thus embodied the spiritual character of the relationship between God and his peoples. Key among these motifs was the tension between wilderness and paradise. In obedience the land would prosper, and in disobedience the land would wilt. These two promises juxtaposed the fruitful garden with the harsh and desolate wilds, imagery that would be repeated by prophets up and down the Judeo-Christian, even into modern times. The Biblical topography was a *spiritual* ecology, where humanity, God and creation

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4 Ancient historians Philo and Josephus were the first to interpret Jewish priest craft in this way. See Philo’s *Vita Mosis*.
dwelt in an intimate relationship, and where human beings knew their place in the cosmos. The symbols, metaphors, prophesies, parables and stories that resonated with Biblical peoples were taken directly from the experiences of its people with the biomes and ecologies of the region.

The Hebrew word Midbar is the most common word translated for wilderness in the Old Testament, and in French and Spanish Midbar is translated as desierto or desert. In the New Testament, written primarily in Greek, Eremos, meaning an isolated place, is used. Wilderness in the Old Testament, captured a range of social-ecological settings, from unsettled or uncultivated land near a settlement, “the wilderness of Edom,” to dispersed pasture lands. An abandoned ruin or a desolation of war were also places of wilderness or desert. These were places of danger, demons, and primordial chaos, where life hung by a thread. The ocean too, with its beast Leviathan, was a kind of watery wilderness. As theologian of place Belden Lane writes:

Deserts have been viewed with fear and contempt as the snare of the devil, the abode of dragons, or the lair of the lawless. As wilderness, wuste, waste, the desert becomes the haunt of demons—at best a ‘negative landscape’ or ‘realm of abstraction’, located outside of the ordinary sphere of existence, susceptible only to things transcendent. In early Christian tradition, the desert was perceived ambiguously, usually as an unfriendly, intimidating domain; but for those able to endure its purifying adversity, an image also of paradise.

Even the harshest desert offered hope of redemption. While the Desert-wilderness was often framed negatively, it was also the place of Israel’s redemption, purification and encounter with God, and became the essential context of the most crucial events in Biblical history and narrative. When God frees the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, he leads them into the desert, sustains them with Manna, and then reveals His law, or Torah, to the Hebrew people through the Prophet Moses on Mount Sinai. While they are in the desert waiting for Moses, the Hebrews fashioned a golden calf and are in the midst of raucous Pagan worship when Moses

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descends Mount Sinai with the law, the Israelites must stay in the desert. In Numbers 32:13 the narrator writes: “The Lord's anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone.” The desert-wilderness is a liminal space. And yet, the wilderness was not a punishment, but a place of encounter with God. This notion is expressed by the Old Testament prophet Hosea who writes that God, speaking to the People of Israel as his bride, “will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her” (2:14).

In the New Testament the Eremos, the deserted places, the desolate places, the wilderness are where John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth made frequent trips to pray in solitude. “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (eremos) to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1); or, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places (eremos) and prayed (Luke 5:16). During his ministry, Jesus is often portrayed as a powerful exorcist, who casts out demons. While demons do not make a strong appearance in the Old Testament, during the intertestamental period, a belief in demons solidifies, with Satan taking the lead role. Jesus as powerful prophet had power over liminal places like the wilderness, and the demons that dwelled there.

Mirror image to the Desert-wilderness is the Paradise-garden. The harsh reality of an agricultural and pastoral people who made their living from the soil, pointed both backwards and forwards, nostalgia for a paradise lost in the primordial Garden of Eden, and forward to a redeemed Nation of Israel, that would inherit a land of “milk and honey.” The presence of a primordial garden or golden age, appears universally among Semitic cultures and Greco-Roman myth; from Assyrian and Babylonian origin stories, to Homer’s Odyssey. In Virgil’s Aeneid, the Elysian Field is an earthly paradise in which Aeneas goes “to the happy place, the green pleasances and blissful seats of the Fortunate Woodlands.” The second chapter of Genesis locates our primordial parents in a Garden of trees planted by God at the beginning of Creation:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—

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8 Williams, George. Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought, 17.
10 Delumeau, Jean, History of Paradise, 8.
trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8-9). The Hebrew word for garden is Gan and can also denote an enclosed area. In the Latin translations of the Bible by Saint Jerome in the Fourth Century, however, the Garden in Genesis 2 is translated as Paradisum. The word Paradise, derives from the Persian word Apiri-daeza which described a walled in orchard or a park-like area designated for the use of royalty. In the Hebrew world, the original garden was a place of harmony with nature, abundance of food and water, and intimacy with God. Eden was a place where Adam and Eve “walked with God.” The Hebrews did not believe in a post-mortal paradise as many Christians imagine it today, but in a future return of the paradisiacal garden spoken of in Genesis through obedience to God’s will for his chosen people.

In the Prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is always attached to the land. For the disobedient, the desolation of the desert-wilderness awaited, but for the obedient, the abundance of Eden. This essentially agrarian understanding of the world runs throughout the entirety of the prophetic writers of Hosea, Joel, Isaiah and Ezekiel. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah for example, most likely written during the Babylonian exile of the seventh century BCE, the writer is explicit about what awaits a faithful Israel: “The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord” (Isaiah 51:3). Israel’s obedience, and Yahweh’s unflinching love for his people, would eventually bring back to earth a lush Eden like landscape in the wilderness.

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom…Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow (Isaiah 35:1, 5-7).

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11 Delumeau, Jean, History of Paradise, 8.
12 Brueggemann, Walter, The Land, 3.
God will set all things right again, and the people will prosper, if they are obedient to God’s law. The desert will again “blossom as the rose”, and the dry bones of the land will become the fleshy sinews of a righteous and prosperous nation.

Christian theologians throughout history would not miss the symbolism of a garden called Gethsemane, where Jesus prays before he is betrayed by Judas Iscariot; and where lay the garden tomb where the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciple Mary Magdalen. These two settings extend the Hebrew land-based motifs simultaneously back to the Garden of Eden, and forward into eternity. For the Apostle Paul, Jesus is the “New Adam” who has come to reconcile humanity back to God (See Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15). Whereas the sin of Adam and Eve brought death into the world, so the death and resurrection of Jesus ushers in the new reality of the Kingdom of God. For New Testament scholar N.T. Wright this new reality could be described as the “Garden of the Resurrection.”

These motifs of Desert-wilderness and Paradise-garden, which encompass aspects of land, sea, sky, field, hills, grove, mountains and village, emerged out of the broader Semitic pastoral and tribal anthropologies of the 1,000 years before the Common Era. The experience of both the harsh desert landscape, and the redeeming fecundity of a pastoral-agrarian society are integral to the spiritual themes and symbols of the Bible and were the semiotic resources with which the hermit and monastic traditions would eventually draw.

*The Desert Foundations of Christian Monasticism*

The experience of the Jewish people in the deserts of Judea and Sinai, and the Christian hope for a realized paradise with God, would serve as the lens through which Christians continually interpreted their own lives, the land, and spirituality. Hermits, from *eremos*, Greek for desert, sought to follow is Jesus’s footsteps by retreating into the desert in order to battle demons, provoke temptation, and purify their souls. The patron saint of the desert monastics, and the first said to live full time in the deep Egyptian desert, was Saint Anthony (251-356), a Copt from Alexandria. After a powerful conversion experience, Anthony sold all his possessions as Jesus had commanded the rich man in the New Testament books of Luke and Matthew, and attached himself to a local spiritual teacher. After mastering his teachings, Anthony moved farther and farther from human settlements.

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First to a graveyard, then an abandoned Roman barracks, and finally to what would become his famous mountain hermitage in the Egyptian desert. In his popular autobiography of Saint Anthony, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373) portrays him as a fierce ascetic who battled constant onslaughts of temptations and demons trying to sway him from his spiritual path, and prevent him from spreading his methods of spiritual self-mastery. Anthony was, as many early hermits saw themselves, a spiritual warrior who took the reality of the unseen world for granted. To Anthony, the desert and wild beasts were the domain of demons and the devil, and thus front in the war against evil. Not only did the physical features of the desert model the deep silence and simplicity Anthony sought, but also were a spiritual battlefield upon which he sought his own kind of martyrdom. Though Anthony was no Thoreau, and his desert hermitage no Walden Pond, Anthony did grow to love the place where he had chosen to carry out his vocation as a hermit. Saint Athanasius writes:

And having journeyed with them three days and three nights, he came to a very lofty mountain, and at the foot of the mountain ran a clear spring, whose waters were sweet and very cold; outside there was a plain and a few uncared-for palm trees…Anthony then, as it were, moved by God, loved the place, for this was the spot which he who had spoken with him by the banks of the river had pointed out. So having first received loaves from his fellow travelers, he abode in the mountain alone, no one else being with him. And recognizing it as his own home, he remained in that place for the future.

He may have been a spiritual warrior, but the place itself began to work on Anthony, and he as Athanasius puts it “loved the place.” The location of Anthony’s hermitage is still occupied by monks. The monastery of Saint Anthony is one of the oldest in the world, and is run by the Coptic Orthodox Church.


Within several decades of the publication of Athanasius’s *Life*, thousands of mostly men, but also some women, fled into the deserts. Some have suggested it was to avoid conscription into the Roman army, to avoid taxation, or to flee the flares of persecution that cropped up from time to time before Christianity became the official Roman Creed.\(^\text{16}\) However, it was also because the desert experience was rooted in Christian life, and a challenge to the spiritual warrior. The monk Saint John Climacus (579-649), who lived at the foot of Mount Sinai said that the monastery was a “tomb before the tomb,”\(^\text{17}\) a place where the seeker could be alone with God.

While the desert was an archetypal battle ground, and symbol as theologian Belden Lane suggests, by their very harshness, they tend to “confront people with their boundaries.”\(^\text{18}\) Boundaries between life and death, body and soul, and heaven and earth. “In desert and mountain wilderness, people discover liminal places suggesting thresholds between where they have been and where they are going.”\(^\text{19}\) The desert with its stark beauty and winnowing danger embodied the very path the hermit sought to travel in his spiritual life. Saint Jerome (347-420), an early desert father and translator remarked “the desert loves to strip bare.” As Lane cautions however, the hermits’ experience of the deserts of Egypt and Syria were not akin to the Romantic Movement’s wilderness park; they were an image of terror, and a gateway to the apophatic spirituality of silence and awe in the face of a mysterious God.\(^\text{20}\) Their place in the early days of monastic history, are as training ground and Biblical motif, places that modelled the simplicity they sought within and pointed to the redemption they sought to realize.

Basil of Caesarea (330-379), one of the early fathers of cenobitic monasticism, who spent many years in the desert as a hermit, demonstrates just how intimately the memory of the Biblical experience shaped monastic spirituality:

> For I am living in the wilderness wherein the Lord dwelt. Here is the oak of Mamre; here is the ladder which leads to heaven, and the encampments of the angels which

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\(^{17}\) Lane, Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 165.

\(^{18}\) Lane, Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 37.

\(^{19}\) Lane, Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 38.

\(^{20}\) Apophatic spirituality, referred to in Chapter 1, is a spirituality that seeks to go beyond imagery and metaphor, wherein the seeker has a direct experience of God.
Jacob saw; here is the wilderness where the people, purified, received the law, and then going into the land of promise beheld God. Here is Mount Carmel where Elijah abode and pleased God….Here is the wilderness where the blessed John ate locusts and preached repentance to men. Here is the Mount of Olives, which Christ ascended and there prayed, teaching us how to pray. Here is Christ, the lover of the wilderness; for He says, ‘Where there are two or three gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’

By fleeing into the desert, Basil was stepping into a symbolic and spiritual ecology that spanned the entire length of the Bible, and by taking on the identity of a monk, he also committed himself to the places where monks lived. If the desert fathers could become holy in these remote howling wildernesses, then to dwell in those same places gave power to the neophyte’s aspirations.

It was not long then before the deserts were crawling with these spiritual seekers. Some communities even began to resemble small cities. Aspiring hermits would seek out a teacher, carve a cell out of the rock, or improvise a small hut, and pray. These communities of solitaries would often gather for communion on Sundays, and would weave baskets or work as seasonal shepherds to support their meager diets of bread and briny water. We have many recorded sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, compiled by their students or passed along by those who encountered them. These collections of the sayings of the desert monastics demonstrate the importance of the desert as a Biblical motif and context for their spiritual practice. As theologian Douglas Christie writes, the hermits expressed,

A desire to recapture in the present moment a taste of innocence and intimacy with God which Adam knew in paradise. The stories likening the elders to Adam recall the simplicity of paradise which the monks were now seeing rekindled in the desert. We see this in the power certain monks were said to possess over animals and the capacity some of them had to live as Adam did, in innocence and without care.

This desire to be one with God was the means by which hermits and monks became true human beings (Anthropos), restored to right relationship with God, that Adam and Eve


enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. The motif of the Desert-wilderness was not complete without the Paradise-garden, and because God’s favor was so often discerned in the concrete terms of the world, the human role on earth was as cooperator with God for our own, and the world as a whole’s redemption from sin, waste, fear and evil.

For example, there is an instance where Saint Anthony is being attacked by demons in the forms of wild beasts, and many hermits reported encounters with lions, hyenas and snakes. In the hagiographical literatures that developed around desert saints, writers often go out of their way to include tales of hermits developing friendships with wild animals, even large predators such as hyenas and lions. Stories are myriad of the animal loving saints in the desert, Irish and Russian literatures. Egyptian Hermit Theon could walk the deserts alone at night in the company of wild beasts. Paul the Hermit was so beloved by a pair of lions, that when he died they dug his grave. Macarius of Alexandria was said to have healed a blind hyena pup. And, Abbot Gerasimus dressed a wounded lion’s paw, after which the lion refused to leave his company. This paradoxical relationship between the Desert-wilderness in which they dwelt, and the Paradise-garden they were cultivating both within, and around them, articulated ancient Biblical motifs of salvation coming to the desert in the guise of a lush garden like the mythical Eden. These holy men and women, through their spiritual discipline, were breaking through a thin veil between the worlds, and rumors of tame lions, servant hyenas, or deferential serpents whispered out from cliff top caves, hovels and dusty cells to the surrounding villages and towns that there lived holy men and women. A hermit’s rapport with wild animals was seen as evidence that they had returned to pre-fallen, or ‘natural’ state. Because in the garden, Adam and Eve dwelt in harmony with creation, the ascetic who had overcome the wilds through spiritual practice, was seen as having returned to that state. Just as crows fed Elijah in the Old Testament, or Jesus calmed the sea during a storm, holiness was seen as a particularly potent state of being, one that could give the holy person power over the elements. The desert was a gateway to paradise, just as the tomb was to resurrection. Far from a romantic affection, the desert was a place of purification, but one that modeled and mirrored the austerity required for achieving holiness.

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Eventually the institutional church caught up with these anarchic networks of contemplatives and sought to organize them into more respectable communities. *Cenobitic*, or community-based monasteries took shape under the guidance of a rule and a superior. Saints Pachomius (292-348) and later Basil of Caesarea (329-379) were some of the first to organize such monasteries in the deserts of the Upper Nile Delta, and Cappadocia respectively. These early monasteries were better organized and often clustered around a chapel, with workshops, refectory and kitchen gardens usually contained within an enclosed area, both for protection from the outside, and to keep monks from wandering. This form of monasticism spread quickly to Ireland and Europe especially through the writings and monastic foundations of an austere monk named John Cassian (360-435).

Monasteries of the medieval period continued to draw sustenance and meaning from the landscape, while simultaneously bringing large swaths of it under their control. The medieval monastic landscapes that surrounded these cloisters became an integral part of both the physical and spiritual sustenance of the monks. The more tightly cloistered communities which emerged during the medieval period were often compared to schools, military barracks, Noah’s Ark, the gates of heaven, the tomb of Christ, or a prison for the body that liberated the soul. The cloister took on the tension between body and soul, earth and heaven, and of the Biblical land-based motifs of the Paradise-garden and the Desert-wilderness. Whereas the Desert-wilderness was the setting for the early hermits, monasticism in Europe sought to transform the forested ‘deserts’ into agrarian Paradise-gardens, a process that mirrored the work they were doing within their own souls.

The land gave voice to abstract theological concepts. Historian of monastic architecture Megan Cassidy-Welch has written, “Within the cloister, spaces of theological abstraction have been anchored to the earth.” The cloister garth, often located at the spatial center of the monastery became its theological center as well, pointing to the liberation of the soul, the coming together of earth and heaven, and the return to intimacy with God for which

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monks yearned. Cultural Anthropologist, Mary W. Helm expands this spatial understanding to the landscape as a whole, wherein monasteries became *Axis Mundi*, or world centers, within the Christian cosmos, much like the mountains of revelation in the Old Testament:

> When expanded into a perspective of the early medieval countryside at large, the cloister as paradise and sacred mountain encourages us to think of the early medieval landscape as virtually blanketed with numerous paradisiacal abodes standing atop spiritual mountains that, in the form of monasteries, dotted the landscape in all directions.  

The monastery and the surrounding landscape were fused to the monastic vocation of prayer, and the Christian cosmological ontology of heaven and earth, and each monastery functioned as a liminal threshold that straddled the boundary between the two, bringing the Paradise-garden and the Desert-wilderness together.

> Whereas the desert fathers sunk into God through the apophatic silence of the harsh desert, medieval monastics sought out their own “deserts” in the rural and remaining wilds of Europe. Rural and wild landscapes served to give some measure of separation for the monks from the world, provide for their livelihoods through farming and extracting rents from tenants, and a quiet setting in which to pray. In her excellent treatment of the monastic relationship to land, and in particular forests, Environmental Historian Ellen Arnold shows how central land was, not only in giving expression to the pervasive Biblical land-based motifs of wilderness and garden, but in grounding the medieval monastic imagination, spirituality and identity.  

Arnold’s study focused on a Carolingian era Benedictine monastery complex in Stavelot-Malmedy, located in the forested Ardennes region of Belgium which thrived between the 7th and 9th centuries. Saint Remaclus (?-671) who founded the monastery in 650 CE, declared that it was established in “a place of horror and solitary isolation which abounds with wild beasts”  

> In the founding documents, Stavelot-Malmedy is set the monastery in a rugged wilderness that was redeemed through the hard work of the monks. With land donated by Sigibert III the Monastic Charter says, “In our

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forest called the Ardennes, in an empty space of solitude,” the forest was a place “in which a throng of wild animals springs forth” that was “confined by mountains,” “impeded by swamp,” whose local population was “not fully established,” and “bound up in idolatry.”³⁰

As European historian Robert Bartlett writes, “The monks progressively obliterated the memory of these earlier settlers in favor of a founding myth of pioneers in an empty land.”³¹

As Arnold shows in her study, the Ardennes had been cultivated and occupied for many hundreds of years prior, and was not so excessively far removed from major transit corridors. As Arnold shows, Saint Remaclus’s suggestion that the area was wild and dangerous appeals to monastic heritage of fleeing the world for the terror of the desert wilds, and thus foundation stories often exaggerated the remoteness, sparseness of the population, and presence of danger. On the monks understanding of their relationship to and role toward the land, Arnold writes:

Throughout the centuries, monks of the Ardennes developed the idea of the forest as a wild and dangerous landscape because it tied them to their religious heritage. But they had established their monasteries in a landscape that had long been full of people, and they were active participants in the regions social and agricultural structures. Thus, the monks not only had to define themselves in relation to the wild; they also had to define themselves in relation to local people and the domesticated landscape. To do this, they told stories of how the power of the saints and of God allowed the monks to transform the wilderness into a beautiful and controllable landscape. They then in turn, used this calm and pastoral view of the forest to represent rebirth, tranquility, and the fertility of both land and soul.³²

Their European setting was understood, related to and managed not only as economic and political domains, but as spiritual ecologies which reflected the spiritual and Biblical land-based motifs of feeling to the harsh desert-wilderness so that it could be transformed into the lush Paradise-garden, an ‘agriculture’ which was mirrored within their own souls through the process of taming and cutting out vice, and planting and cultivating virtue and purity of heart.

³⁰ Arnold, Ellen, Negotiating the Landscape, 34.
³² Arnold, Ellen, Negotiating the Landscape, 28.
Despite archeological and historical certainty that the area of Ardennes had been peopled for many centuries, the monks’ official histories spoke of the howling wilderness being supplanted by the pacifying, redeeming work of the monastic community, which resulted in the beauty and prosperity of a pastoral Paradise-garden. This tendency to exaggerate the remoteness and wildness of a place was pervasive in monastic history, and served a theological purpose in setting up the monks as holy pioneers. This is of course not unlike the environmental classic Walden Pond by Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who’s writing makes it seem as though he too were in the dark woods, when in fact, he was less than a mile from Concord. Monasteries were not National Parks, and monks had an impact on their landscapes. During the Medieval period, monks were at the forefront of literacy and learning, farming technology, and the development of sophisticated mechanical clocks to keep track of their rigorous liturgical schedules.

In the 1960s French historian Georges Duby suggested that monastic institutions were the key drivers of deforestation in Europe which took place between 800-1100 CE in what Duby calls the “Great Clearance.” And some recent environmental historians have assumed that land clearance was often spearheaded by Benedictine and Cistercians monks. The deforestation of Europe correlates well with the development of the deep plow, and the rise in European population starting in the 10th century. Monastics were often framed as a sort of “holy frontiersmen” who went out into the wilderness and cleared land, drained swamps, spread Christianity to the Pagans, and diffuse new farming and metallurgical technology to peasant settlers.


While monasteries were absolutely agrarian in outlook, the monk as ax-wielding Dominionist is not entirely consistent with evidence presented in Ellen Arnold’s work and in other case examples. Some exaggeration of monasticism’s role in Europe’s deforestation can be attributed to the fact that sources for historians are written records, and in the medieval period, monasteries produced far more written records than peasants and farmers, who were also engaged in land clearance and farming. This made monastic documents a primary source for tracing environmental history in Europe. However, as we have seen, monastic documents such as lives of saints, or official community histories, often exaggerated the wildness and remoteness of a given area to reinforce their identities as monks.38

In addition to this narrative hyperbole, historians such as Arnold and others are problematizing the simple narrative of a single unidirectional “Great Clearance.” These historians have argued that the development of medieval Europe followed a more or less linear trajectory of ecological destruction, specifically with respect to forest clearance, with monks at the frontiers. Arnold, among others, highlight the fact that newly developed forest regions such as the Ardennes, certainly did undergo reductions in forest cover, but point out that forests were often highly valued resource areas that were managed through sustainable pre-modern forestry techniques such as pollarding and coppice.39 These methods allowed for more intensive forest management without clearcutting or land conversion, and provided a steady source of wood that was in constant high demand for construction, craft and fuel. Arnold argues that the staggering quantities of wood that were required to sustain Stavelot-Malmedy necessitated an intensive and judicious management of the surrounding woodlands either by the monks themselves, or their tenants. For example, just one estate which paid tithing to the Abbey delivered nearly 1,000 chords of wood, 2,200 cart loads of firewood, and 6,800 bundles of bark.40 Forests were also essential gathering zones for fruit, nuts, acorns, and as grazing areas for herds of pigs. Forest clearings were also where wild and semi-domesticated bees were cultivated.41

39 Pollarding is a method of forestry where branches are cut at head height so that branches will regrow out of reach of grazing animals. Coppice is the cutting of trees at ground level such as willow to harvest for firewood or basketry. See Ellen Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, 68.
40 Arnold, Ellen, *Negotiating the Landscape*, 67.
41 Arnold, Ellen, *Negotiating the Landscape*, 74.
Beyond the Ardennes, another example of pre-modern monastic forestry and land care is the original Camaldoli Hermitage, founded in 1024 by Saint Romuald in Italy. Camaldoli Hermitage sought to balance the hermetic and cenobitic styles of life in central Italy. When Romuald arrived, he set his monks to planting white firs, to ensure a steady supply of wood. With a larger monastery at the base of the mountain, and a cluster of hermitages up higher, Camaldoli has become a case in successful Pre-modern forestry practices. It even served to inform the modern codification of the Italian Forestry Code during the 19th century. Today the Hermitage, which is still in use, is the one of the longest continuously occupied monasteries in Europe. Since World War II it has become part of the Casentine National Park which encompasses 36,000 hectares, and is one of the largest in Europe.

Thus in establishing themselves in rural and wild settings, and going about making them productive and beautiful, medieval monks were neither wholly idyllic nature-lovers, nor ruthless exploiters of the land as some writers have argued. As Arnold suggests, monks could hold the tension between differing views of land simultaneously. She writes, “The monks were stewards of land and aggressive exploiters of resources, religious leaders and economic agents, isolationists and social leaders, builders of agriculture and lovers of untamed nature all at the same time.” As we will see, this principle holds true of contemporary monasticism as well, even with a whole set of social and ecological conditions at their disposal.

Sustaining a medieval monastic community, which could reach up to 200 monastics or more in some cases, and which sought to sustain itself into the future, required careful attention to sustainable land management practices, not a slash and burn scorched earth policy. Many monasteries founded after the time of Saint Benedict and his famous unifying Rule strove to be self-sufficient so that the monks would not have to depend on the charity of...
others, and they could avoid exposure to the corruption of the world. The 66th chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict councils:

The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced. Then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not all good for their souls.45

Monastic cloisters often included spaces for vegetable gardens, domesticated animals, orchards, a cemetery, workshops, and accommodations for guests and pilgrims. However, no single cloister could be wholly self-sufficient. As historian Christopher Brooke has documented, the monastery cellarer, charged with keeping the monastery well stocked with supplies, often had to source items such as wheat, beans, milk, butter, cheese, fish, sheep’s wool for habits, pig skin for parchment, and timber and stone for building from the surrounding countryside, and monasteries needed access to vineyards for wine, orchards for fruit, flowers for the altar, and bees’ wax for candles.46

However, the medieval monastery was not a self-contained egalitarian farming commune, but a highly disciplined, hierarchical institution that could be a major social and political actor embedded within the feudal or manorial land tenure systems which pervaded European during that period. As historian Walter Horn points out,

As a manorial entity the Carolingian monastery thus differed little from the fabric of a feudal estate, save that the corporate community of men for whose sustenance this organization was maintained consisted of monks who served God and spent much of their time in reading and writing.47

The monastery of the middle ages was a social and economic institution as much as it was a spiritual one and their survival often depended on extracting tithes and rents, from large swaths of surrounding farm and forest land.

These vast tenures over large swaths of territory, often resulted in a concentration of wealth and political power. As historian C. H. Lawrence writes, “Centuries of landed

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47 Horn, Water, The Origin of the Medieval Cloister, 41.
endowment turned many abbeys into rich and powerful corporations, displaying all the characteristics of group acquisitiveness.” One of the most successful monastic franchises of this period, was centered in Cluny, France. It began as a reform movement, seeking to bring monasteries within a more standard observance of the Rule of Saint Benedict. At its peak in the 10th century there were more than 1,000 monasteries within its Congregation and it became known for its opulence. The Church spared no expense in designing elaborate ritual and ornamentation as a way of praising God. Using pure gold to decorate its altar, fine jewels to adorn crucifixes, and adorning chapels with large tapestries and carpets. As one customary documents, an Easter service at a Cluniac monastery used nearly 500 candles.

Cistercian Reforms and the Land

Beginning in the 10th century, reform-minded movements looked once again to desert fathers and mothers views of the land, work, and simplicity as markers of an authentic monasticism. Monasticism was of course in constant flux and change, and the Camaldolese, one of the Benedictine Congregations in this study, emerged during this period. However, one of the most successful reforms of the period, with the biggest impact on land, was that of the Cistercians.

These zealous monks sought to return to the simplicity of the Rule of Saint Benedict, and to do this they looked to the land. Led by Robert of Moslme, and then the famous orator Bernard of Clairvaux, they sought out a remote forested and swampy valley in southeastern France called Citeaux (from which Cistercians is derived). These “white monks”, so called because they would not even dye their habits black, refused in principle to collect tithes or rents and strove to live by their own labor. They founded an architecture style that was free of excessive statues and adornments, and forbid the use of gold and precious jewels in their altar vessels.

The Cistercians too appealed to land-based narratives of wilderness and solitude to authenticate their reforms and identity as monks. Citeaux, and many other Cistercian locations, were located in remote corners of Europe. Reflecting on the foundation of Citeaux,

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48 Lawrence, C.H., Medieval Monasticism.
49 Christopher Brooke, The Age of the Cloister, 75.
Stephen Harding, the author of the early Cistercian history *Exordium Cisterci* calls it “a place of horror and vast solitude,” referring to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Thus taming the wilderness of the land, became akin to the spiritual work of taming their souls. Another early Cistercian, William of Saint-Thierry (1075-1148), a Cistercian, compares these zealous reformers to the founding desert fathers:

I was amazed to see as it were a new heaven and a new earth, and the well-worn path trodden by the monks of old, our fathers in Egypt, bearing the footprints of men of our own time…There was a sense in which the solitude of that valley, strangled and overshadowed by its thickly wooded hills, in which God’s servants lived their hidden lives, stood for the cave in which our father Saint Benedict was once discovered by shepherds –the sense in which those who were patterning their lives on his could be said to be living in a kind of solitude. They were indeed a crowd of solitaries. Under the rule of love ordered by reason, the valley became a desert for each of the many men who dwelt there.52

The well-worn path of monastics of seeking secluded, “desert” locales, connected past and present through the land. By framing their surroundings as wilderness, they not only affirmed their monastic identities as authentic, but set themselves up as agricultural redeemers of the land, shepherding it from howling wilderness to a Garden-paradise, again, as an icon for the work they were doing within their souls. Their zeal for living entirely from their own labor was short lived however, and they soon began to employ lay monastics called *Conversi* as manual laborers, and idea borrowed from the Camaldoli reforms. These vowed worker-monks who lived in separate “granges” with their own chapels, and ran the affairs of the monastery farms while the “choir” monks focused on the Opus Dei, the Work of God. Choir monks would sometimes help with the work, but the lions share was left to the Conversi, who made many Cistercian monasteries very wealthy, a status they had sought to avoid. This class-based system avoided feudal entanglements, but implemented a system that resulted in some exploitation of labor, which occasionally led to riots and revolts.53

52 Cited in Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, 16.
known for their beautiful simple architecture, efficient management of the land, and innovation in technology. Because they often settled in valleys, or near wetlands, they developed refined water management skills, with novel drainage and sewage systems within around their monasteries.\textsuperscript{54}

Land has played a critical role in the history, livelihoods and spirituality of the Christian monastic movement from its earliest days. Land was a sort of place marker for the authentic monastic lineage, but also a kind of template for the monastic vocation as a whole. Benedictine monastic foundations reform movements such as the Cistercians seemed to always have landscapes in mind as they sought union with God through a life of prayer and penance. The importance and contribution of land is well thought out by Belden Lane who wrote:

People seeking new vitality in the spiritual life continually retreat to wild and undeveloped landscapes, seeking new meaning along the outer margins of familiarity. There, in places of abandonment—the desert, the highlands—they establish community rooted in the spirit of wilderness saints before them. But after having made this new land habitable, beginning to look upon it with a pastoral eye, they sense the danger of losing the sharp edge and hardiness the original landscape had suggested. Subsequent movements of reform, therefore, set off in search of still other wild and remote regions to begin anew. Or they preserve within the present terrain an archetypal or metaphorical landscape symbolizing the wilderness enclave the community still aspires to become. Repeatedly, therefore, the “desert ideal” of fourth-century monasticism in Egypt, Syria, and the Wilderness of Judea served to inspire successive movements of spiritual renewal.\textsuperscript{55}

The medieval era of monasticism sought to create heaven on earth through agricultural settlement and a life of regimented prayer and solitude. The land was an essential component of this socio-religious movement from both an economic and spiritual standpoint. After the Protestant reformation and French Revolution, this would of course change, but land would remain an integral aspect of monastic spirituality until the present day. As Lane points out,

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\textsuperscript{55} Lane, Belden, \textit{The Solace of Fierce Landscapes}, 47.
\end{flushright}
the Wilderness-garden has served as the locus of human reinvention, from the earliest days of the hermits, through medieval monasticism into the invasion and colonization of North America by Protestant and Catholic Christians.

With the rise of the Romantic Movement and the musings of poets such as William Wordsworth, Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and proto-ecologists such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold, Western civilization began to shift the Biblical motifs away from their monastic implications. While North America was settled through a mostly agrarian and mostly Christian approach to land, the Romantic Movement began to see wild, unmanaged and uncultivated land as the most loyal expression of the original blessedness of the Garden of Eden, God’s Paradise.56

**Changes to Contemporary Monastic Landscapes in North America**

For nearly 2,000 years, monastic solitaries and communities have forged strong relationships to the places they practice their unique form of spirituality. These places have provided a means of livelihood, affirmed monastic identity in the face of reform movements, and populated monastic spiritual practice. I will now frame the contemporary context for the monasticism and the land and the changes that have taken place since Vatican II.

The Protestant Reformation, beginning in the 16th century, and the French Revolution in the 18th greatly reduced Benedictine and Cistercian landholdings, especially in England and France. These upheavals coincided with the broader dissolution of the feudal land systems throughout much of Europe.57 While monasticism did undergo a modest revival in the 19th century, it would never again reach the extent and influence it had during the feudal/manorial age, and prior to the advent of the Mendicant orders of the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism did not reach North American shores until the 19th century, with waves of migrants from Europe. While the more active orders of preachers had arrived much earlier, contemplatives found fertile ground in educating priests, and running schools and orphanages. Monastic communities took on a much more humble

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role as centers of prayer and retreat for Catholic diocese. The first Benedictine Abbey to be established in North America was Saint Vincent Arch-abbey founded in 1832 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania\footnote{Oetgen, Jerome (2000). Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the First Benedictine Monastery in the United States. (Washington DC: Catholic University Press).} part of the American-Cassinese Congregation. While the first Cistercian/Trappist monastery arrived in Nova Scotia in the 1820s, though Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, which was founded in 1848 is the longest continually occupied Trappist monastery in North America.\footnote{Glazier, Michael and Thomas J. Shelley (Eds.). (1997). ‘Cistercians.’ Encyclopedia of American Catholic History. (Michael Glazier).}

Monastic communities were late to the colonization game, but they continued to employ the biblical motifs to tie them to the Biblical and monastic traditions. One Catholic Newspaper describing the establishment of a Benedictine monastery and seminary in Mount Angel Oregon, wrote:

What was, a few years ago, prior to the occupation of the Benedictines, comparatively a howling wilderness covered with timber, is now converted into waving grain fields, orchards, vineyards and vegetable gardens, dotted here and there at convenient points with flour mills, shops and all the engineering of modern civilization.\footnote{Mount Angel Abbey. Website: <www.mountangelabbey.org>. Accessed July 25, 2017.}

In keeping with their nearly 2,000 year spiritual heritage, these monasteries often sought out large, rural tracts of land upon which to found their communities. Until the early 1960s, most Benedictine and Trappist monasteries had farms that provided for the sustenance and in some cases livelihoods of the monastic communities. Even with other apostolates such as colleges, boarding schools, seminaries, or orphanages, monastic communities remained committed to living from the land to some degree, and to sourcing as much of the labor and skill needed to run the monastery from within the monastic community itself.\footnote{See Kardong, Terrance (1983). ‘Monks and the Land.’ Cistercian Studies Vol. XVIII; Yocom, Neil OSB (ed.) Mount of Communion: Mount Angel Abbey: 1882-1982. (Mount Angel, OR: Mount Angel Abbey); Scott, John C. OSB (1996). This Place called Saint Martin’s: 1895-1995: A Centennial History of Saint Martin’s College and Abbey Lacey, Washington (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers); Fletcher, Christine (2015). ‘The Border between Wilderness and Garden: Cultivating a Benedictine Spirituality of the Land.’ IN Collen Mary Carpenter (ed.) An Unexpected Wilderness: Christianity and the Natural World. (College Theology Society Annual, Vol. 61. Maryknoll: Orbis Books), pp. 182-192); Rippinger, Joel OSB (1990). The Benedictine Order in the United States: An Interpretive History (Collegeville: Liturgical Press).}
The decades leading up to and immediately following World War II also saw a rise in monastic vocations, which made these agrarian economies more feasible. With an abundance of young men, typically trained in some kind of trade, monasteries were for the most part self-reliant. Historians have also attributed an increase in monastic vocations during this period to the writings of Thomas Merton. Merton, a convert to Catholicism, joined the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, and wrote a best-selling memoir of his conversion as a student at Columbia University. *The Seven Story Mountain*, was only one of many which popularized monasticism and contemplative prayer for entirely new generation of Catholics coming of age in the US. While this fact is well documented, it was confirmed by many of the monks with whom I spoke during this study. This rise in vocations, also led to the expansion of the many monastic lineages into the South and Western regions of the US, most of which were founded shortly before or just after 1950.

Unfortunately, almost simultaneously with the rise in monastic vocations and foundations in North America, was a radical restructuring of the US agricultural economy. The post-depression agricultural landscape was shaped by Franklin Roosevelt’s 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act which was aimed at providing price supports and implementing mandatory land idling to keep commodity prices stable. In the 1950s and 1960s this policy was phased out in favor of commodity subsidies for major products such as grains, sugar, and dairy products. A post-war boom in industrial farming techniques and investments also resulted in greater yields, which further drove down prices. Many farmers were forced to sell their farms or supplement their incomes with outside employment.

With relatively small properties compared to industrial farms, many monasteries simply could not keep their farming operations profitable, or even afloat. Some Benedictine monasteries with other apostolates such as teaching or ministry, simply shifted their emphasis to those efforts, finding other ways to bring in revenue, or selling off small sections of land. For the more contemplative monasteries, rather than sell their lands, they often decided to lease their farmland and transition income generating activities to other industries.

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such as carpentry, pastry production, book binding, or other specialty products.\textsuperscript{64} Leasing land ensured that it would not be developed, maintaining a buffer of solitude, and brought in a modest income. This shift also meant that many lay brothers (formerly known as Conversi), who did much of the manual farm work no longer had jobs, and many monasteries decided to fully integrate the lay and choir monastics.

Another factor of change during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, was brought on by what is called the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Implemented by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and completed in 1965 by his successor Paul VI, Vatican II was an attempt to modernize the Catholic Church and clarify its doctrines and practices for a changing world. It also resulted in the restructuring of many monastic communities, and the transition was painful for some. The liturgy was restructured and transitioning from Latin to English and the mass became more participatory, with Priests facing the congregation. The Church as a whole became more open to ecumenism, and interfaith dialogue. Monastic communities too, began to open themselves to the world in small ways; some loosened their rule of absolute silence, and they became more porous to outsiders and women visitors. They also relaxed the strictness of staying within cloister areas and monks could wander more freely around their properties on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{65} Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey even experimented with allowing monks to watch TV, but this was quickly rescinded.\textsuperscript{66}

Unfortunately, by the end of Vatican II, the shifts in farm work and the changes in liturgy and monastic strictness began to take their toll on vocations.\textsuperscript{67} However, with these changes, also came a kind of creative energy that once again looked to the land for inspiration. With the shift in farming, and Vatican II came a restlessness that sought to return to the roots of monasticism, which once again took form in experiments with smaller, more isolated communities. The writings of Thomas Merton were also a major influence on this desire to return to simpler silence-focused monasticism. Merton had long sought a deeper

\textsuperscript{64} This trend is a well attested part of the Our Lady of Guadalupe’s archival history and is also documented in several other published works about the history of monastic communities in the US. SEE Neil Yocom OSB (ed.) Mount of Communion: Mount Angel Abbey: 1882-1982. (Mount Angel, OR: Mount Angel Abbey); John C. Scott, OSB (1996). This Place called Saint Martin’s: 1895-1995: A Centennial History of Saint Martin’s College and Abbey Lacey, Washington (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers).

\textsuperscript{65} In, Annals of Our Lady of Guadalupe. (Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey).

\textsuperscript{66} In, Annals of Our Lady of Guadalupe. (Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey).

solitude in his cenobitic community, and in 1968 was finally granted permission to build a hermitage on his Abbey’s property, the first Cistercian on record to do so in North America.\textsuperscript{68} Benedictine historian Joel Rippinger writes that this post-Vatican II-era monastic renewal was also, 

>[A]ccompanied by the Benedictine equivalent of the experiments in communal and rustic ‘return to nature’ that were so much a part of the American counterculture of the time, and the results of this were the closure of many community buildings and a monastic diaspora of some who wanted to live in smaller communities in cabins or rustic retreats.\textsuperscript{69} Just as the many monastic movements before them did, and just as many strands of America’s Back-to-the-land movement were also trying, many monastic communities attempted to return to a more simple way of living. Christ in the Desert Abbey, included in this study, whose founding monks were from New York, got their start in this way, and though the community has almost folded several times, the community has greatly expanded in recent years.

**Contemporary Environmental Discourses and Monasticism**

*Biblical Motifs and North American Environmental Discourse*

Environmental Discourses are defined by geographer Tom Mels as “frameworks of meanings about the biogeophysical world and its natural and social qualities.”\textsuperscript{70} These discourses or narratives emerge from our relationship to land, but also shape our ideas about land and environmental problems. Discourses both shape and are shaped by our experiences in the world, our religious convictions, region, gender, political and economic status and cultural context. American environmental discourse is in fact rooted in Christian culture and has often drawn on familiar biblical land-based motifs. European immigrants interpreted their new surroundings through familiar religious motifs, and from the beginning of colonial settlement, there was a continuing tension between the wilderness and the garden.

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\textsuperscript{68} For Merton’s commentary on Gethsemani’s farming operation see his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.


However, discourses are not simply abstract ideas created ex nihilo. They emerge from our experience, and from particular cultural contexts that can then be applied to new situations such as settling North America. For example, as environmental writer Even Eisenberg writes, “Whether the settlers of America saw a paradise or a howling waste depended partly on their prior beliefs and partly on what actually happened when they arrived.”\footnote{Eisenberg, Evan (1998). \textit{The Ecology of Eden: An Inquiry into the Dream of Paradise and a New Vision of our Role in Nature}. (New York: Vintage), 241.} This notion suggests that cognitive framings and discourses as I call them, and embodied experience interact and inform one another. Many of the initial settlers found hunger and disease, so it is no surprise that they interpreted the overgrown continent with some disdain. For William Bradford, the coast of Massachusetts appeared as a “hideous and desolate wilderness,” filled with “wild beasts and wild men.”\footnote{Gatta, John. (2004). \textit{Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present}. (New York: Oxford University Press), 18.} But for Philadelphia naturalist William Bartram however, Pennsylvania was a “fertile, blooming paradise.”\footnote{Eisenberg, Evan. \textit{The Ecology of Eden}, 241.} Early colonial narratives set up the New England Village as a model of the Garden of Eden.\footnote{Gatta, John. \textit{Making Nature Sacred}, 20.} In many ways, the North American pioneers whether Puritan, Mormon or Anglican, were a Protestant re-telling of the Cistercian myth of the religious pioneer; settling the wilderness for God’s glory, and converting the threatening wilderness into a tame and productive garden.

The predominance of this agrarian narrative began to shift however in the 19th century as the continent was settled, and cities grew. The unmanaged places, and those of sublime beauty began to speak to the souls of many. Naturalist John Muir (1838-1914), who advocated for a National Park System, wrote a tongue and cheek criticism of the pervasiveness of the Biblical Paradise-garden motif as moral imperative in the American psyche:

> Moral improvers have calls to preach. I have a friend who has a call to plow, and woe to the daisy sod or azalea thicket that falls under the savage redemption of his keen steel shares. Not content with the so-called subjugation of every terrestrial bog, rock, and moor-land, he would fain discover some method of reclamation applicable to the ocean and the sky, that in due calendar time they might be made to bud and blossom as the rose. Our efforts are of no avail when we seek to turn his attention to wild
roses, or to the fact that both ocean and sky are already about as rosy as possible—the one with stars, the other with dulse, and foam, and wild light. Muir expresses the rising tension between the agrarian ethos of settlement, and the emerging preservationist framing that saw nature and wilderness as a kind of sacred site, temple, or sanctuary. If the settler experience had been one of conquest, the ex-urbanite experience was one of leisure and contemplation.

Environmental historian and journalist Carolyn Merchant argues that these “Recovery Narratives” of the Garden of Eden which go back as far as the Ancient Israelites and carry through to medieval monks, have been completely absorbed and internalized in Western civilization and are very much alive today. Whereas for agrarians the earth was to be converted into a garden, for the Moderns, this gardening continued through innovations in technology, market economies and science. Merchant writes:

Recovering the lost Eden became Western culture’s major project during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. Reason and experiment were the keys to reinventing Eden on earth. During this century-long transformation, the Fall and Salvation narrative of the Middle Ages was secularized. Rather than an escape from the earth to a heavenly Eden, the new narrative remade the planet in the image of the lost Eden.

However, despite the prominent of Recovery Narratives other environmental discourses would opt for the wilderness side of this ancient tension. By the end of the 19th century, the US Park Service was expanding to include more areas set aside as park and wilderness. Yellowstone National Park, the nation’s first, was created in 1872 and not long after, New York protected a 715,000 acre area of the Adirondacks as a “Forest Preserve” that would allow the area to be “forever kept as wild forest lands.” In 1916 thirteen more parks were created with the passing of the National Park Service Act. Their mission was to “To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to

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provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”78

It was of course Hendry David Thoreau (1817-1862) that best embodied the gradual shift from wilderness as terror to wilderness as paradise when he said that “in wildness is the preservation of the world.”79 In Thoreau’s essay “Walking” he sees the west as the energy which is constantly calling civilizations back to its source. He writes that, in stark contrast to the prevalent Christian agrarianism of his day that, “A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it.”80 Thoreau expresses what would later be the roots of the ‘Primitive’ movement, the attempt to get people outside, back to nature, to prove themselves out of doors. The newly discovered “wilds” much of which had been managed in varying degrees of intensity for thousands of years by indigenous peoples, took on a deeply spiritual function. For Thoreau and many others of his generation, the wild places were sacred sanctuaries: “I enter a swamp as a sacred place –a sanctum sanctorum.”81

However, wilderness advocates such as writer John Muir and others came into open conflict with more moderate voices under the sway of the allure of the Paradise-garden recovery narratives. Forester and early head of the US Forest Service Gifford Pinchot’s Conservationism envisioned a responsible stewardship of forest, water and mineral resources. He advocated for the grazing of sheep on National Forest lands, and when Hetch Hetchy Valley was proposed as a reservoir for the growing city of San Francisco in the 1920s he and Muir came into public conflict. Preservationists and Conservationists envisioned two different strategies for the countries natural patrimony, with Preservationists seeking to protect and set aside areas of natural beauty and uniqueness, and Conservationists seeking to manage resources sustainably for the benefit of the national character and interest. The logic of the biblical motifs are clearly evident in each project.82

To the agrarian mind, nature had been corrupted with us during the mythical ‘Fall’ and we were called to cooperate with God to redeem it; but to the Romantic mind, it was

80 Thoreau, Henry David, Walking, 514/763.
81 Thoreau, Henry David, Walking, 508/763.
only we humans who had fallen, and it is within pristine nature that we find our redemption. In elevating wilderness, Thoreau is not immune from the motifs that underlie the entirety of Western Christendom, stating: “As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country.” The Romantic’s sublime and the myth of the American Frontier combined to recast American wilderness as the new Garden of Eden. ‘Nature’ took on a new cache as the domain opposite to culture, where over-worked, industrialized humans could discern God’s mysterious presence. Whereas previously wilderness was seen as needing redemption by civilization, it soon became imperative to redeem wilderness from civilization, so that civilization could be redeemed.

Wilderness also gained traction with the cultural tumult of the 1960s, and the popularization of the thinking of forester Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), who early in his career, advocated the culling of predators in order to increase game species. Leopold had a change of heart when he realized that intact ecosystems were valuable in and of themselves. Leopold developed what is now famously called “The Land Ethic” which states: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Leopold’s approach attempted to shift humans from conqueror to community member and he is seen a core inspiration for the eventual passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the Deep Ecology movement which emerged in the 1980s. Coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, Deep Ecology positions itself within this movement, as a “new ecological philosophy.”

Deep Ecology, sets itself up as an adversary to modernist Recovery Narratives. Naess writes, “The arrogance of stewardship consists in the idea of superiority which underlies the thought that we exist to watch over nature like a highly respected middleman between the Creator and Creation.” In the Christian telling, that is exactly what human beings are, but for Deep Ecologists human are one species among many, “intelligent fleas” as one writer put it. It also contrasts itself with “Shallow” ecology, or “reform environmentalism” which

85 Leopold, Aldo, A Sand County Almanac, 204.
works within the system of existing political and ontological structural assumptions about humanity’s place within the biosphere. As writers Bill Devall and George Sessions write, “Deep Ecology goes beyond a limited piecemeal shallow approach to environmental problems and attempts to articulate a comprehensive religious and philosophical worldview.” For deep ecologists who insist on a biocentric or ecocentric rather than anthropocentric approach to nature, setting aside large tracts of untouched wilderness, controlling human population, and taking a generally pessimistic view of technology is the only way to both protect the biosphere, but also to return human beings to their rightful place in the natural order.

**Ecological Restoration and Sustainability Discourses**

More recent environmental discourses have focused on ecological restoration and defining ecological sustainability. With all the destruction and damage done to intact ecosystems throughout colonization and modernization, many have looked to repair some of the damage. Running parallel to the notion that pristine places can be protected for human enjoyment, is the idea that places damaged by humans can be restored to their former state.

*Ecological Restoration* is an environmental discourse that emerged in the late 20th century as an attempt to repair some of the damage done by an increasingly post-industrial society. This has included reforestation, wetland restoration, or reintroducing meanders to previously channelized rivers. The Society of Ecological Restoration (SER) defines Ecological Restoration as “the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.”

In 1962, Rachael Carson published her controversial book *Silent Spring*, which argued that the use of pesticides and other chemicals was wreaking havoc on wildlife, especially birds. Carson was a talented writer and scientist and her findings were viciously attacked by industry. The controversy only brought more attention to her cause, and some argue, that Carson launched the environmental movement. Her efforts led to a ban on DDT, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. Carson wrote of our duty to protect the environment:

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We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.\textsuperscript{91}

Carson was influential in the rise of \textit{ecological sustainability} an environmental discourse that sought to put limits the technological impact of human achievements. This of course earned her many enemies loyal to the modernist recovery narratives that embraced technology as a force for good. However, more and more voices were being raised over the accessed of modern environmental destruction.

Whereas Deep Ecologists might suggest we abandon the modernist project, within the broader public conversation, thinkers and policy makers were seeking ways to make the modernist project less harmful. In 1987, a UN Commission published \textit{Our Common Future}, defined Sustainable Development as:

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: The concept of ‘needs’, in particular, the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.\textsuperscript{92}

As the industrial West came up against a global frontier, international organizations, and grassroots movements alike began to discuss the degradation of the planet, the millions of impoverished still among us, and the limited supply of finite resources used in our everyday lives. Running throughout these questions of quality of life, pollution and justice, have been a long standing argument about whether or not there are too many people on the earth. \textit{The Population Bomb} in 1968, and \textit{The Limits to Growth} in 1975 called into question the

possibility that human population could continue to grow with the same standard of living that was aspired to in the capitalist/industrialized west.

Sustainability in its broadest strokes seeks to balance the needs of human civilizations, with a sensitivity to the poor, and the needs of the earth ecosystems. As scholar of sustainability John Robinson writes, *Our Common Future* “argued for integrating the vast and complex issue of environmental deterioration with the equally vast and complex issue of human development and poverty, and suggested that both had to be resolved simultaneously and in a mutually reinforcing way.” In 2005, the World Summit on Social Development established three pillars of Sustainability: Economy, Society and Environment which sought a balance between the existing goals of conservationists, development, and human wellbeing. Thus sustainable development, or ecological sustainability sought to balance the needs of the earth biosphere with the most vulnerable human populations.

*Entering the Anthropocene*

Humanity faces a slew of interconnected and fundamental ecological problems. Stemming largely from increased resource use and industrial development by an ever growing population of 7.5 billion souls, human beings are now a force of Nature. During the International Geological Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa in 2016, a working group of Geologists voted to recommend the official recognition of what Paul Crutzen called in 2000, the Anthropocene, an era of pervasive human influence on the planet. The Holocene, the stable comate regime that has preceded us for the last 12,000 years since the last Ice Age, saw a remarkably stable temperature range, within which all of human civilization developed and spread across the planet. The Anthropocene, which is said to have begun in the 1950s, is characterized by a reduction of the number of wildlife in the world by half since 1970; an extinction crisis, being called the Sixth Extinction, that could result in 75 per cent of species going extinct by the end of the century; average global temperatures on track to raise above 2 degrees Celsius for the first time in thousands of years; nuclear testing, the burning of fossil fuels, a proliferation of toxic chemicals and plastic wastes, have spread the human footprint

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to all corners of the globe, including the geological record. Environmental discourses continue to fragment over the proper response to the emerging crises.

On one hand are the so-called ‘Ecopragmatists’ who have put tremendous faith in humanity’s ability to understand and manage the planet. They are the inheritors of the garden motif, the neo-conservationists who see human beings as capable of the task of global caretakers. For example, in the Ecomodernist Manifesto, the writers state:

As scholars, scientists, campaigners, and citizens, we write with the conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, Anthropocene. A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world.

As pragmatists they see human genius and technology as the primary means of addressing our problems. Opposed to this camp, those who seek to preserve the intrinsic value of the earth regardless of its value to human beings are the Deep Ecologists, whose cousins the Spiritual Ecologists, I will discuss in below.

Building Bridges: The Greening of Christianity

While biblical motifs had informed much of the bedrock assumptions behind contemporary environmental discourse, ironically, Christianity as a whole was slow to join the secular environmental movement. Sociologist Stephen Ellingson argues that there was a 25 year delay to a broadly religious response to the environmental crisis. Ellingson suggests that this is because as secular environmentalism and religious culture grew farther apart, religious people were less willing to identify with the movement as a whole, and environmentalists saw Christianity as part of the problem.

One of the most popularized and controversial of these critiques levelled at Christianity, was a short 1967 piece published in Science by historian of technology, Lynn White, Jr. White was certainly not the first to criticize Christianity, nor point out its penchant for ecological harm, but writing for the journal Science, gave the piece enough exposure to

create a broader conversation among Western academics. White, himself a lifelong Presbyterian, claimed that through the Biblical injunction to dominate the earth found in Genesis 1, Western Christianity had become “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,”97 and Western technology and science followed suit. Anthropocentrism in environmental ethics is a way of describing the Western ontology which it is argued has devalued the natural world and privileged human needs, wants and development over and against those of the biological communities with whom we share this planet.

As a historian of technology, White argues that foundational axioms and ideas influence (even determine) behaviors toward the earth: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.”98 By this White is referring to a predominantly Greek dualistic tendency, which sees the world as pairs of opposites: body and spirit, subject and object, male and female, heaven and earth, etc. and in the Christian mode, privileges the spiritual over the material, the eternal over the temporal.

Because Christianity placed human beings at the center of its theological and soteriological concerns, the spiritual vibrancy of the created order was gradually chipped away by a combination of anti-Pagan polemics, and the rise of enlightenment science through Christian institutions. This often meant that the animist ontologies of indigenous and Pagan peoples wherein trees, mountains, rivers, plants and animals were perceived as subjective entities, within which human beings were in relations of reciprocity, was suppressed or exterminated. Christian missionaries, Greek-influenced theologians, and Enlightenment scientists, gradually “disenchanted” the world White argues.

Early zealous Christians, in the grips of Greek dualism with an apocalyptic bent, tended to see the world in stark terms that privileged the spiritual, heavenly realm. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians (5:17) states, “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.” Because of the persecution of early Christians, and the view that Christ’s return was imminent, the things of this world, the body and the earth, were often denigrated in favor of a spiritual reality and the heavenly realm. Though Christianity is a diverse tradition, it has not shaken this reputation for being too

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97 White, Lynn, *Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, 1204.
98 White, Lynn, *Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, 1205.
narrowly focused on a rigid self-denying morality focused on achieving heaven in the next life.  

This theological climate in part contributed to enlightenment philosophies that privileged the mind over the body. Philosopher Rene Descartes’ philosophical dualism asserted that there are only two kinds of substance in the world: Res Extensa and Res Cogitans, or Matter and Mind. This philosophical dualism, completely overturned the classical medieval view of the cosmos as an integrated, hierarchical creation of the divine, often referred to as the Great Chain of Being, which placed human beings above animals and plants, but below angels and God.

Beginning in the 1970s and 80s, notable theologians such as Paul Santmire, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether Catherine Keller, and John B. Cobb, Jr. began to write strong theological arguments for a strong Christian environmental ethics. Former Dominican Priest, now Episcopal Priest Matthew Fox has framed the problematic aspects of Christianity and its promise for ecological sustainability in terms of two opposing ‘traditions.’ In the Fall/Redemption Tradition, the dualistic side of Christianity privileges the spiritual over the material, and sees the earth, matter and creation has domains to be transcended. In the Creation Spirituality Tradition, Fox interprets traditional Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard Von Bingen and Saint Francis of Assisi as embracing the body, the world and teachings that encourage a more sacramental view of the world, wherein God is present to the creation as creator and sustainer of the universe, and the world, after being created in declared Good, rather than sinful, a tradition that develops later with the theology of Saint Augustine.

During the 1990s, then Professors at Harvard, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim organized a series of 11 conferences on World Religions and Ecology which included over 800 participating scholars and practitioners from the world religions. The proceedings from that series were later published as an eleven volume series called Religions of the World and Ecology and summarized in a work called Ecology and Religion. In recent years, in

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collaboration with physicist Brian Swimme, they have also been involved in the *Journey of the Universe* project, an hour-long film, book, and 12 episode educational supplement, that seeks to tell the story of the universe as a single evolving event, within which human beings are integrally involved.\textsuperscript{101} Grim and Tucker argue that the task of the Religion and Ecology scholar is to ‘Retrieve,’ ‘Reevaluate,’ and ‘Reconstruct’ a given tradition’s scriptures or teachings in light of environmental issues and concerns.\textsuperscript{102} Other notable scholars in this field include Bron Taylor, who edited the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature, and founded the Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture with its quarterly journal. Robert Gottlieb edited *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*.

In 1986 representatives from five of the world’s major religious traditions gathered in Assisi, Italy to draft a declaration on religion’s duty to protect and care for the environment. The 1990s saw statements by the US Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church, Lutherans, and even Evangelicals. At the World Day of Peace, held in 1990, Pope John Paul II called stated adamantly that “the ecological crisis is a moral issue”\textsuperscript{103} for which we are all responsible. With this trickle of voices in the 1970s and 80s, what Ellingson calls ‘Religious Environmental Movement Organizations’ (REMOs), began to increase in the 1990s and surged in the 2000s. In 1990 there were approximately nine REMOs in the US, but by 2010 there were approximately eighty,\textsuperscript{104} the most prominent of which are GreenFaith, Interfaith Power and Light, Evangelical Environmental Network, and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Through these organizations and loose networks, thousands of parish and congregation-level activities focused on reducing carbon footprints, conserving resources, switching to fair trade coffee, transitioning to renewable energy, divesting from oil and gas investments, and advocating for climate justice. In addition, almost all major Christian denominations have by now released statements calling for better attention to

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\item[104] Ellingson, Stephen, *To Care for Creation* 12, 27.
\end{footnotes}
environmental issues, a focus on racial justice and the environment, and action on climate change.\textsuperscript{105}

As Christian theologians and institutions and theologians began to catch up with the environmental movement, they have engaged in what Ellingson calls “bridging” between religious and environmental values.\textsuperscript{106} This means that religious environmental organizations, churches or orders are engaging with environmental discourses through their own language and values. So despite the fact that most environmental discourses are underlain with biblical motifs, they have become virtually unrecognizable to many religious organizations, who must now bridge back to environmental discourse from their own theological territories.

One of the major events in Christian environmental movement in recent years has been the release in the summer of 2015 by Pope Francis of an Encyclical Letter entitled that addresses environmental issues. \textit{Laudato Si} is the most extensive and significant contribution to official Catholic Social teachings and calls for an “Integral Ecology” to protect “our common home.” Francis, who frequently cites German Priest Romano Guardini (1885-1968), takes a strong stance against consumerism, pollution, biodiversity loss and poverty. He blasts what he calls a “throwaway society” that seeks fulfilment in material possessions, and looks to technology as a kind of savior. Guardini is quoted as saying,

The technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.\textsuperscript{107}

While there has been evidence to suggest that the Encyclical has softened Catholic attitudes toward climate change and the environment, another more recent study suggests, that there has been little evidence of a “Francis Effect.” A study by the Center for Climate Change Communication found that after the release of the Encyclical, Americans in general and Catholics in particular were more likely to talk about climate change at home or at their place

\textsuperscript{106} Ellington, Stephen, \textit{To Care for Creation}.
of worship. And 35 per cent of Catholics say that the Pope has influenced their view of Climate Change.\textsuperscript{108} Another study found the opposite, claiming that the Encyclical has not broadly raised awareness or concern over climate change, and has actually decreased interest among conservative Catholics.\textsuperscript{109}

\textit{Spiritual Ecology as Bricolage}

While much emphasis in Christianity has been focused on theological exegesis, congregational initiatives and statements in support of the environment, there is also a growing movement across explicitly religious and non-religious writers to foster greater direct emotional or spiritual connection to the environment, wildlife and the cosmos as a whole. This more phenomenological approach, looks to traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous ontologies as models for a more reciprocal and in some cases animistic approach to the world. Whereas the Christian West disenchanted the world, it is argued, \textit{Spiritual Ecology} seeks to Re-enchant it.

Spiritual Ecology has roots in the Deep Ecology movement. Norwegian Philosopher Arne Naess in a 1972 address called on the environmental community to abandon “shallow” approaches to systemic reform, and push for an ethical and ontological revolution toward a “Deep” ecology. This struck a chord with many radical environmentalists who had broken with Christianity, and sought to forge a new ecological worldview that restored as sense of enchantment to nature, revalued the earth with intrinsic worth, and focused on attention and care for this life.\textsuperscript{110} We must, it is argued, move away from ‘Anthropocentrism,’ toward ‘Bio’- or ‘Eco-centrism.’ Away from the assumption that the physical world and all its nonhuman lifeforms exist as an opportunity for human purposes, and toward a biocentric

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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ethic that broadens human moral imperative to include the ecosystems and global biosphere within which human beings are dependent.\footnote{Sessions, George, and Bill Devall (1985). Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered. (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books).}

Within this push for intrinsic value, many voices have called for a return to an ‘enchanted’ world, to experiencing the world as in some way sacred. In the West, the Romantics began this tradition, which was then inherited by the Transcendentalism who asserted a deeper spiritual reality behind the physical world. The Gaia Theory of James Lovelock, which argues that the earth is a self-regulating organism, has also been interpreted as having a deep spiritual implications for Deep Ecologists, Neo-Pagans and Religious Naturalists alike.\footnote{See Taylor, Bron (2010). Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future. (Berkeley: Univ of California Press).} Regardless of the perspective, there has been a general tendency to reject the whole of Christianity along with Western approaches to the environment.

While anthropologist Leslie Sponsel broadly defines “Spiritual Ecology” as “the vast, diverse, complex, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces between religions and spiritualities on the one hand and on the other ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms;”\footnote{Sponsel, Leslie (2012). Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), xiii; See also Vaughn Lee (ed). (2013) Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth. (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center).} Douglas Christie, writes of the complementarity between spirituality and ecology that “To argue for a ‘spiritual ecology’ means, rather, acknowledging that ecological understanding ought to be set within the widest possible framework, and include not only the effort to understand how organisms interact with their environment, but also how these ecological networks shape and are shaped by human culture and thought, including human emotion, reason, imagination, and yes, soul."\footnote{Christie, Douglas E. (2012). The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology. (New York: Oxford University Press), 5.} Sufi writer Llewellyn Vaughn Lee, suggests that Spiritual Ecology is a movement that seeks to heal our “image of separateness” from a sacred earth. Technological solutions will be necessary, but as he and others intuit, “the world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong.”\footnote{Vaughn Lee, Llewellyn, Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth.} Similar impulses have been described as Deep Ecology, Dark Green Religion, or Eco-Spirituality, but each seeks to shift perceptions toward the environment in fundamental ways. It includes strands and philosophies from post-religious and radical
environmentalism, animal rights and even surfing, to homesteading and back to the landers. Journalist Douglas Todd has tried to capture the essence of the “unchurched” Pacific Northwest by showing how deeply people in that region connect to the outdoors as spiritual practice leading one informant to state “We don’t have the galleries and cathedrals of Europe here. We have wilderness.”

Behind each of these approaches, is the notion that the disenchantment of the world brought about by the Western dualism between subject and object is a source of the environmental crisis. If we could somehow recover our sense of the sacredness of nature we would begin to see the world in a different light. This is certainly what anthropologist David Abrams argues in his book *The Spell of Sensuous*, in which Western dualism, and specifically the development of written language have disenchanted the world into a collection of materials created for the exploitation of human beings as a sensuous, rather than an embodied, interconnected and sacred organism. He writes, “The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn.”

These tendencies in Christianity and other religious or spiritually oriented movements do not insist on staying within a certain orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Rather they engage what Ellingson and others call “bricolage.” This means that groups “tinker, borrow, improvise, experiment, and recombine existing elements into new forms.” For example, in Sara McFarland Taylor’s book *Green Sisters*, she finds that many orders of Catholic Sisters are creatively engaging both their own religious traditions and the wider environmental movement by adopting certified organic gardening, erecting green buildings, transitioning to renewable energy, conducting habitat restoration and protection, but particularly adapting and experimenting with new liturgical styles and rituals that celebrate the seasons of the year, or the history of the universe as told by science.

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120 Ellingson, Stephen, *To Care for Creation*, 83.
121 Taylor, Sara McFarland, *Green Sisters*. 
This engagement with so-called “New Cosmology” is in direct response to Cultural Historian Thomas Berry’s (1914-2009) admonition to incorporate science more completely into human myth and story. Berry was influenced by Catholic Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, who saw human beings are the pinnacle of evolutionary development, who would go on to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Berry’s eschatology predicted that, rather than heading for calamity, humanity was entering what he called the “Ecozoic” age, where we would finally develop “mutually enhancing” human-earth relationships. Berry was not typical of his Passionist peers, and did not hesitate to wander outside of Christian orthodoxy, or ecotheological bridging. In fact, Berry believed we needed an entirely new religious cosmology that incorporated the insights of science.

We cannot do without the traditional religions, but they cannot presently do what needs to be done. We need a new type of religious orientation. This must, in my view, emerge from our new story of the universe. This constitutes it seems a new revelatory experience that can be understood as soon as we recognize that the evolutionary process is from the beginning a spiritual as well as a physical process.¹²²

Bricolage then is the blending of science, religion, ecology and spirituality to craft new approaches, theologies, institutions and practices aimed at the furthering of the goals of an ecological transformation.

Atheist Donald Crosby agrees that even without a traditional religious affiliation, “We must learn to reverence and hold in awe the sacredness of the earth as our beloved community and household rather than view it merely as the backdrop or setting for self-contained, self-regarding human enterprises. Deeply rooted religious sensibilities and commitment are required.”¹²³ Rather than abandoning religious language, Crosby embraces it, but looking toward a new application of traditionally religious concepts such as sacredness and awe that do not conform to established religious metaphysical framings of those terms.

To view the earth as sacred, is to view the human person as integrally attached to, emergent from and dependent upon the earth. Anthropologist Richard Nelson, discovered this for himself after living on Haida Gwaii for several months:

¹²² Berry, Thomas (1988), The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 87.
¹²³ My emphasis, cited in Sponsel, Leslie, Spiritual Ecology, 149.
There is nothing in me that is not of earth, no split instant of separateness, no particle that disunites me from the surroundings. I am no less than the earth itself. The rivers run through my veins, the winds blow in and out with my breath, the soil makes my flesh, the sun’s heat smolders inside me. A sickness or injury that befalls the earth befalls me. A fouled molecule that runs through the earth runs through me. Where the earth is cleansed and nourished, its purity infuses me. The life of the earth is my life. My eyes are the earth gazing at itself… I am the island and the island is me.124

Whether we call it the New Animism, Dark Green Religion, or Deep Ecology, or Spiritual Ecology, there is a growing consensus that cultural transformation toward ecological sustainability will require a rewiring of our perceptions of the natural world and our relationship to it. That rewiring often includes an appeal to religious language in going beyond religion in sacralizing and valuing the natural world, in other words in ‘reenchanting; it.

The “Greening” of Monasticism

Monasticism in North America has in many ways responded to environmental discourse, sometimes in ways that are not always consistent with its agrarian roots but certainly rooted in its sense that the land is part of the monastic vocation. For example, Thomas Merton, has become something of the unofficial nature writer of the monastic tradition. Merton was a gifted poet and writer, and his writings are an important milestone in any potential monastic spiritual ecology. Before his death in 1967, Merton joined the Wilderness Society, and saw a strong connection between the monastic vocation to discover paradise within, and wild and rural landscapes as the spiritual ecology of that practice. When he entered Gethsemani Abbey in 1941, Merton would often work in the fields with his monastic brothers, but by the mid-1960s, through a series of letters with a founding mother of the environmental movement Rachel Carson, he began to take on a more wilderness-friendly focus.125 In 1967, Merton was even permitted to move full time into a small hermitage on the Abbey property. Here Merton wrote beautiful poetry, weather reports, and not so friendly encounters with a snake in the outhouse. But he also began to imagine a role for monks in the budding environmental movement:

If the monk is a man whose whole life is built around a deeply religious appreciation of his call to wilderness and paradise, and thereby to a special kind of kinship with God’s creatures in the new creation…then we might suggest that the monk, of all people, should be concerned with staying in the ‘wilderness’ and helping to keep it a true ‘wilderness and paradise.’ The monk should be anxious to preserve the wilderness in order to share it with those who need to come out from the cities and remember what it is like to be under trees and to climb mountains.\textsuperscript{126}

This last phrase was lifted directly from John Muir and Thoreau, who saw wilderness not as a spiritual battle field, but a sanctuary, a paradise. What Merton is doing here is carrying forward the Biblical motifs of Desert-wilderness and Paradise-garden, the eschatological hope of the monk to return to their true nature before the fall. But by embracing the logic of the American environmental movement, rather than converting the wilderness into a paradise through agricultural work, wild nature and wilderness is envisioned as paradise, and returning to wild nature was returning home. Merton even fantasized about dispatching monks all over North America as fire lookouts. Merton’s own formation in monastic agrarianism was shifted not only by his time in the hermitage, but also but his engagement with the writings of contemporary wilderness writes such as Rachel Carson.

As early as the 1980s, some monastics began to worry that North American monasticism was losing touch with its roots. During this time, Terrance Kardong OSB, a Benedictine monk, published an article entitled “Monks and the Land” which celebrates the Benedictine land-based heritage, laments the rise of industrial farming, and its contribution to the decline in monastic land-based industries and general stewardship practices. He also suggested that there are few monasteries left in the US that were fully managing their own land, or doing so sustainably. He also worried that what monks were calling “work” had slipped away from its original meaning (an instinct that runs throughout the history of monastic reform). He writes, “More and more monks are slipping into the roles of middle administration that seem to involve neither study nor manual labor in the traditional sense.”\textsuperscript{127}

Kardong, citing the agrarian writer Wendell Berry, calls for a return to the traditional land-based Benedictine values of stability, work and stewardship, just as


reformers before him have done. He admonishes, “A monastery is not nowhere but somewhere. We must take good care of that somewhere. To be a monk is not to practice an ethereal spirituality that treats place as irrelevant.” Drawing on his monastic roots, Kardong sounds a warning that Benedictine monasticism has strayed too far from its land-based foundations.

Since then, there have been several many attempts to re-connect (bridge) the land-based roots of monasticism with the contemporary concerns of the environmental and agrarian movements. In 2008, for example, the Trappist monks of Our Lady of Gethsemani held a conference entitled ‘Monasticism and the Environment’. This interfaith conference in which Buddhists, Benedictines and Trappists participated reflected what it meant to move toward a “green” monasticism. This work too focuses on the values and theology of monasticism that could be applied to environmental issues and concerns. Authors also reflected on the nature writing of Thomas Merton. One Sister from the Benedictine community of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde Missouri, reported on their work to restore 200 acres of prairie, and the installation of a large wind turbine on the property.

Other monasteries have sought direct collaboration to bring their land management practices up to date with current ecological sustainability practices such as reducing soil erosion, reducing energy consumption, and restoring ecological integrity. One such community is Holy Cross Trappist Abbey, located in Clarke County, Virginia. In 2007 they sought the help of students and faculty at the University of Michigan’s Natural Resource Management program to conduct a thorough assessment of the community. The team published a report includes a detailed Environmental Assessment of the 1,200 acre property.

The study begins in familiar territory, by citing foundational Benedictine values that harmonize with contemporary environmental discourse around stewardship, care and

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131 Buckner, Kathryn, Craig Cammarata, Charlotte Coultrap-Bagg, Alexander Linkow, Jessica Neafsey and Christopher Stratman (2010). Holy Cross Abbey: Reinhabiting Place (School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan).
connection to place. For example, this quotation from the 2005 Cistercian Constitution Section 27A “The brothers are to be concerned about conservation of the environment and to manage natural resources prudently” is seen as ample support for engaging in environmentally friendly management and practices. The Introduction cites the Benedictine ethos of ‘Work and Prayer’, and the Cistercians admonition to be ‘lovers of the place’ as further moral impetus to be better stewards of the land.

The study presents a detailed assessment of the ‘sustainability’ of eight domains: Land use, energy, water, solid waste, toxics, economies, food, and buildings. Their conclusions suggested that while the monks loved their land, the monastery was a far cry from a model of ecological sustainability. They found that monoculture farming practices were degrading local water and soil quality. That, cattle grazing is increasing soil erosion; that invasive plants are threatening local biodiversity. They found a poor native habitat to developed spaces ratio, and an undeveloped trail system. Energy production was inefficient and CO\textsuperscript{2} emissions were higher than local averages. They used more water, but generated less waste than average North American. In addition, the monastery employs over 100 harmful chemicals, and has asbestos and lead paint in structures and mold growing in several places. The baking of fruitcakes, one of their livelihood enterprises, generates significant carbon emissions, and their food is sourced through corporate, non-organic distributors.

Since the report, the community has set to work on both ensuring that the community remains on the land, and that their management practices are in greater harmony with the principles of ecological sustainability. The community was recently featured in National Geographic for their efforts, which included establishing an 80 acre Green Cemetery, where natural burials occur and ashes can be spread. The community has also entered a Conservation Easement with a local land trust which ensures the property will remain intact and undeveloped in perpetuity. While they have not returned to farming the land themselves, due to dwindling vocations, one of their tenants has begun farming 200 acres organically, and they have fenced on streams where cattle used to graze, to reduce contamination and erosion.\textsuperscript{132}

These examples show obvious evidence of discourse bridging, however, for the most part, Benedictine and Trappist monasticism, especially among the male communities, have been less willing to change their liturgical and spiritual practices to conform to environmental values. Before I move on to the histories of the four communities in this study, which will illustrate these changes with more specific cases, I want to present several examples from the wider North American context which show how monasticism’s relationship to land has changed over the past 50 years, and how it has assimilated environmental discourse in unique ways.

Theologian Christine Fletcher documents one such case at Saint Procopius’s Abbey, a Benedictine Abbey in the Cassinese Congregation. Located in rural Illinois, the Abbey maintained a large rural property that included a self-sufficient farm that included cattle, chickens, turkeys, hogs, bee hives, a peach orchard and large garden, until it became unmanageable in the 1960s. This was as Fletcher points out, due to decreased vocations, the unity of lay and choir monastics, and shifts in the US agricultural markets. The Abbey began as a Priory in Chicago, founded by Saint Vincent’s Arch Abbey to serve a mostly Czech neighborhood in 1885. In 1897, the monks moved to a more rural setting that would reach 365 acres at its peak with a high of 32 monks, and house a boarding school, a college and an orphanage.133 Fletcher suggests that while the monks felt a strong agrarian attachment to their land, and their vocation as farmers, it was finally agreed that they had reached a threshold. The monastery decided rather than sell the land outright, to collaborate with a developer to create a “sustainable community” called ‘Green Trails’, which would devote 40 per cent of total land (135 acres) apart from the monastery proper, to recreation, walking trails, lakes and park areas. The author sees this compromise as an example of the uniquely Benedictine values being applied to a difficult land-based problem, and a solution that uniquely blended the monks’ attachment to the land with the pragmatic needs of a changing monastic community, and a growing environmental consciousness.134 The monks were not attempting to restore a wilderness area or rope off a section of land, but seeking a way to be the best stewards they could under the present circumstances. Fletcher writes “The difference


Benedictine stewardship makes its clearly visible in Green Trails in the large amount of common areas for people to gather, and in the mix of housing: large and small single-family units, low-rise condominiums, and high-rise apartment buildings.” Fletcher argues that this project was “ecologically sustainable,” but within the Benedictine frame of human use and occupancy of the land. She rejects the notion that restoration of the prairie for example would have been preferable or more sustainable. The monks made a hard decision, but their decision was ultimately informed by Benedictine values. “Green Trails is an example of Benedictine stewardship of the environment in a situation when the agricultural life envisioned by Benedict could no longer be sustained.” 135

In another case, where a monastery has been forced to close its doors due to a lack of vocations, the monks’ legacy on the land is being respected and preserved by the surrounding community. The Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity in Huntsville, Utah, was founded in 1947 by monks from Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. The monks made a living by growing grain, raising cattle, keeping bees and baking bread. In 2016, the land was sold to a private resident of Huntsville, who is working with a local Land Trust to ensure the property is preserved through a Conservation Easement that will restrict development of the site in perpetuity, and ensure the sustainable management of the property by future owners. A small footprint surrounding the Abbey will be gifted to the Diocese for the construction of a parish.

The land, perched in a mountain Valley surrounded by the Wasatch Mountains, has a beautiful rural character, boasts hundreds of trees planted by the monks, and harbors a spring that is valuable to the Huntsville water supply. The few remaining monks will be allowed to stay at the monastery until they die. The process has been facilitated by a collaboration with a team of Utah State University regional planning students to ensure the land will continue to speak to the monks’ presence and contribution on the land. This case shows how integral land is to the Benedictine/Trappist lineage, and how beloved the monks were in the community, which is largely populated by Mormons. The reality of shrinking religious

communities has found a willing partner in Conservation Easements, which are now more commonly taking up easements on dwindling or dying monastic landscapes.¹³⁶

Thus within contemporary monasticism, just as in contemporary environmentalism, several environmental discourses can exist simultaneously or contradictorily. By far the most common narrative is that which maintains a place for human beings in the land, the agrarian model of Europe and early North America in addition to the ‘Conservationist’ approach of writers such as Gifford Pinchot, who advocated for stronger environmental protections and a wiser use of resources rather than the blanket setting aside of vast areas as wilderness or park land as preservationists and wilderness advocates have tended to advocate. However, as we shall see there are threads of preservationism and wilderness protection that see the land as already participating in the original garden of God.

Four Contemporary Monastic Communities and the Bridging of Environmental Discourses

Whether it is as part of a monastic community, a logging company or an environmental organization, discourses about the land shape the way we see the world. In addition, our experiences of land and nature shape the contours of these discourses. With their long histories of dwelling on the land, monastic communities have been in continual dialogue with their contemporary environmental discourses. From their desert origins, to the agrarian golden age, through the 19th century revival and into today.

Between December of 2015 and April of 2016, I spent approximately two weeks at four monastic communities in the American West. I began at New Camaldoli Hermitage, in California, then went to New Clairvaux Trappist Abbey also in California. After a short break I then headed to Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey in Western Oregon and finally to Christ in the Desert Abbey in northern New Mexico. In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline the history of these communities and the ways in which regional environmental

discourses have been embodied in the management and spirituality of each community, and how each monastic lineage has been a key framework through which each discourse is interpreted and applied.

**New Camaldoli Hermitage**

New Camaldoli Hermitage, originally named Immaculate Heart Hermitage, was founded by 14 monks from Italy in 1958 who sought to return to the simplicity, austerity, isolation and silence of the order’s 11th century founder Saint Romuald (952-1027), who founded the first Camaldoli Hermitage in Tuscany, Italy in 1012. Romuald’s order though small today, was an early and innovative monastic reform that anticipated many of the Cistercian reforms. In particular, Romuald’s order was known for bringing the hermetic and cenobitic strands of monasticism together, much like the Carthusians would do a few years later. The Order has monasteries (also called hermitages) in the United States, Brazil, India, Tanzania and Italy.

While they retain a distinct lineage, the Camaldolese at Big Sur are members of the Benedictine Confederation, and follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, in addition to Saint Romuald’s ‘Little Rule’ and their own Camaldolese Constitutions. They are technically a Priory, rather than an Abbey, which means they are under more closely controlled authority from their mother house in Camaldoli. As of December 2015, New Camaldoli Hermitage housed 13 professed monks, with two in formation.137

The Hermitage’s daily schedule gives monks more time for solitude, and only holds three public offices and mass daily. The rest of the monks’ time is spent in their various work assignments, prayer and study, and several of the monks are published authors, artists or musicians.138 Each monk lives in his own hermitage which is surrounded by a brick wall enclosure and small garden area. The monks take a “desert day” every month, which is a solitary retreat day for recreational or deeper prayer and solitude. The Hermitage maintains a wide circle of supporters and benefactors with an estimated 700 Oblates, or lay monastic enthusiasts.139 They maintain a daughter monastery in Berkeley, where four monks live full

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137 See Table 5.
138 See Table 4.
time and have recently taken over patronage of a small Benedictine monastery in San Luis Obispo, California. The retreat center of the monastery receives an estimated 1,500 guests per year,\textsuperscript{140} who stay in a small dormitory building outside the cloister, or in one of several hermitages below the monastery proper.

The Hermitage is located on 880 acres off CA-Highway 1 south of Big Sur, in the Santa Lucia Mountain range, just southwest of Cone Peak.\textsuperscript{141} The monastery overlooks the Pacific Ocean with the US Forest Service controlled Ventana Wilderness to the north and Limekiln State Park to the east. Large rural estates border the remainder of the property. It shares part of a mostly undeveloped coastline that is a popular scenic drive during the tourist season. Though Mediterranean in climate with Coastal Live Oak (\textit{Quercus agrifola}) being the most common tree species, the valleys shelter the southernmost reach of the Coast Redwood (\textit{Sequoia sempervirens}).\textsuperscript{142} The area is habitat for grey fox, mountain lion, black bear, mule deer, coyote, several birds of prey such as the red tailed hawk and a recovering colony of California condors. Sudden Oak Death a disease that affects Coastal Live Oak, has been an issue in the surrounding area, but the monastery has maintained a fairly healthy population of oak according to a local expert.\textsuperscript{143} The steep cliff sides are highly erodible, and major rain events can cause mudslides and road damage. The chaparral hillsides are also fire adapted, and major fires have occurred in 1977, 1985, 1999, 2008, and again in 2016, with the monks being evacuated in 1985 and 2008. Father Robert Hale, jokes in his memoir, that they are “living in the shake and bake eschatological adventures of earthquakes and fire,” because they live on the unstable eroding and fire-prone cliff sides of the California coast.\textsuperscript{144}

The area is the traditional territory of the Esselen and Salinan peoples who were systematically exploited and depopulated during the Spanish Mission era. Descendants of the Esselen people have yet to be federally recognized as a tribe.\textsuperscript{145} In 1848 the area became part

\textsuperscript{140} See Table 10.
\textsuperscript{141} See Figure 1.
\textsuperscript{142} See Figure 3.
of the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War, and Anglo families soon moved to the area as homesteaders. In the late 1880s Lime Creek was mined by Rockland Lime and Lumber Company, who were supplying lime for construction of San Francisco.\textsuperscript{146} The supply of ore and redwood lumber soon ran out and the land was abandoned. According to the monks, prior to 1958, when the Italian monks purchased the property, it was a dude ranch, and several of these original buildings remain today. The area adjacent to the monastery which housed the limekilns was purchased by the state in 1994 and turned into a state park and the Hermitage actively supported this acquisition, so that their solitude would remain intact.

The Hermitage’s structures were built soon after arrival, and renovated in the 1990s. A cloister garden was installed in the 1980s outside the chapel and planted in a California style with ornamental plants and fruit trees.\textsuperscript{147} Approximately 13 non-monastic staff live in small cabins or other accommodations on site, which was a unique circumstance to the communities in this study, and necessary because of their isolation from major town centers.\textsuperscript{148} Staff at the Hermitage maintain the grounds, chop firewood, work in the bakery and bookstore, and maintain a small apiary on site. There are over 15 varieties of fruit tree for domestic consumption in the cloister area behind the chapel, and a large garden area on top of a small rise among the hermitages, but it was inactive at the time of this study.

The main source of income for the Hermitage is hospitality, which has remained consistent since the founding. In the 1970s they began a small fruitcake operation which recently added a line of granola. The fruitcakes are baked offsite and packaged and shipped from the monastery. The granola is baked onsite by a lay employee. In the 1980s, they also opened a bookstore.\textsuperscript{149} During the 1990s, they were encouraged to expand their retreat facilities to increase capacity. However, while they did renovate many of the existing structures and add an infirmary, they did not expand the hospitality operation because as one monk put it, they wanted to be “keepers of the land not developers.” They were also unsure if they could sustain the increased water demands a new facility would create. Their water is captured from several springs on site and stored in cisterns on site. The electricity for the

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\textsuperscript{146} California State Parks (1998). \textit{Limekiln State Park} (Big Sur: California State Parks).
\textsuperscript{147} See Figure 2.
\textsuperscript{148} See Table 6.
\textsuperscript{149} See Table 7.
\end{flushleft}
Hermitage comes from a diesel generator that costs approximately $60,000 per annum to operate. The monks are keen to convert to solar electricity, but have not secured the resources to do so as of this study. The monastery participates in municipal recycling and garbage collection, and has its own composting facility. They recently voted to suspend the use of any non-organic chemical spray on the property.

The original Italian Camaldolese monks who founded the Hermitage, were seeking to reform their own tradition by returning to the austerity and simplicity of their original founders. They did this by setting up their monastery on the rugged and remote Big Sur Coast. When they arrived, the founders attempted to establish an olive orchard, which eventually went out of production. Many of the olive trees remain in a forgotten and overgrown patch of scrub oak.

The founders also built their hermitages so that they could not see the ocean from their cells, emphasizing the interior landscape over the physical. Brother Adso suggested that the monastery’s thinking with respect to the environment has since undergone a transition. When they arrived they sought to escape the world, and to mold the land to their needs. However, as we stood overlooking the Pacific Ocean on a cool December morning, Brother Adso reflected fondly on the life of Father Bruno, the recently deceased and beloved former-Prior of the community:

I think in those days the isolation was really about fuga mundi. It was really getting away from the world in an isolated place. Maybe they did like what the landscape looked like, but they built the fences big enough that you couldn’t see the ocean from your cell. So many of the old guys even in the past years they have got their windows completely covered up. Even Father Bruno living out in that cabin in the woods, the windows were completely covered up. These huge windows looking out over the ocean were completely covered up. He lived in a little hermitage out there, he had these huge windows covered up with Styrofoam and curtains. I asked him, he says, ‘well I got God in here what do I need the ocean out there for?’ He was just oblivious to the surroundings.

The monks privileged the inner life over the material world because it is the monk’s duty to seek God within. That was a means to a spiritual end for many of the founders. They

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150 Father Bruno had built a small hermitage outside the cloister that did in fact have a view of the ocean.
inherited the property from ranchers, and intended to maintain an active agricultural presence on the land through their olive orchard. Early benefactors of the monastery would sometimes hunt and fish on the property, and in the early 1960s, a small patch of Redwood trees was logged from the property in order to generate revenue.

However, much has changed since the hermitage was established, and it has taken on much of the environmental ethos of the surrounding Big Sur community filtered through its own unique Camaldolese sensibility. Needless to say, Brother Adso, has since removed the Styrofoam from the hermitage’s windows, which reveal an almost 180 degree panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean.

Strolling through the Hermitage’s library with Brother Michael he stopped in front of an impressive aerial view of Camaldoli in Italy. After some preface, Brother Michael related:

Camaldoli had this wonderful ecological intuition from the beginning and the Mother House is in this context of a beautiful forest which they are largely responsible for over the 1,000 years and if they would cut down a tree they would replace it with another tree and that kind of thing so they had to have a vote of chapter first of all to cut down any tree. So they were very ecologically sensitive.

For Brother Michael his lineage’s history of forestry meant that they worked in ‘harmony’ with the environment. And even though the founders of his own monastery were more austere, other-worldly and agrarian-minded, the contemporary context fit well with his conception of what the Camaldolese monks originally taught about the earth.

However, despite the conservationist outlook of his historic predecessors, many of the monks at Camaldoli were much more influenced by a Preservationist mindset. The monks that I spoke with overwhelmingly framed the land in terms that sought to protect its integrity from human intervention. For example, walking with Brother Colum along a narrow path, he told me about his own struggles with alcoholism before he joined and related this his land ethic:

We’ve all come from the world and we’ve seen a lot of destruction and we know of a lot of destruction in the environment and in land and things. And the value that we put into the earth and trees and flowers and things are very important, and we don’t want to interrupt that or disrupt that.
Being a monk was about healing the soul, and caring for the land for him meant protecting it from harm and interruption. The land had its own integrity and its own course, and the monks were there to care for it, preserve it and protect it from human harm.

Brother Adso, like many of his peers, cherishes the land, and wanted to preserve its wilderness character saying, “There have got to be places in the world where we don’t mess with things.” Another monk relating that the wilderness was a place to “let God be God.” This notion of letting nature take its course, and not messing with things or managing them was very much the dominant approach of New Camaldoli Hermitage. There was little interest for example in conducting further forest management, logging, or grazing anywhere on the property, even if that might reduce fire danger, and the monks saw themselves as caretakers of the untouched wilderness, much as Thomas Merton imagined above.

This transition away from the founders’ more ascetical pragmatism began in 1980s when the monastery voted unanimously to declare the monastery a “wildlife and wilderness preserve.” The monastery had never attempted any interventions that were too drastic, but as Father Hale wrote in his published memoir, it is something that the community has wrestled with during its nearly 60 year history:

We have wrestled for years now over the issues of wildlife and the wilderness. Being blessed with eight hundred acres of beautiful Big Sur coastland, we certainly have that obligation. In the early years we allowed a logging company to cut the woodland—for a share of the profits. And we allowed friends to come and hunt, in exchange for favors. But about eight years ago we set down fairly rigorous principles: no hunting, no fishing, no logging. At most we can cut from our forest for our own heating needs, but not to sell the timber. Most of our cells have wood stoves, so wood is a basic fuel for us. We try to cut only dead wood, or at most, to carefully thin a section of trees. So, most of the Hermitage land is wilderness, with just our cloister area cultivated. Sometimes the natural balance seems to be tipped badly—too many deer, or too many rabbits, and then we are tempted to intervene. But so far, Nature has taken better care of herself than when we were extensively cutting and hunting and fishing. Our contacts with Little Bear and his Native American Center and with the Esalen Institute and with the Buddhist monks of Tassajara have influenced us in a
very positive way in this regard. It is presumptuous to think Roman Catholics are put on Earth just to teach others. We are here to learn.\textsuperscript{151}

With harvesting, hunting and fishing in the early days, since the 1980s and even before, the Hermitage has sought to follow the examples of indigenous and Buddhist organizations in the area, and the general ethos of the California Coast to preserve Nature from intervention. They want to allow nature to take its course, and rooted in their Catholic heritage, learn from the religious centers that live nearby. Though this ‘wilderness ethos’ is held in tension by the Hermitage campus and cloister garden which boasts lush sub-tropical ornamental plants, fruit trees and vegetable garden area. Living on the Big Sur Coast has been an important aspect of the monks’ identity, and they have been very open to learning about how to care for their land from local environmental organizations. The monks admire the spirituality of Native Americans, and the sustainable facilities housed at the nearby Esalen Institute. Speaking affectionately of the “Pagans” at Esalen, Brother Adso admitted that they still had a lot to learn from their neighbors.

I feel like the Pagans are way ahead of the Christian Church or the Catholic community on this. The folks at Esalen are doing Permaculture work, Tassajara has a zero carbon footprint. They even get rid of their propane lanterns and have solar lights on the pathways, so they wouldn’t even use the fuel for that. They have a generator that only works for the kitchen and the office in certain times of day. Envious of their food production, and renewable energy, Brother Adso envisions many improvements for the community in the future.

Walking with Brother Nicolas along the Hermitage driveway, he reflected on the shift in approach to the land:

When we came, the land was almost seen in utilitarian terms—we’ll build this, we’ll do this, we’ll knock these trees down. But over time I think at least the order and certainly the local Camaldolese have a new sensitivity to the land. We need to have this huge respect for it and work with it and not just see it as ours, or do what we want with it.

I then asked, “Where do you think that came from, that sensitivity?” and he replied:

I think probably the whole environmental movement you know and, certain writers like [Thomas] Merton raised our awareness. But it almost seems to be in the air, you know, I’m not quite sure what the source of it is.

While the regional and interfaith context of the setting certainly influenced the monks, it was primary their own tradition from which they drew for inspiration. Bridging from a place of Camaldoli spirituality and theology, they were open to learning about other traditions, and collaborating on proposed projects.

As Robert Hale alluded to above, in the early 1990s, New Camaldoli co-founded the Four Winds Council a consortium of the four nearby centers of spirituality that live on the Big Sur Coast. They are made up by the Esalen Institute, a personal growth and Gestalt psychology retreat center; Tassajara Zen Monastery Center a Buddhist retreat center; and the Esselen Tribe, a small Native American band whose ancestral home is on the Big Sur Coast. The consortium meets quarterly, rotating to each center’s location. The consortium helped defeat a proposed dam on the Carmel River, and to broker the designation of the property adjacent to the Hermitage which was slated for development as Limekiln State Park, again part of the preservationist approach.

One experience where the Camaldolese environmental ethos bridged with a more preservationist discourse came through very clearly was when I was walking with Brother Colum to a Marian shrine located in a burnt out Redwood log on the back of the property. We were met by a worker in a golf cart who engaged us in a 30 minute discussion about whether or not we should cut down a Sycamore tree that was tilting slightly over the workshop where he did minor repairs for the monastery. He blurted: “I want to drop this tree do you have a problem with that, because it looks like it’s going to drop itself if I don’t.” To which Brother Colum affectionately replied, “You don’t just drop trees around here sir… there’s a tree committee.” When the worker pointed out that the key member of the committee had just died, Brother Colum said “well I’ve appointed myself to the tree committee and you cannot cut it down!” The conversation was jovial, and Brother Colum was certainly emphasizing his own environmental interests in my presence, but the notion that the pinnacle of environmental concern is to leave things intact, reflects the preservationist approach. Seeking to prevent harm, to allow nature to take its course, and the monks’ willingness to listen to the communities in their region shows clearly that bridging
between regional environmental discourse and Camaldoli monastic spirituality were the forces that gave the place its unique character and charm.

*New Clairvaux Abbey*

New Clairvaux Abbey is a Trappist monastery founded in 1955 by 26 monks from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. As discussed in Chapter 1, Trappists, or, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), are descended from the monastic reformers of the 11th century at Citeaux, France. New Clairvaux is named after Clairvaux, France where the Order’s most influential Abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, founded a monastery. Saint Bernard (1090-1153), initially entered at Citeaux, the first Cistercian monastery, but was soon asked to found his own monastery as the order rapidly grew throughout Europe. Cistercians are known for their farm work, water management engineering and a unique style of architecture. Both Trappist monasteries in this study were proud of their order’s accomplishments, history and unique vocation on the land. Though the Trappists do not belong to the Benedictine Confederation, Trappists still follow the Rule of Benedict, supplemented with their own Constitutions and a more hierarchical, centralized structure with a single Superior based in Rome.

New Clairvaux Abbey encompasses 600 acres of prime Central Valley farmland in the town of Vina, California in Tehama County, where the surrounding countryside is almost entirely agrarian, growing prunes, walnuts and olives.152 The environs directly surrounding the monastery retain a rural character with one small subdivision and a town center nearby. Trappist monks emphasize community and thus hold seven public Offices each day including Mass, with the remainder of time devoted to work assignments, prayer, and study.153 The community houses 23 professed monks with one in formation.154 The monastery buildings were renovated in the 1970s and unlike other Trappist monasteries the grounds are laid out in a California Rancho Style, similar to what existed on the property when they arrived, reflecting a regional influence.155 There is a cloister garden with fountain, but it is not actually cloistered, but rather abuts the refectory within the wider cloister arboretum area.156

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152 See Figure 4.
153 See Table 4.
154 See Table 5.
155 See Figure 5.
156 See Figure 6.
The cloister area has an open park like feel with several species of trees planted including Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), Stone pine (*Pinus pinea*), Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) and Italian Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*). Several of the oak and black walnut trees in the cloister and near the guest house are thought to be over 100 years old, and several wind fallen black walnut trees are being milled on site for use in the Chapterhouse choir stalls by hired carpenters. The cloister area also maintains a small domestic use fruit orchard with apples, oranges, grapefruits, peaches, and pears, which until about five years ago were harvested annually and canned, dried or turned into jams or jellies by the monks. This practice has been discontinued because it is too labor intensive. The monastery recently partnered with a local utility company to install several solar panel arrays which are plugged into the wider grid. The panels were primarily a financial investment, saving the community several thousands of dollars per year, though the monks were proud of the environmental implications as well.

New Clairvaux Abbey has also invested considerable time and resources into erecting a 12th century Spanish limestone Cistercian Chapterhouse that was purchased by William Randolph Hurst in the 1950s and then donated to the city of San Francisco where it sat in pieces until the monastery sought to acquire the stones in the 1990s. The structure will become their permanent place of worship when it is completed sometime in 2018 and is an official site of pilgrimage for the diocese. The structure reflects the Cistercian style of architecture, with minimal ornamentation, high degrees of symmetry and vaulted ceilings.157

The Vina area is the traditional territory of the Wintu, Yana and Nomiski peoples, who were driven onto reservations in the 1850s. From its earliest European settlement, the property has been used for agricultural purposes. The monks claimed that because it was near the Sacramento River, their top soil was nearly 30 feet deep.158 The property was previously owned by Peter Lassen, who purchased it from Spanish Land granters, and Lassen planted the first vineyard in the area in 1846. Early California vintner Henry Gerke’s vineyards gave the town of Vina its name, and the property was later incorporated into Stanford University

157 See Figure 7.
158 I had no way of verifying this, and they could have been exaggerating. But the area is well known for its fertile soil and abundant ground water.
Founder Leland Stanford’s 55,000 acre winery. However, he planted inappropriate varieties for the climate, and quickly pivoted to producing brandy.\textsuperscript{159}

Mule deer, migratory birds, mountain lions, squirrels are common features of the rural landscape, and recently a black bear was sighted in the area. The monastery is also home to approximately 50 turkey vultures and about the same number of wild turkeys, who have taken up residence in the cloister area with the monks. The monastery is surrounded by orchards to the south, a small neighborhood to the east, and Deer Creek to the north and west, which empties into the Sacramento River and is protected salmon habitat. A majority of the property has been under cultivation since the monks arrived, except for the small riparian areas that flank the Deer Creek and China Slough. These more ‘wild’ areas housed several hermitage sites established by previous monks.

In 1955, when the monks purchased the property they continued a dairy operation that was active before they arrived. However, after several unprofitable years they converted the dairy and pasture land into prune and walnut orchards which has remained the predominant land use until the present day. For many years the orchards were irrigated using a flood method, which required intensive labor and management. Eventually, they decided to modernize their operation, installing drip irrigation, drilling three wells, and removing and replanting several of the older orchard blocks. This intensive manual labor which included pruning, irrigating, spraying, harvesting and processing was until recently all carried out by the monks; however, due to an aging population, and fewer vocations, in 2010, the monastery unanimously decided to hand over maintenance of the orchards to a management company until they are again able to do so themselves. The monastery has retained ownership of the property, and continues to oversee operations.\textsuperscript{160} Though they follow conventional management techniques, Brother Severinus compared the monks to the farms around him by contrasting their approach to a more corporate, money-driven agenda:

Well for one thing there’s a lot of corporate farming here in California. There it is an investment. When the prune industry is good they plant prunes, when it’s not good they tear them out and plant something else. It’s not that we are not affected by it and we don’t follow the markets, but we’re in it for the long haul.

\textsuperscript{160} See Table 7.
The monks have to make a living, but they see themselves as more invested in the long term beauty and sustainability of the farm, not just as an instrument for generating revenue, or a parcel that is assigned a number. In fact, each orchard block has the name of a Saint or significant figure in the history of their order.

In 2005 the Abbey began to generate revenue from a small vineyard that is jointly managed with a Napa Valley vintner. This operation continues to engage the labor of the monks during preparation, harvest, pressing and bottling of the wine, though there is also a need for hiring supplemental workers. Each year the monks invite the wider community to participate in the blessing of the grapes, which involves priestly vestments, procession, incense and holy water. This development has made the monastery a wine destination, which according to the guest log at the monastery has increased traffic to the tasting room to approximately 25,000 people in 2015. However, only an estimated 400 guests stay at the retreat facilities each year which is still a minor but important share of the monastic vocation and revenues.\footnote{See Table 10.}

In terms of environmental discourse, the community overwhelmingly reflected their medieval counterparts at Clairvaux, who saw manual work as cooperation with God in redeeming the world, and returning to the garden. This agrarian outlook was consistent with their mostly conservative and rural setting, though they were still located within the generally environmentally conscious state of California. While the details of this theology will be explored below, one insight from Brother Aymaro gives the reader a sense what this agrarianism looks like in the contemporary monastic context, in dialogue with the broader environmental movement:

Learning to care for living things, cooperating with them, to make them fruitful, its cooperation. With our help we can make them more fruitful than they could be for Gods glory. Now I mean obviously that’s not quite the same thing as the natural beauty of a wild forest but it’s the beauty of the cultivated orchard and that has a place too. Cooperation between man and nature. I see that as one of the fruits of this particular way of life, but its real cooperation.

Brother Aymaro, conscious of both the agrarian and preservationist discourses, not only connected his theology to the work on the land, but saw manual farm work as a spiritual
practice: “I think physical work, not just mental work, or intellectual work, or even spiritual work plays a part in integrating our whole person and you know that balance draws us into God.” This dynamic between inner and outer landscape was present in all the communities, but took on a strongly agricultural character at New Clairvaux. A wild forest was certainly beautiful, and he was conscious that perhaps I might prefer the wilderness aesthetic, but defended the beauty of his orderly and well-groomed agricultural setting from the point of view that it not only enhanced the monastic life, but reflected the beauty of its Author.

Rather than bridging, the monks were in many ways simply continuing a long tradition of agrarian land-based work. In the monastery’s Strategic Plan for example it states, “We value living close to the land, skillfully managing it and our goods in a simple sustainable manner to provide for our economy as well as to share our resources with the poor.” Like their Cistercian ancestors, the monks of Clairvaux had to make a living and that meant growing walnuts and prunes in as efficient a way as possible. They were farmers to their core, and they loved the land and wanted to care for it the best they could. As I interviewed several monks in the cloister park area, we frequently saw one of the older brothers in the background patiently trapping gophers on the front lawn. This agrarian approach to “vermin” or “varmints” was seen as part of keeping the lawn green and healthy. During our interview, the gopher-hunting monk bragged to me that last week he had killed 80 gophers, but immediately repented of having told me for fear that I might be offended, or see him as cruel.

However, the monks also valued and enjoyed the riparian zones that bordered their property as areas of unmanaged ‘wildlands,’ where they would often go on walks to pray or reflect. These places reflecting a reminiscence of the desert father’s desire for solitude, and Thomas Merton’s foray into the hermit life in the mid-1960s.

Yet the property was brimming with animal life and which the monks pointed out was unique among their neighbors. According to the monks, the property has also been caught in the middle of water resource controversies involving the salmon bearing Deer Creek. A local coalition of farmers had recently gone head to head with the California Department of Wildlife during the recent drought over salmon habitat and water rights. The monks I spoke with were sympathetic to both sides, but less concerned with the outcome because the dispute did not threaten to affect the monastery’s production in the immediate future because of
several wells on the property. Brother Patrick who attended several of the meetings, expressed sympathy for both sides of the issue:

So that’s a pretty big environmental question. I would go to the meetings and hear the farmers, ‘they’re taking water from the farmers!’ But then I was thinking to myself there is a fish industry, it’s a pretty big one and it’s a pretty important one. If we don’t have water for those fish, they’re going to stop coming here and then what’s going to happen? So I see both sides of the picture, especially because I happen to love fish, I mean eating fish! [Laughs].

The monk was sympathetic to the fisher folk, primarily because he likes to eat fish, not because of some ecological or biodiversity informed ethic. His interest was in workers livelihoods and maintaining access to a natural resource, but could also sympathize with the farmers’ need for water.

One unique problem that monastery has is that despite being a working farm, they also see several hundred retreatants each year. This has posed something of a clash of values between the agricultural landscape of the monks’ livelihood and the leisure landscape of retreatants. Several proposals to convert the orchard to organic have failed to gain traction among the relevant community committees. Thus they continue to allow the use of pesticides and herbicides on the property. The monks were thus concerned about the continual spraying of pesticides and herbicides on the property because of the potential human impact, rather than any broader ecological goals. When I asked about the option of converting to organic, Brother Aymaro said:

Well I guess the major barrier is the labor and the feeling is we might not get a good crop we might not get a good harvest, and we do need to support ourselves. So you know what can we do to manage the land as best we can and still use these modern farming practices? We are mindful of what chemicals we use. The other thing is, unlike almost every other farm we have a population who lives here, and we always have guests with us on retreat. So we have to be very mindful of the chemicals in terms of their health…It’s not too many farms with a retreat center right in the middle.

The monks love and value the land, but they must also make a living. They employ best management practices, and try to limit spraying or put up signage when spraying occurs.
However, it is a necessity for the thriving of their livelihoods and is unlikely to end any time soon.

This agrarian approach meant that monks used words like stewardship and caretakership to describe their relationship to the land rather than preserve or maintain undisturbed. They saw themselves cooperating with God for the care of the land and themselves, which as we will see in later chapters serves as a deep spiritual lesson wherein the monks cultivate both the land and the inner landscapes. This agrarian motif was strongest at New Clairvaux, which had the most active agricultural industry. The monks were steeped in their own Cistercian heritage, and a region of conservative agriculturalists, but also sympathized with broader environmental goals such as protecting salmon bearing streams. Their outlook and management was agrarian to the core, and they were prototypically Trappist in the sense that their vocation included manual agricultural work, which is becoming rare, even among Trappist monasteries.

*Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey*

Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey is a Trappist monastery also founded in 1955 by 41 monks from Pecos, New Mexico. Their Mother House has a long history in North America going back to the founding of Petit Clairvaux in 1825 in Nova Scotia which relocated to Rhode Island in 1900 after a series of tragic fires. Our Lady of the Valley as it was renamed, endured into the 1950s, when it too burned down, and the monks once again relocated to their final home in Spencer Massachusetts. While in Rhode Island however, the prosperous monastery made several foundations. One was sent in 1905 to Jordan, Oregon, which eventually failed and returned to Rhode Island. In 1948, Our Lady of the Valley, with over 100 monks, made another foundation in Pecos, New Mexico. The monks in Pecos, though enamored by the site, eventually gave up on the property’s farming potential and in 1953 purchased a property in Carlton, Oregon, not far from the former Jordan foundation. The Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which took on that name in New Mexico, retained the name at its Oregon locale and currently houses 25 professed monks with one in formation.163

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163 See Table 5.
The monastery is located in a small valley between two ridges that run north and south in the semi-arid western foothills of the Oregon Coastal Range.\textsuperscript{164} It is surrounded by rural properties on all sides, an increasing amount of which are devoted to wine grapes. Oregon maintains laws against major subdivision of rural properties, resulting in increased property values in the area, especially with the arrival of the wine industry. The property is home to mule deer, bobcat, and many migratory and resident birds, and the large retreatant pond shelters carp and bullfrogs.\textsuperscript{165}

It is the traditional territory of several groups of Kalapuyan peoples, who were driven from the area by settlers in the 1850s and now belong to the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde. The area was traditionally an oak savanna, kept open by indigenous burning practices. Collapse of the Kalapuya has seen a reduction in prairie and savanna ecosystems by 90 per cent between 1850 and present.\textsuperscript{166} Settlers also converted the area into farms, pasture and woodlots. Much of the remaining Oregon White Oak is now overgrown by Douglas fir forest.

The previous owner, a farmer and logger, clear cut the property after he sold it to the monks in 1953. The first monks to arrive were said to have found a “moonscape” as one monk put it, but they continued growing grain in the bottomlands, and raised sheep and cattle on the hill until the farm closed in mid-1960s. These operations were caught up in shifts in the agricultural economy and the monks struggled to stay in the black. They eventually sold their livestock and leased their farmland to a local farmer, putting all of the energy into other industries such as a carpentry shop which manufactured church pews and other furniture, and a book bindery that mostly sourced clients from local universities. In the 1980s the Abbey added a fruitcake bakery, and in the 1990s a wine storage and labeling facility. The approximately 300 acres of leased farmland grew a variety of commodities such as grass seed until 2016, when the monks decided to start a contract with a higher paying leasee, who has planted the land to hazelnut, a common commodity crop in Western Oregon.\textsuperscript{167}

The Abbey buildings cluster around the chapel, which is attached to the cloister in a traditional Cistercian style that has flares of Japanese Zen gardens and Northwestern

\textsuperscript{164} See Figure 8.  
\textsuperscript{165} See Figure 11.  
\textsuperscript{166} Ferguson, Scott (2010). \textit{Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe Forest Management Plan} (Abbey of Guadalupe).  
\textsuperscript{167} See Table 7.
gardening style. In 2010, the monastery renovated the old church, which is now more open to sunlight with large windows above and to the west of the chapel. The monastery also enclosed the cloister area and installed a traditional cloister garden, with a central fountain and stations of cross along the wall. The monastery offers five public Offices each day, with two said in private and daily mass. They have a retreat facility and a Zendo-style meditation house. They receive an estimated 600 retreatants each year.

Starting in 1967 with a Christmas tree operation, the monks began actively managing about 880 acres for timber production, planting mostly Douglas fir, but also experimenting with Ponderosa Pine (Pinus ponderosa), Knobcone pine (Pinus attenuata), hybrid poplar (Sp. populus), and Leland cypress (Cupressus leylandii). In the 1980s, active harvesting began by a small crew of monks. The small monastic forestry crew, planted, thinned, pruned and harvested all the trees themselves in small block cuts, and replanted in tightly spaced monocrop tree plantations. Plantings were not concerned with privileging native species, and management was designed to maximize the production of timber resources.

The monks of Guadalupe inherited a classically Trappist agrarian orientation and praxis. They were proud stewards of the land and saw the forest as a kind of ‘tree-farm’ for the production of products and revenue. In Rhode Island, for example, one Annalist boasted, “This year, without the help of any engineer, we built a great dam at the point where the stream begins to curve, for the purpose of collecting the water into an artificial lake which will freeze in winter and supply us with ice for the use of the community.” In classic Trappist fashion, their ability to manage water for the usefulness of the community, without the help of “seculars” was on display. Yet the monks were not ruthless exploiters of their new farm. In New Mexico, as they attempted to farm, another more poetic Annalist wrote, “Our amateur botanists are still finding new flowers; they are everywhere in extraordinary profusion, reminding us of their Maker’s loveliness and lavish generosity.”

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168 See Figure 9.
169 See Figure 10.
170 See Table 10.
clearly a naturalist, was also enamored by the beauty of the wildlife and plant life, in addition to the more pragmatic side of making a living from the land.

In Oregon, as the monks grew older, and vocations dwindled throughout the 1970s, they began to reach out for help with managing their land. One landmark came in the late 1980s, when a heavy-handed clear cut near a favored picnic area angered several of the monks. It was decided to discern a new forest management strategy, and to hire a professional forester to manage the forest with the help of a small monastery forestry crew. In 1995, they hired a local forester to conduct an inventory of the property and to write a management plan that would balance spiritual values, ecological health with the need to generate revenue.

Since 1995, with the professionalization of the forestry operation, the manager has transitioned to a more ecological focused approach seeking and obtaining Forest Stewardship Council certification, a third party certification that ensures ecological principles are used in management and harvest. This means there has been a decrease in patch cut size to no more than two acres, increased the use of commercial thinning as a harvesting technique, in order to diversify the forests’ age and structural diversity. Harvest areas leave more standing dead trees wildlife trees, more downed trees for woody debris, has focused on clearing areas around overgrown white oaks and madrone to increase native tree species diversity. In 2010 they also started aggressively managing for invasive species such as false broom (Brachypodium sylvaticum), scots broom (Cytisus scoparius), and English Hawthorn (Crataegus laevigata).¹⁷⁴ They do have also designated a small 80 acre section of forest as a remnant old growth area set aside from thinning and commercial harvest.

The manager was also instrumental in enrolling the property into a conservation easement funded by the Bonneville Power Administration, a hydroelectric dam company that has been legally obligated to purchase conservation easements for habitat restoration in and around the Columbia River because of the land it flooded by building dams. After a lengthy process, and assessment, the monastery received almost $10 million to keep the property undeveloped, to promise not to plant vineyards, and to manage the forest sustainably. This process was negotiated by the community, who mostly supported the initiative with a few hold outs, and finally agreed to enter the easement in 2010.

In addition, the easement qualified the monastery for additional funds that were used to restore areas of Oregon White Oak (*Quercus garryana*) savanna on property. According to the Oregon Conservation Strategy, Oregon White Oak savanna is an endangered ecosystem, with less than 5 per cent of its historical range remaining. In the past the white oak was cleared to make way for more Douglas fir, and sold as fire wood. The climate of the area before European settlement was adapted to White Oak, and Native Americans used fire to clear the area of trees to open it up for hunting and harvesting acorns. The project was advocated and argued by the Abbey forester through the logic of ecological restoration, the attempt to use historical baselines to return a given ecosystem to a particular function or structure. In this case, without fire, the Douglas fir trees outgrow the White oaks, eventually shading them out completely. By harvesting all the trees except the White oaks, a stand replacing fire is mimicked and the oaks return to health and vigor, reproducing naturally. In the summer of 2013, the monastery began cutting a large section of forest that contained white oak that had been overgrown by Douglas fir trees and planting native grasses and wild flowers.

From its early agrarian roots, through its tree farm days to its contemporary context as an ecological working forest, Our Lady of Guadalupe has undergone significant changes in its approach to land and forest management, but always guided by the monks’ heritage. As we walked by a particularly straight row of Douglas fir trees, Brother Salvatore related a memory about the former forest manager-monk:

Father Romaine, when he was with us, he was one of the main planters and he walked by here once and said, ‘this is what some people contemptuously call a tree farm,’ at which he took great umbrage at because he thought it was a forest. But if you look at it compared to the other parts of the forest it is kind of a tree farm.

Brother Salvatore, who had been raised with a strong environmental consciousness could see the difference between a naturally generating forest and an intensive plantation. Father Romaine, however, steeped in the agrarian conservationist approach to forestry, where trees were crops, the distinction was belittling of the work he and other monks had done to reclaim the forest from the degraded state it was in when they arrived.

Through an agrarian past, and a paradigm shift that sought to restore the forests structural and species diversity, the monastery now sees itself as a kind of sanctuary to
monks and visitors alike. This is because, one condition of the easement allows public access for quiet recreational hiking. Interestingly, the monastery is one of the largest intact forest areas in Yamhill County, which being primarily agricultural, has very few wild or protected areas.\textsuperscript{175} This was seen as part of the monastery’s offering to the world by Brother Benno:

“...To me the only purpose of a monastery is to be a sanctuary. And certainly there’s been times in history where there’s been even more need, but for us today I think there’s an intense need for sanctuary and that’s what we have to offer. The woods the forest, actually have acted in very significant moments as a sanctuary for me. When I’m walking along the higher trails it’s like being in a cathedral. It’s incredible the growth, and the way the light filters. And to know the monks that first worked that forest you know with such love and that it’s open to all.”

Embedded in Western Oregon, which embodies a strong tension between environmentalists and loggers, the monastery has been influenced by elements of both. While it is rooted in the Trappist agrarian sensibility, the community has since adopted a program of ecological restoration, invasive species removal, and forest certification. The paradigm of the forest manager is “ecological forestry” with its emphasis on restoring native species and endangered ecosystems, increasing the forests structural and age diversity, a major shift from its former days as a production oriented tree farm.

While the Abbey’s forest management is rooted in best management practices, stewardship and agrarian roots which provide revenue for the monastery, and sanctuary for the monks and guests, it is also influenced by the ecological restoration paradigm of the current forester, who is seeking, in rather Trappist fashion, to restore the agrarian landscape to its pre-European state, which in the minds of contemporary environmental discourse is in fact the original paradise of God, a total reversal of the poles. Whereas previously the agrarian landscape was the garden of God, now, it is the wilderness which expresses God’s glory most powerfully. However, throughout this process, the Trappist sensibility for stewardship and care has been central to the community’s approach to land.

\textit{Christ in the Desert Abbey}

The most remote of the four communities, Christ in the Desert Abbey was founded by three monks from Mount Savior Benedictine Abbey in upstate New York in 1964. The

\textsuperscript{175} Personal Communication, Scott Ferguson of Trout Mountain Forestry; also see Figure 8.
monastery is part of the Subiaco-Cassinese Congregation, founded in 1867 as a more contemplative branch of the Benedictine Confederation. The founders felt called into a deeper observance of monastic silence and thus, looking to their monastic roots, sought a more remote location. Father Aelred Wall, a monk of Mount Savior, began to scout a more secluded property to make a foundation, eventually finding a remote cattle ranch in Northern New Mexico. The Abbey is located 13 miles off the main highway on a dirt road about 90 miles north of Santa Fe. In 1995, the monastery became an Abbey, with the then prior being elected as Abbot. The monastery now houses 18 professed monks with 21 in formation, a major exception in this study, and in North American monasticism as a whole, based on their openness to foreign nationals seeking vocations. They house monks from over 10 countries, and maintain close ties with three other monasteries in the same congregation: Holy Cross in Chicago, La Soledad and Todos Santos in Mexico.

The property is located on the Chama River in the Chama River Canyon in northern New Mexico, near the village of Abiquiu. The area is at 7,500 feet elevation and is considered high desert, dominated by Pinyon Pines (Pinus edulis, P. monophylla) and Juniper (Juniperus osteosperma) trees, with some conifer forests at higher elevations or northern aspects. The area is habitat to mountain lion, black bear, mule deer, beaver and migratory birds, particularly a flock of Canada Geese that takes up residence on the river banks each spring to hatch and fledge their chicks.

The area is the traditional territory of the Pueblo Peoples, who inhabited the canyons and farmed the mesas starting around 1,100 CE. The Gallina Pueblo, the area’s first inhabitants, were exterminated by the Anasazi People who dominated the region until the Spanish conquest. From then on, the area was incorporated into the Spanish Land Grant system. Many indigenous and Mexican peoples lost their families or communal lands when the US took over. In the 1960s, there was a resurgence of Mexican and Indigenous occupations seeking the return of these lands, which were then in the hands of the US federal government, and the Abbey was briefly threatened by banditos in the 1970s.

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177 See Table 5.
178See Figure 12.
The monastery began with 115 acres on the west bank of the Chama River, but when
the property across the river became available for purchase in 1978, they quickly raised the
funds to purchase it, bringing the total acreage to 275, and preventing a potential
encroachment on their solitude. The chapel was designed by famed architect George
Nakashima and built in 1968 from local materials. There is a retreatant complex separate
from the cloister area, and several workshops spaces including a state of the art solar power
systems. They have water rights on the west side of the river, but sold the east side to help
with renovations and expansion which happened in the mid-1990s. The monks hold seven
public offices and daily mass, and their main cloister has an enclosed cloister garden, which
was built during the 1995 renovations.

The monks have tried a variety of land based industries most of which have been
discontinued. Their primary sources of income have been their guesthouse, gift shop and
private donations. There is a small brewery located on the property, which serves as the
licensee for Monk’s Brew beer, however the monks do not participate in the commercial
brewing. The monks also grow commercial hops, which are sold to a craft brewing supply
operation, and they have recently revived a large vegetable garden under the leadership of
one of the monks. There are plans to devote more of the property to raising food crops in
the future, but as of this study nothing else has been established. An estimated 1,300
retreatants visit the monastery each year.

Located within the Coyote District of the Santa Fe National Forest, the Abbey is
located within the Chama River Canyon Wilderness Area. This means that the stretch of
Chama River passes the monastery is a designated “wild and scenic” river under US law.
However, the Chama River is dammed at two places, the El Vado and Abiquiu dams, which
were built in the early 1960s for local irrigation and drinking water. The Chama is very
popular with rafters, and in 1990 the Forest Service announced an improved Chama River
Recreation Management Plan to that would repair and grade the access road, expand boat
launch sites, install a River interpretive center with camp grounds and a large parking lot, all

180 See Figure 13.
181 See Table 4 and Figure 14.
182 See Table 9 and Figure 14.
183 See Table 5.
184 See Table 10.
about a mile away from the monastery property line. According to local historian Mari Graña, when the Forest Service began construction, local people and the monks protested on the grounds that the development was too big and too close to the monastery. A compromise was reached, and the original plan was scrapped for something much smaller and farther from the monastery.

The community has been a champion of green building and sustainability since its founding, and the structures are all built from local adobe, wood and stone. When the monastery expanded in the 1990s, buildings were made of straw bale and adobe, and the monastery installed the largest private solar power generating facility in New Mexico. They also installed a small grey water system, which diverts grey water from the cloister into a small wetlands pond. The only monastery with a ‘Sustainability’ page on their website, the monastery identifies five objectives of their “sustainable stewardship” program:

1. Use sustainable materials and techniques to safeguard the environment and the beauty of the Chama Canyon Wilderness,
2. Energy production and consumption at the monastery must be clean, renewable, and cost effective,
3. The buildings must meet the needs of the monastic community, now and for the future,
4. The buildings must be beautiful,
5. Construction costs must be minimized.

The renovations received the Renew America Green Building and Real Estate Development award in 1998. Thus the monastery is steeped in the New Mexican architectural tradition, and several spiritual retreat centers are located nearby. Their remoteness makes renewable energy an economic necessity, but they are also committed to being a sustainable community. As Brother Ubertino reflected on the commitment of the monastery to the discourse of environmental sustainability he embedded it within the monastic tradition as a whole and his own regional setting in particular:

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I think sustainability has always been a monastic value and that it’s become a contemporary word is a wonderful thing. Living here in this harsh environment located at 6,500 feet in an isolated north New Mexico canyon with very limited light in the winter and a very limited growing season, it’s got challenges. But I think it sensitizes you to what the land can do and can’t do…People often say ‘oh your buildings fit so beautifully with the landscape.’ How could they be otherwise? It is the landscape, we just turned it upright. The colors are the same as the canyon. We’ve chosen this architecture, but this has been the architecture of New Mexico for centuries and centuries and centuries, it predates the Spanish conquistadores, so it’s an architecture that works here. You’re not going to come in the middle of the desert and build a gothic monastery, it wouldn’t fit. This monastery grows out of the land. Monks are affected by the land, so how could we not emphasize sustainability? The land will instruct you in that value, this particular land. It’s certainly a monastic value that has been expressed over many, many centuries but if you didn’t have that value the land would teach you the value…Much like restoring an old house would teach you about architecture living on this land teaches you about sustainability.

Monasticism has always been conscious of sustainability, but the regional setting has also played a role in their approach to architecture and resource use. While they preserve the monastic spirituality and liturgy, to impose a gothic style cathedral as he says would be absurd. Sustainability was about necessity and self-sufficiency, but it was also about beauty and listening to what the land was calling them to do in that particular place.

The monks at Christ in the Desert were enthusiastic about environmental sustainability initiatives, however, interestingly, the monks at Christ in the Desert were the most vocal about carving a space between their approach and dominant environmental discourses, especially Deep Ecology. Bridging environmental issues such as pollution with traditionally Catholic issues such as abortion, Brother Bertrand stated:

I think it is important, as a spiritual statement, that if we really reverence the person and the sacredness of the person and the sacredness of all creation and the earth, we have to stop polluting it and abusing it by just exhausting its resources and fouling it all up with all this artificial stuff.
Polluting a river and protecting the unborn were not unrelated because they were both protections of the sacredness of life and creation. Brother Venantius, reiterating that he was in fact in favor of environmental preservation and protections, said “the environmental or green movement since the 70s…seems to be a sort of bubbling up of the human spirit in push back against sort of the over-technologicalization.” But he was quick to point out with former Pope Benedict the XIV that:

> We need an environmental movement of the soul. Because we pump all this porn all over the place, and everybody wants to drink spring water. You want to dip your body in polyurethane so you can have sex with anything that moves, but you go to Whole Foods, because God forbids somebody put a chemical on your tomato!

If we are so concerned about polluting the earth, why shouldn’t we also be concerned about polluting our bodies and souls? For Venantius, environmentalists were too often concerned with the minutia of controlling environmental problems, while ignoring moral ones. Others felt that Deep Ecology was too anti-human, wanting to preserve the earth at the expense of human life, more concerned about whether people ate meat than whether or not women got abortions, or we legalized euthanasia. Environmental sustainability was celebrated in so far as it supplemented the monastic purpose of seeking God, but certain aspects were kept at arm’s length.

In addition to its commitment to sustainability, the monastery also aspires to more fully develop its agricultural base. While I was there, the monastery was gearing up to plant two large vegetable garden areas, and fertilizing a broad acre field to grow alfalfa. They own several horses to keep the monks in contact with domestic animals, and hope to become more self-sufficient with respect to food production. For Brother Ubertino, there was more than a practical reason for this:

> There’s just a long time between monasticism and agriculture. It’s a healthy use of technology to make land produce food, and if you have reverence for land and its able to produce food…that is much better than land that is simply fallow. Even land that won’t produce a single grape can be beautiful, but if it can produce food, in a way, that’s its purpose—fecundity.

Though he lived in a vast wilderness area, and enjoyed the stillness of the desert, Brother Ubertino was a farmer at heart and wanted to put the land the monastery owned to more
productive use, and enlist their swelling ranks to grow food, which in turn would of course grow monks, physically and spiritually. Bringing fruit from the earth simultaneously fulfills human purpose and that of the earth, and cooperation between humans and the earth is at the heart of a monastic agrarian theology, that was dwelling in the heart of a wilderness area. The bridging of monastic values and environmental values go hand in hand in many ways, however, each of the communities maintained firm boundaries between their purpose and the broader world.

**Conclusion**

Back at New Camaldoli Hermitage, Father Brother Bruno will be missed by his community; but his books and talks continue to influence and inspire many who live at New Camaldoli Hermitage or who visit as retreatants. His dense and profound work, *The Future of Wisdom*, calls for Christianity to rediscover its roots in what he calls “participatory knowing.” Barnhart pushed for broader ecumenical dialogue, an embrace of the divine feminine as a response to the overwhelmingly patriarchal heritage of Christianity, and a deeper embrace of contemporary ecological ethics and scientific knowledge.\(^{188}\) I never met Father Bruno, I arrived a day too late. But it was clear from the monks I spoke with that he regretted some of the more dualistic aspects of his own Camaldolese past. However, in dialogue with the regional context, and the wider environmental movement, Bruno found his own way toward a monastic spiritual ecology, which many of his monks had also embraced through their experiences on the land.

Over their 2,000 year history, from the deserts of the Middle East, to the agricultural powerhouses of medieval Europe, monasticism has a long history and relationship to land which was entangled with monastic identity, livelihood and spirituality. Throughout that history monasticism engaged with biblical land-based motifs such as the Desert-wilderness and the Paradise-Garden to make meaning with their new and changing circumstances. While the desert was a harsh testing ground, it was also inspiration for the monastic spiritual practices of silence and solitude, and a marker of monastic identity which was exploited by later medieval foundations, who also sought to flee to their own ‘deserts’ in the remote and

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remaining wilds of Europe. Just as the monks sought to cultivate the land as a sign of God’s blessing and grace, they also sought to cultivate the soul.

In North America, while monastic institutions have not had nearly the same wide spread effect on the historical character of the landscape, and Vatican II brought sweeping changes to monastic communities, they continue a tradition of dwelling on the land that upholds the monastic identity and enlists both biblical motifs and environmental discourses in their relationship with and management of the land.

The environmental movement, which was originally rooted in the biblical motifs of Christianity, and has continued to wrestle with the tension between motifs of wilderness and garden in its attempt to protect the land, has branched into many parallel and at times competing discourses. Whereas the wilderness was at first seen as a kind of harsh desert testing ground, with the rise of Transcendentalism and other forms of environmental discourse, the wilderness was re-assembled as a kind of original Paradise-garden itself. This view of a pure, unblemished Nature, has been influential within the broader environmental movement. Contemporary efforts to move beyond Nature as a domain of authenticity, toward a human-values centered approach demonstrate a swing of the pendulum back toward the more familiar conservationist and agrarian approaches to the environment. From agrarianism, to conservation, preservationism, deep ecology and ecopragmatism, the emerging era of the Anthropocene will continue to see debate and tension over the human relationship to the earth.

While there is certainly a common heritage from which each monastic community draws, each community had its own approach to the land and were influenced by different environmental discourses. Each was enlisted in ways that promised to support the primary purpose of the monastic life of seeking God, and were compatible with the communities’ livelihood, general theological positions and regional cultural context. The monastic communities in this study have engaged and assimilated various environmental discourses through the process that sociologist Stephen Ellingson’s ‘bridging,’ which frames environmental discourses in terms that speak to and affirm core monastic values, and support the monastic way of life. Certain aspects of environmental discourse such as stewardship, care, appreciation of ascetic beauty, and even wild nature find their correspondences within various Christian theologies and monastic lineages.
New Camaldoli, rooted in a tradition that emphasizes solitude, has taken a more preservationist approach to its wildlands which has been influenced by their location in Big Sur, a place dominated by preservationist culture and interests. New Clairvaux, a Trappist monastery with roots in farming, maintains a strong agrarian outlook and practice that values stewardship and right relationships with the land through production and cooperation. Their rural and agricultural setting also reinforces this historical value. Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, also Trappist, has more dramatically shifted from an agricultural and production model of forestry to one of ecological forest management and restoration. They have reduced timber harvests, altered harvest and planting techniques in order to diversify their forest, entered a conservation easement, allowed public access to their lands, and initiated a non-production oriented Oregon White Oak Savannah restoration project. They have thus managed to balance the competing narratives in Oregon of preservationism and production forestry. And Christ in the Desert, the most remote of the four monasteries, prides itself on sustainable energy technology and green building techniques, and are also looking to expand their food production efforts. And while they embrace environmentalism generally, they are skeptical of its more misanthropic tendencies in relation to Catholic teachings on population control, abortion, and the place of human beings on the land.

In the communities explored in this study, none of the extant environmental discourses have altered liturgical practices in any meaningful way, which has led me to argue that they do not practice bricolage, or as Ellingson argues is the blending of environmental discourses with monastic ones to create new institutional or cultural forms. This is because the monasteries maintain a strong commitment to tradition and orthodoxy that other more porous communities have loosened or even sought to subvert (See Taylor). They are also committed to maintaining a tension between Catholic social teachings and the more secular environmentalist views on population, abortion and the role of humans on the earth. While more experimental communities and theologians will continue to test the limits of Christian orthodoxy, it seems unlikely that the communities in this study will break with their long standing monastic and lineage-based heritage to alter their liturgies or adopt more ecocentric

189 Whereas anthropologist Claud Levi-Strauss’s definition of bricolage in Savage Minds (1962) is as a kind of new use for old mythical or cultural materials, I tend to favor Ellingson and Sara McFarland Taylor’s approach which tends to frame bricolage as resulting in novel liturgical praxis or institutions.
rituals for example. This is not to say they are disinterested in ecological sustainability, but that it is not the *primary* discourse driving their relationship to place and landscape.

While the biblical and early monastic experiences of wilderness and desert, like the early American experiences, were of harsh testing grounds and demon infested wastes, contemporary monastic communities have bridged the broader environmental movement’s positive attitudes toward these domains as places of authentic encounter with the divine in the service of the monastic vocation. In contemporary monasticism as in environmental discourse, the aesthetic and mystique of wild nature has replaced the cultivated garden as the symbol of authenticity and divinity. The trial and danger of the desert and wilderness, as we will see in Chapter 5, have rather taken deep meaning as symbols for an internal landscape. The desire to transform the landscape as a sacramental sign of redemption has been mostly internalized. Even New Clairvaux Abbey, the most intensely cultivated of the communities, had its pockets of wildlands, which the monks valued and defended against the wider agricultural setting.

Yet, because Catholic theology is deeply humanist, for the most part monasticism continues to insist that environmental protections should not completely exclude human activities from the landscape as some wilderness preservationists would advocate. They take on the middle ground of conservationism and stewardship which insists on a right relationship between God, human beings and the land through our responsibility to care for and protect creation. This position will always be at odds with certain strains of the environmental movement especially Deep Ecology. A possible exception, being of course New Camaldoli with their more preservationist management policies. Yet they also lived *in* the wilderness area and felt that their structures and cloister garden were a kind of complement to it rather than invasion of it.
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Chapter 3: Lovers of the Place: Stability, Liturgy and Manual Work as Markers of the Monastic Sense of Place

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

–Simone Weil (1952)

“I thank God all the time for how blessed we are to be here, to be in this place... ‘Lovers of the Place’ is what one of our ancient documents says.”

–Monk of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey (2016)

Introduction

It was still dark as I walked to the early morning Office of Vigils from New Clairvaux Abbey’s Guest House during a cool California night in February. There was a hint of light in the eastern sky beyond the walnut and prune orchards, the train tracks and the tiny town of Vina, California. As my feet crunched the gravel of the monastery path, I heard the calls of a robin, and then a wild turkey, and perhaps a night hawk. I could hear frogs in the irrigation ditches, the faint thrum of the distant I-5 freeway, the rumbling of the nearby train. As I approached the Abbey church, the bells rang. There was a chill in the air, and I could see a twinkling planet setting in the western sky. The new moon had set many hours ago, around the time I went to sleep. Even though it was early, I felt invigorated.

I entered the church and sat in my stall between two monks. One of them helped me find the right book and page number for the morning’s Psalms, the seasonal antiphons and responsories. With a blunt tap on his choir stall by the Abbot, we stood and chanted the opening refrain ‘Oh God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me.’ We bowed at the Gloria. We chanted several Psalms, each side of the choir alternating in a call and response. We sat in silence. The Abbot again tapped, and we rose. There were scripture readings, responsories. There was a faint buzz as one of the monk adjusted his hearing aid; a creaky chair, a cough, silence. After the Office ended, the monks filed out of the chapel in silence, and I walked into the still dark morning and back to the Guest House for breakfast, and a day of interviews. These daily rhythms, repeated words, pathways and cues opened to me not just a location on a map, but a place which had come to entwine work and prayer with
heaven and earth.

Sense of a place is a something of a slippery concept in the social sciences, but one that has garnered increasing attention, especially with respect to the process by which sense of place takes shape. There are people and there are places, but how does the almost ineffable bond that connects the two develop, and why? In this chapter I seek to answer this question by looking to what factors contribute to the process of developing an abiding sense of place among Catholic monks in the American West.

I demonstrate that the institutional legacy of the monastic tradition, which values seeking God through particular places provides an important bridge to the contemporary emphasis on localism and place. In his history of the Cistercian community Exordium Parvum, early Cistercian Abbot Stephen Harding (1050-1134) exhorts his fellow monks to be lovers of the place and of the Rule.¹ Through the monastic “vow of stability” which commits monks to the community and the place for life, the land becomes an essential context within which a monk’s formation and identity are carried out.

This monastic theology of place also entails a rich experiential reading of the landscape’s features as spiritual symbols and moral lessons which contribute to the formation of the monks who seek God therein. In addition, monks spend each day immersed in chanted liturgical prayers that act as “hinges” of the day and markers of the seasons. The Divine Office orients the monks to the time of the day and the liturgical and natural seasons of the year, each of which deepens a rootedness to place. Lastly, with their motto of Ora et Labora, the public Offices are punctuated by periods of work, private prayer and study. The monastic practice of manual work not only balances a life of intense prayer, but also contributes to the monk’s sense of place through the memories it attaches to the land, and the spiritual allegories working the land provides. Thus monastic discourses which cognitively orient monks toward developing a relationship to place as a means to seeking God, are forged and enriched through embodied experience and encounter with the land itself as shaped by monastic formation, liturgy and manual work.

Making Sense of Place

In this section, I will outline the general theoretical framework of sense of place and

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how it is formed. In addition, I will look specifically at the religious sense of place and its representational and phenomenological dimensions. First, sense of place or place attachment, as it is sometimes called, is a research focus of increasing interest among social scientists, environmental psychologists, resource managers, and philosophers of environment. The concept has been variously defined, but the most basic question is concerned with understanding what it is that so frequently connects people to place and landscape. And, what processes are involved with that connection. Sense of place, rootedness, and attachment to place seem to be some of the most basic components to human existence. For sedentary and even nomadic peoples, seasons, foods, vistas and locations speak to our identities and our sense of self. As Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz reflects, “To dwell means to belong to a given place.”

For Environmental Psychologists, sense of place or place attachment involves three components: a person or group, a place and a process. The first answers the question of who, the second to what (or who else), and the third how. As Psychologist Maria Lewicka suggests, much more attention has been given to the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of place attachment than to how this attachment is crafted. However, scholars of place have pointed to several predictors of where a deep sense of place is likely to exist. The most obvious being, places where people spend the most time; familiarity; having abundant social relationships nearby; or, the existence of small, walkable, quiet spaces without large buildings and loud traffic; access to green, natural, historic, cultural and aesthetic features are also important self-reported factors. Urban, rural and wilderness settings are all implicated in the human sense of place.

Representational, or more cognitive approaches to place, would suggest that they are created from undifferentiated space. Places are simply constructions of human cultures out of the raw materials of the physical landscape, and the socio-political forces which shape it. The

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3 Cited in Casey, Edward, Getting Back to Place, 109.
4 Lewicka, Maria. ‘Place Attachment: How far have we Come in the Last 40 Years?’ Journal of Environmental Psychology 31, no. 3 (2011): 207-230.
6 Lewicka, Maria. ‘Place Attachment: How far have we Come in the last 40 Years?’ Journal of Environmental Psychology 31, no. 3 (2011): 207-230.
notion that place is simply constructed space is contested by phenomenological approaches, who take place to be primary to our very existence. For philosopher of place Edward Casey, the Enlightenment project abandoned the primacy of place for space and time. Linearized time is a succession of events which unfold in undifferentiated space.\(^7\) And yet as Casey and many others in the phenomenological school argue,

There is no grasping of time without place…Place situates time by giving it a local habitation. Time arises from places and passes (away) between them. It also vanishes into places at its edges and as its edges.\(^8\)

In other words, place is more than a cognitive human construction of undifferentiated space. As Casey beautifully writes, “body and landscape collude in the generation of what can be called ‘placescapes.’”\(^9\) Like the Husserlian ‘Lifeworld’ also suggests, the mind does not come into being independent of the world itself, like the platonic forms, or the Cartesian mind, but inter-dependently co-arise, to use the Buddhist term. Geographer Yi Fu Tuan calls this process whereby humans develop attachment to and affection for place “Topophilia,” the Greek *Topos*, means simply place, space or region, and *philia*, affection or fondness.\(^10\) As we spend more time in a given place, it becomes more and more ingrained in our daily lives. We begin to form habits in relation to place, and our memories also begin to inscribe themselves within the temporal and spatial contours of the place. As Casey writes, “In residing we rely on the body’s capacity for forming ‘habit memories’; that is to say, memories formed by slow sedimentation and realized by the reenactment of bodily motions.”\(^11\) This dialectical and dialogical process put more simply means that our ideas influence place, and places influence our ideas, with neither arrow of influence set as deterministic.

This is especially true of cultures that have dwelt in a given region continuously over many thousands of years. In Keith Basso’s seminal work *Wisdom Sits in Places*, the anthropologist details the stunning variety and beauty of Apache place names, and how, these stories are used to “stalk” the Apache in living a good life.\(^12\) For my purposes in arguing for

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\(^7\) Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 8.
\(^8\) Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 21.
\(^9\) Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 25.
\(^11\) Casey, Edward, *Getting Back to Place*, 117.
\(^12\) Basso, Keith, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 7.
an embodied semiotics that combines phenomenological and semiotic elements to demonstrate a more robust understanding of religious experience of the land, landscape as marker of moral lesson is relevant because while the monks dwell in a sacramental ontology which takes God as the Source of all things, they are also steeped in the biblical symbolism of the Western tradition. While the monks do not have anything as elaborate as the Apache system of place names, the monks too attached memories and experiences to the landscape that often made an appearance in the stories that guide their lives. This is not to say that they projected symbols onto the objective landscape, but attached, through embodied experiences, their ideas, stories and morals to the landscape. Places and people become so deeply entwined that it is difficult to untangle the myths, stories, legends, moral lessons and sacred sites from the people themselves. 

*Place in Christian Spirituality*

Human beings develop unique relationships to place. The world’s religious and spiritual traditions add a sacred dimension to place as well, wherein places provide access to God, religious stories, historic site and encounters with the divine. *Topophilia* has been rendered as a kind of “Geopiety” as theologian Belden Lane calls it, where places and landscape are embedded within a given tradition’s relationship to the numinous or sacred. As French mystic Simon Weil intuits, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Rootedness in place can reap spiritual benefits, but it is also a fundamental part of how we experience the world on a day to day basis.

In religion more broadly, the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment under a certain Bodhi tree, Moses received the law on Mount Sinai, Muhammad recited much of the Qur’an in a certain cave, and Joseph Smith recovered the golden plates on the Hill Cumorah. Each of these theophanies, or encounters with the divine, occur in place, and temper a given tradition’s future relationship to it. Diana Eck, in her study of Hindu sacred sites and religious practices such as pilgrimage and festival, calls this a “sacred geography,” with temples, shrines or natural features calling to mind sacred events, theophanies or

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13 Here again, I remind the reader that I am using the word ‘sacred’ to frame notions of a Transcendent realm, or to other worldly beings referred to variously as God, gods, local spirits or ancestors. Of course in the Judeo-Christian tradition which this study’s subjects adhere to, the sacred refers specifically to God, creator of the universe, who is omnipresent, omnipotent and omnibenevolent.


15 Lane, Belden, *Landsapes of the Sacred*, 7.
characters within the Hindu cosmology.  

The ontological dimensions of what constitutes a sacred landscape will be addressed in the following chapter, suffice it to say here, that the sacred sites of religious cosmologies contribute significantly to the theoretical underpinnings of place attachment, sense of place and landscape meaning.

And yet, there has always been something of an ambivalent relationship in the wider Christian tradition toward place as an end in itself.  

As theologian Belden Lane writes,  

In scripture and the history of spirituality alike, one finds a continuing tension between place and placelessness, between the local and the universal. God is here—in this place at Bethlehem, Lourdes, Iona, even Boston and Salt Lake City. But, at the same time, God is not here—not limited exclusively to this place, not only here.  

Christians take God for granted as an ontological reality which orders the cosmos and gives meaning to human existence (See Ch. 4), but they also affirm the reality of the human soul as a kind of inner landscape, or place where God can be discovered and encountered.

In the introduction, I distinguished between two threads of Catholic spirituality: Cataphatic and Apophatic. These two threads will be important in understanding the monastic relationship to place and landscape, but also in describing the inner dimensions of monastic spirituality. In its cataphatic mode, practitioners embrace the particularities of place, the words, language, symbols and metaphors about the divine: The Incarnation, a morsel of bread in the Eucharist, a church, a saint’s tomb, a holy well, etc. Lane writes that this tendency in religious experience is “centripetal” meaning its energy moves inward, toward a center.  

Theologian of place John Inge, also suggests that this incarnational aspect of Christianity speaks to a strong Christian theology of embodiment and place, and writes, “Just as there is no experience of place without body, so there is no experience of body without place.”

On the other hand, the early desert monastics were known for their Apophatic spirituality. Apophatic experience is placeless, imageless and negative.  

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16 Eck, Diana L., India: A Sacred Geography.
18 Lane, Belden, Landscapes of the Sacred, 242.
19 Lane, Belden, Landscapes of the Sacred, 242.
21 Lane, Belden, Landscapes of the Sacred, 241.
image and the metaphor as stand in for God, and insists on raw unspeakable encounter. In this view, God is ultimately ungraspable, beyond words and human understanding, and the spiritual practices of asceticism, silent meditation and chanting the Psalms act as a gateway to God’s unnamable presence.²² However, it should be noted that even the placelessness of apophatic spirituality developed in a specific place, namely the deserts of the Middle East, and were consistently referenced by later monastics as the marker of an authentic monasticism. Lane suggests that the development of this negative spirituality among the early monastics in the sheer harshness and silence of the desert biome, was no coincidence.

The vastness is centrifugal, pushing out from the center into the placelessness of infinity, which the monks sought to grasp.

In contemporary Christian spiritual ecology, the historical monastic affection for place has not gone unnoticed. Theologian Douglas Christie’s “Contemplative Ecology” looks to the monastic Topos for inspiration in an era of climate change, a time of dis-place-ment and Solastalgia.²³ For Christie we live day to day in a world of soul loss and spiritual crisis, which he argues is symptomatic of the broader ecological crisis. Christie sees place-making in the Benedictine octave, as a contemporary spiritual practice that promises to restore our neglected connections to particular places, and the world as a whole.²⁴

**Place and Monastic Identity, Stability and Formation**

In this section, I will elaborate on the roots of the monastic sense of place, which emerges from their unique vow of stability, the process of formation, and elements of the landscape as a kind of moral lesson. For monks in the Benedictine and Trappist lineage, taking a vow of stability is the first step toward developing a monastic sense of place and becoming a monk.

*The Vow of Stability*

Brother William was a forester like me. He entered Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey in the early 1990s and quickly joined the monastery’s forest crew, which managed over 800 acres of mostly Douglas fir forest on the Abbey’s land. As we walked north along a small monastery road, we talked about his work in the woods with Brother Clarence, the monastery

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forester for some 30 years, who retired at age 84, and who had recently died. As we talked, Brother William showed me some of the places where he had planted trees, or removed the invasive grass False Broom (*Orobanche Sp.*), which now haunted him every time he went on walks or hikes. We walked along familiar paths that were his favorite for prayer, or just getting away from his studies. He would often seek out places where he could see the layered ridgelines of the coastal mountain range far in the distance because it was in these wide open vistas that he felt God speaking to him most powerfully. At one point, as we climbed a small rise, in a grassy field, he said, “The land was really important for me when I first came. When I had open time it was a way to go out and pray, get away a bit.”

Brother Williams experience on the land was not unique. I often started my interviews with the question, “how does this land support your monastic vocation?” Each monk answered differently of course, but they would often start by telling me that to be a monk in the Benedictine or Trappist lineage, was to seek God, and to seek God in a particular place. It helps of course if that place is beautiful, quiet and relatively remote, but the monk is one who commits his or her life to *Stability*, to one community and one place. As one monk put it, “The men make the place, and the place makes the men.” A monastic tethers the body as a way of freeing the soul from outside distraction.

All professed monks in the Benedictine and Trappist lineages take a vow of stability that binds them to their monastic community for life. Stability, from the Latin *Stabilis* for standing firm, is an essential aspect of what is called Cenobitic, or community-based monasticism. According to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which all monks in this study follow whether Benedictine of Trappist, cenobitic monasticism, communal monasticism committed to place, a Rule, and obedience to an Abbot was the ideal “school” (*schola*) for the spiritual craft. The Rule of Saint Benedict is clear that the wandering monk, or *Gyrovague*, is not a good monk:

These [Gyrovagues] spend their whole lives tramping from province to province, staying as guests in different monasteries for three or four days at a time. Always on the move, with no stability, they indulge their own wills and succumb to
the allurements of gluttony, and are in every way worse than the Sarabaites.\textsuperscript{25} Of the miserable conduct of all such it is better to be silent than to speak.\textsuperscript{26} The hermit life had its appeal, Benedict himself lived as a hermit for many years, but was for those who had a heightened sense of discipline or had achieved a higher level of holiness. As one monk told me, cenobitic monasticism was a “school for slow learners,” a community of imperfect people, living together with all their human defects and problems. This is the monk’s path to sanctity. Stability acts as a counterforce to our imagination wherein the contemplative grass may be greener somewhere else.

Simply put by Brother Adso of New Camaldoli Hermitage, “That’s what monks are, they are people who love the place where they live. They sink deep roots into the place where they live.” A monk’s identity is bound to the place where he chooses to enter, and that place becomes the battlefield upon which he wages spiritual warfare with his demons, vices and weaknesses. Put slightly differently by another monk of Christ in the Desert, “with our vow of stability we belong to the place where we join, that place becomes the locus of your spirituality and the center of your spirituality.” This sense of belonging has just as much to do with the history of the order or the culture of the particular monastic lineage of the monk, as it did with the character and beauty of the place.

Thus, as discussed in Chapter 2, the classical Benedictine monastery was a self-contained community that drew from the wider feudal landscape for its economic sustenance and viability. Whereas feudal peasants were often attached to the lands they worked by heredity, the monk became attached to it through their vow of stability. As Brother Adso of New Camaldoli taught me:

> We actually go backwards and make ourselves slaves to the land and to the place and find freedom there instead of working the land to be free of it to get our independence. We become slaves of the land, I love that. And even the idea of Stability, I’m going to stay here. I’m not going to go anywhere else. There’s a certain kind of indentured-ness about that, but it’s freely chosen in a Wendell Berry kind of way.

\textsuperscript{25} According to the Rule of Saint Benedict, Sarabaites, are a third type of monk after Cenobites, Hermits. They lived in one place, but not under a Rule or under a Superior.

Bridging the monastic notion of place with Agrarian writer Wendell Berry’s emphasis on small farming communities, Brother Adso has deftly connected his own tradition with an emerging popularity of place and small scale farming. Peculiar to a contemporary obsession with freedom of movement, choice, and diversity of options, the monastic vow of stability requires a lifelong commitment to the community and the place. Within this self-chosen “imprisonment” the land becomes a “palestra de libertad” as Brother Adso called it, a gymnasium, or playground of spiritual liberty.

Monks possess a unique but equally valid vocation with the wider Catholic Church body. Unlike a parish priest, or the mendicant orders, who are called to a life of preaching in parishes and other ministries, the monk is called to distance himself from the concerns of the world, to quiet his mind from the busy-busy of endless tasks and to pray for the world, seeking God within, in order to bring God closer to the world. As Brother Severinus of New Clairvaux Abbey taught me:

The difference between us and the mendicant movement [Friars] is that in the Rule of Saint Benedict there is first of all an emphasis on a place, a stability. We take a vow which means we belong to a community, to the place. We don’t wander about….In the Benedictine tradition you’re rooted in the place, and you are to be a lover of the place, to seek God in the place and not elsewhere. As valid as other ministries might be, our ministry is to live faithfully a common life, here.

While Francis admonished his brothers to live like Christ without a single personal possession, the monastic vocation and way of life requires certain amenities:

And if you put your roots down, then you are going to need a building, and you are going to need some kind of property. And if the concept is you are going to be around a thousand years, a few monasteries, in actual fact, have been around that long, even longer, it just follows we’re going to take care of the buildings, the land.

Stewardship and best management practices follows from a long view of history where monks are temporary caretakers of the land, who will someday be buried on the property, and hope to pass it on to the next generation of monks. This long view of history, in both directions, looking to the monastic tradition for guidance, and caring for the place that will be inherited by your brothers in the future, roots the monk in place physically and historically.
The monastic identity is rooted in their own orders and their commitment to the places in which they felt God has called them to live out their lives.

Sitting in my temporary monastic cell in the infirmary at Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, Brother Abo related the importance of his land to his identity as a Trappist monk:

The land is important. You have to remember the Cistercians are known as, and this goes all the way back to our founders, lovers of the land and of the brethren. The land is very important, we are not city dwellers, and you will never find one of our monasteries in the city. We have to have an expansion of land.

An expanse of land originally served the livelihood needs of the monks, but for Brother Abo it was also for beauty, to nourish the inner landscape. His strong “we” statements exuded a pride in his tradition, and guided his approach to the future:

Our poverty is not a Franciscan poverty, our poverty is communal. You want to build that which will last because you’re not thinking just of yourself, you’re thinking of your brothers who come after you.

This statement was not only an explanation to me, but also hid a subtle defense against seeing mendicant poverty as a superior spiritual vocation, a debate that raged from the advent of the Mendicants with Saint Francis well into the Enlightenment. The Benedictine monk as I was told, possesses everything, but owns nothing, not even his own body.

Formation

This institutional marker of Benedictine and Trappist monasticism, which commits the monk to the place and community of his vows, is followed by a rigorous process of formation wherein the monk puts off his old identity, ideas, and habits for those of the monk. During my interviews, it was clear that just as the monastic disciplines of chanting the Divine Office, attending daily Mass, daily lectio divina, spiritual direction and study were an essential component of monastic formation, so too was access to and time spent on the monastery’s land. The ability to wander and explore the properties was essential to working out the kinks and growing pains of a monk’s transition out of the world and into the contemplative life.

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27 Umberto Eco’s novel The Name of the Rose (1980) captures this debate between Franciscans and Benedictines during a conversation between Father William (a Friar) and the Cluniac Benedictine Abbot of the grand monastery, who is busy accounting for the monastery’s lavish altar chalices. See pp. 142-155.
Sitting on the Banks of the Chama River, Brother Malachi of Christ in the Desert and I were having a lively discussion. He was very committed to what he called “wilderness monasticism” and had tried many different monasteries before committing to Christ in the Desert, each slightly more remote, from a suburb in Massachusetts, to a rural area of Oklahoma, and finally Christ in the Desert. He had come to know that he was committed to becoming a Benedictine monk, but the place where he would live the rest of his life was the final crucial part of that decision. While the Rule was everywhere the same, it was practiced differently by different congregations and orders in different places. He explained,

You can think about the Rule being incarnate in a certain place versus another place. Because it’s the same Rule, I mean the monks are pretty much doing the same thing: It’s Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, everywhere. Think about it just in terms of silence, the way that a monastery will incarnate Saint Benedict’s teaching about silence is different.

Each monastery possessed a unique culture of the Rule based on their Order and lineage, each developing a unique *incarnation* of the Benedictine or Trappist life. Brother Malachi intentionally used the Christian language of incarnation in reference to the central event of Christianity, when God became human in the person of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. But what further drew him to Christ in the Desert was the deep natural silence, beauty and remoteness from the world the place offered, and the rigorous attention the community gave to the Rule and the performance of the Divine Office.

When a monk like Malachi enters the monastery, he must go through what is called a process of *formation*. The person, accustomed to life in the world must learn how to be a monk. Having visited the monastery on several occasions as an observer, he then gets permission to enter as a *Postulant*, a sort of trial period that usually lasts for about 4-6 months, wherein the monk tries on the monastic life, wearing a simple habit. Then, he will enter the *Novitiate* which depending on the Order can last from 1-2 years. After he completes his Novitiate, he will enter into ‘simple ‘vows and become what’s called a junior monk, taking his first serious try at the monastic life. Then, after another 2-3 years, with a solemn induction ritual that enacts his death and rebirth into the monastic life, he will take his ‘solemn vows’ which bind him to the community and the place for the rest of his life.
The process of formation is as much about reading, study and prayer, as it is about wandering the monastic properties, wrestling with the demons that refused to stay behind. Many of the older monks, who could not walk with me on the properties, recounted their days as spry young monks who would take long walks on Sunday afternoons after Mass, or when there was no work for them to do on a slow weekday afternoon.

Sitting with Brother Berengar, a monk of Guadalupe Abbey, he explained how he had a very difficult time as a young monk. He struggled fiercely between his call to monasticism and a more active vocation as a parish priest. Making his final vows at Guadalupe he said, was a decision made in darkness, but that during those early years, the land held him in a very important way.

Those years were very formative for me. Cistercian are called to be ‘lovers of the place,’ and so I learned from experience what it means to be a lover of the place…My whole soul was really formed by the woods, and Saint Bernard says, I think this is a paraphrase, ‘beeches and oak trees surrounding Clairvaux have taught me more about God than any book.’ That was the experience I had.

Bernard of Clairvaux, the early Abbot of the Cistercian reforms, was speaking directly to the importance of the place in forming the soul of the monk, and Brother Berengar found that experience to be deeply soothing of his anxiety over his vocation, even if he never fully reached clarity. This process of becoming rooted in the place through monastic formation, was an essential aspect of living the monastic life. There seemed to be a quiet ebb and flow between the monastic vocation and the surroundings. The place was “ingredient,” as one monk put it, to who they are.

As we sat among tall Italian Cypress, girthy Redwoods, and several 100-plus year old walnut trees in the Abbey Cloister arboretum, Brother Adelmo, a young monk at New Clairvaux Abbey compared his formation to the growth of a tree:

You become part of the land. Our vow of stability grounds us, and an image that was really helpful for me was the idea of these trees [points] taking root, you know we’ve got thirty feet of top soil, and the roots go deep…so that was the image of stability that I had. The longer I stay here, the more I can see myself growing in ways I never thought possible. It’s of course not always easy, staying in one place, but the [longer] you stay the [the higher you can] reach.
Time spent on the land, like time spent in the cell, the library, or the chapel shapes the monastic personality to the place and aids in the process of formation. Becoming part of the land, means that Brother Adelmo felt that he was not living on top of the land, but dwelling within it, and drawing from the elements of the landscape, he compared himself to some of its most ancient residents.

Monks who are attuned to this process, reported that it had unexpected results. Sitting on the banks of the Chama River, Brother Venantius excitedly recounted how the night before, a pair of Canada Geese, flocks of which visit the monastery every year at this time, had begun introducing their brood to the water, it must have been their first lesson, he said. The stars, the canyon walls, the birds and the ever changing river reminded him of the land-based roots of motifs of Christian scripture, and helped him to feel God’s presence. Having spent time on the east coast, he loved the openness of the American West, and its impact on the soul, which he said had the effect of opening the chest. But what he did not expect, was what the land invoked from him, a short time after arriving:

I would say within two or three months, I could feel the impact of the land on my soul. Um, ok, we are not moving at light speed anymore. Within the first six months or a year of being here, I noticed a tremendous amount of praise coming out of me. It wasn’t chosen. I couldn’t stop thanking God and praising him for majesty, I would say probably is the right word.

Becoming part of the land, or taking note of what feelings the land evokes, was just as much a part of the formation process as studying the Rule, or memorizing scripture. In fact, staying put was so important to one monk of New Clairvaux, that when I mentioned to him in passing that at a monastery I had visited the monks occasionally took a short backpack trip, he responded sharply:

I really don’t look for satisfaction or contentment outside of the community practices, and that’s a relief, that’s freedom. Everything I have and need is right here. I don’t need to look anymore, so I can free myself. That searching energy can be diverted into the most essential aspects of my existence, which is connection and communion with God.
To be a lover of the place was not just an aesthetic attachment to the land, though it certainly was that too, but a spiritual discipline that used the precincts of the monastic landscape and cycles of the Divine Office as a ladder with which one ascends into God’s presence.

Another interesting dimension of the monastic sense of place related to the early years of formation, was the frequency with which the language of romantic love was used to describe the relationship to the place. One monk stated bluntly, “I just fell in love with the place the first day.” This language was particularly acute for monks in the Trappist lineage. This is perhaps because they are more conscience and devoted to the writings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who more than perhaps any Catholic writer, compared the relationship of God and the soul to that between two lovers. Bernard wrote nearly 100 sermons on the Song of Songs, a book in the Old Testament of Hebrew love poetry which makes no reference to God whatever. However, for Bernard, and many mystics before and after him, this language of erotic longing and love was a powerful metaphor for the yearning we feel for God. This is of course not to say that land is a stand-in for God, but that through this powerful language of spiritual union, the admonition to become a lover of the place takes on a certain spiritual urgency.

Sitting in my cell at Guadalupe Abbey with Brother Benno, a Trappist monk, I asked him what had drawn him to this particular monastery. Reflecting for a moment, he finally said:

You know in the earliest documents, so we’re talking 12th century, of the order, they talk about Cistercians as ‘lovers of the place.’ And they really mean place in the sense of the land, the place itself. I had not read the 12th century documents when I came the first time to visit, I just came on retreat. And I would say it was like falling in love with a person. So it was totally irrational, but it was a very powerful force. Perhaps it was the first time I ever experienced a place as a person. It was definitely that, so it was just being haunted by a place.

Brother Benno said he would go on to understand the importance of being a lover of the place in the monastic tradition, but that his first experience with the place was a “powerful force” that solidified his conviction to enter the rigors of monastic life as if it were a kind of matrimony between himself, the community and the land.
Brother Alinardo was one of the younger monks I interviewed at Guadalupe, but even in his short time as a Postulant and novice, he had noticed that the land had begun to filter into and through his own daily habits. He reflected,

There’s this connection with the land; and I would say more than anything, how I would define it is as a relationship… it’s just letting the land look at me, and me look at the land. And I know its sinking in. I mean I can’t tell you specifically, but I look out the window when I’m brushing my teeth, and just the change of the landscape, you know, with the seasons, it sinks into you. It’s probably like a woman you’ve been married to fifty years, you just kind of come to know each other from living together, and maybe you don’t have to say much; so the land is like that.

While he spent long hours studying, and learning the intricacies of the Divine Office, Brother Alinardo believed that he was “being held” by the land in such a way that it was sinking deeply into who he was becoming as a contemplative. The place is not just a background for the practice of prayer, though some monks certainly affirmed this notion, it is the soil out of which the monk is to grow and develop his spiritual life.

Because the monastic life involves so much attention to ritual, study, liturgy and prayer, the land acts as a kind of check against which the monk can hold himself. Sitting with Brother Jorge, I learned what this looks like in his daily practice:

I think our life of solitude and prayer has a danger of becoming Neoplatonist or, getting lost in an abstract spiritual world. You need to be reminded to keep a balance, that we’re flesh and blood as well, and to see the birds so close to the trees mating, rearing little babies, and to realize that no matter how holy you go in the spiritual life, and close to union with God or the divine in this life we’re always going to be creatures. We can’t forget that, when we forget that, it becomes a disaster. So it’s important for me to go and see a mother deer with her two fawns. I might be, after reading Saint Bernard, doing lectio Divina, having a very profound interior experience of divine union with God, but I need to go for a walk and see the deer with her fawns to realize that I’m a human being that’s going to die, that’s going to live like those fawns, struggle to live, and then die. You can forget when you’re doing this union with God type of thing and prayer, you can forget. When your body kicks in, then it can be a shock. Whether its sickness, or whether its death, you think this
shouldn’t be happening to me, this shouldn’t be happening to me. So connection with creation, being so close to us reminds us. Ya we could have a very, very high spiritual experience and union with God, but we’re not angels, and we need to like Saint Bernard says, when you feel close to God, that’s when you should throw yourself down into the dirt to get balanced. And when you’re in the dirt and the muck, you should throw yourself at the feet of the resurrected Christ. So you see, he’s constantly bringing it back to the center again, not to go to either extreme.

To be reminded that we are flesh and blood as Brother Jorge says, is to be reminded that we are embodied, and as John Inge stated above, there is no experience of body without place, and no experience of place without the body. Even as monks aspire to holiness, that holiness is grounded in the very earth upon which they tread. The monastic sense of place, rooted in their commitment to stability takes shape through these early experiences in formation.

While I am focused here on place as the surroundings, monastic spaces, land, setting etc. Formation and sense of place were also essentially community-based. A monk becomes a brother in a particular community with all the eccentricities and personalities that involves. While it often felt to me like the monks did not speak to each other all that often, there was an almost nonverbal literacy that came with sharing space with several dozen other men. I was amazed by a story Brother Abo told me while we sat in my cell one evening between Vespers and Compline, and I asked him whether he got to speak with the other monks very often.

You know it’s a good question, because we actually, you’re right there isn’t a whole lot of talking, but it’s interesting you get to know [each other]. I’ll give you an example, this was before I went to Rome. My office was where the chapter room and the library [are now]. There was an alcove where we had our mailboxes. Well the Abbot, at the back of his office was a stairwell going down, and it looked into what we called the abbots garden, and it was a pear orchard. Well, I could sit in my office, I could be reading or studying or whatever, and I could hear the monks walking by, and not only could I tell who it was, but I could tell how they were feeling. I was a little dubious as to how he knew how they were feeling, if they never talked, but nevertheless, the monks all seemed to know everything about each other’s backgrounds,
expertise, quirks, talents and bad habits, all aspects of developing a sense of place that includes not just love of the land, but of the community as well.

*Landscapes of Moral Lesson*

Seeking God in the place, often means that the place teaches one how to be a monk. Again, as one monk told me, “The monks make the place and the place makes the monk.” This quip reflected the importance of the place in the formation of the monks, and their ongoing journey toward God. In this section I will discuss the ways in which the monastic sense of place, rooted in the vow of stability, and seeking God in the place, is enriched through ‘habit memory’ attachments that teach moral lessons to the monks through their experiences on the land.

As we walked the monastery grounds and trails, the monks would often point to markers of memories, or things that reminded them of spiritual lessons. When we finally reached the bottom of Limekiln Creek Canyon from the steep makeshift trail that descends from New Camaldoli Hermitage, Brother Adso, pointed to the abundant clovers that colonized the ground in circular clumps. He bent down and picked one, and said, “When it closes back in like this, you know it’s time to get back up.” A couple of guests had gotten lost in the canyon, and he wanted to make sure I knew how to get back. I nodded, and we continued to work our way to the canyon floor. A pragmatic rather than spiritual sign, the position of the clovers was associated with the approaching evening time, and it became a marker of the time to start heading back for the monastery.

In other cases, the elements of the landscape took on more allegorical or spiritual significance. As Brother Michael and I were walking through the Cloister Garden of New Camaldoli Hermitage in December of 2015, he bent down to look at a small flower and said abruptly, “Therese of Lisieux, one of the mystics, she says God has need of the glorious big flowers, but also the tiniest flowers.” The existence of the small flowers among the big, was a lesson not only in humility, but in the expansive and universal love God has for all things, even the tiniest of organisms.

Even within the cloister, places of significant memories stuck out in the monks’ minds, and were attached to a lesson they had learned. On another occasion, as Brother Brendan and I walked along the road that leads to the Hermitage, he related to me how a particular place taught him a lesson every time he passed by it:
I remember in 2008 I was going to have this really difficult meeting, I mean really difficult meeting. And I really believe God lives within me, and I remember being in my cell going down to the office for this meeting it was during the day, and I remember just saying ‘ok God just be with me God,’ so you know here I am believing God really lives within me and my prayer was God be with me. Again it’s not that I hear voices, but I feel like I got to a certain spot, and I could take you back to the place where it actually happened, and I heard God saying: ‘wait a minute, I just want you to stay with me.’

He remembers the exact place it occurred, and when he walks by inevitable thinks of the small but significant lesson. The monastic sense of place is thus populated by these small habit memories wherein the monks attach memories to places which then reinforce certain theological or spiritual lessons.

Sometimes it was not an image at all, but rather a sound that triggered a moral lesson. Walking with Brother Aymaro along the banks of Deer Creek at New Clairvaux Abbey, we could hear a train passing in the distance. I commented that I was surprised the monastery was so close to the train. He responded,

It’s a very quiet place, except for the train. I was taught to use the train as a reminder to pray. So every time I hear the train, I pray for the world [laughs]. So we try to use it in a positive way. But you will be surprised how often a train passes by, so you will be praying a lot [laughs].

The train was a common noise that I don’t really associated with anything other than trains and their cargo or passengers. However, for Brother Aymaro, the train’s pervasive presence had turned the potential disturbance to their silence into an impetus to pray.

Common elements of the landscape often pointed to deeper spiritual lessons for the monks. Sitting near the entry way to the refectory at Christ in the Desert Abbey, Brother Columba pointed out across the broad Chama River Valley to the trees that lined the opposite cliff sides. He said:

Look at all those trees. They’re coming out of the rocks. How do they do that? Whoever thought of making trees coming out of rocks? What kind of moisture are they getting? What kind of nourishment are they getting? If they can live coming out of a rock, which is very basic, what about me? What do I need? Do I need to live in a
fancy apartment and have all kind of money and cars and Rolls Royce and all the latest everything to be happy, to survive, or to find God? No. If they can do it, I can do it.

The moral lesson is applied directly to the monk’s spiritual life. Brother Columba, was seeking to teach me about the way a monk lives in a place like this and how the land impacts his life as a monk. He derived a simple lesson about perseverance from the trees drawing on basic elements of symbolism that derived from the trees physical qualities: growth, perseverance, hardiness. These elements then further rooted him in the place as they reinforced the meaning he had come to make through them.

For the monks, God upholds and sustains all things from moment to moment, thus the entire created order can potentially teach one how to live in harmony with the creator. Nature is itself a kind of domain wherein human beings can seek solace, peace and rootedness, not unlike much of 20th century nature writing influenced by Transcendentalism. The physical world spoke of spiritual truths as Emerson wrote. Unlike the fallen world of the medievals which was in need of agricultural redemption, for contemporary monks, wild nature most closely taps into the divine intention and beauty. For Brother Daig at Guadalupe Abbey, the natural world modeled the kind of peace he sought within, and spending time outside was a kind of moral lesson in how to be a better monk. His own soul was a kind of wilderness in need of taming. As he related:

Our minds get into spaces where things are off kilter—we’ve got to change this, or fix that. But, what is true is that God has it all in His hands, and we just have to trust. So part of the reason I go walking every day is just to, what I call it is, participation in the stillness. That’s what I try to do, that’s what I try to be when I am walking. Because the water and the dirt and the trees and the animals, they can’t not do God’s will, which is to be at peace, to be calm, and at rest; and that’s the focus for the monk too, is to try and understand that.

This reference to creation as good, as modeling Saintliness will be discussed as a feature of the monastic sacramental ontology, but also, the land models a kind of moral peacefulness that he strives to emulate and practice within. Again, any perception that creation was bad, bloody, or harsh, was a human perception being projected onto the goodness of the world and
God. Brother Salvatore and many other monks also spoke of this essential goodness which creation models for them.

For Brother Abo, the question of wilderness as dark, or dangerous was a human concept, describing the moral dimensions of the liturgy and the seasons as they unfold on the land, he stated:

And that’s the lovely part of when you experience the cycle of the seasons because you get to experience that and you begin to more deeply understand when you talk about the ‘dark night of the soul’ what we’re talking about is appearance because, see it appears that everything is so dark, because it appears that Jesus is not with us, but he is. So the seasons to me are so [pause] what’s the word so representative not just of life but of spiritual life, not just of bodily life but of the spiritual life, because in the spirit we’re never static. You go up or down that ladder you don’t stand on the rung. You have your spring, everything is so absolutely beautiful, and you come to your summer which is nice and it starts kind drying out, but then you have the aging beauty of the autumn, and then you have the death of winter. But it’s not over, it’s not over, that’s not the end, there’s a spring that comes after.

Darkness and danger are human representations projected onto the land, which is ultimately good because it comes from God. The seasons on the land point to the seasons of the soul, and model for the monks how the human being continually dies and resurrects to their old selves.

Brother William, who was the monastery forester at Guadalupe for many years, also couldn’t shake his training that certain invasive species were inherently bad. The environmental discourses around ecological restoration had taught him that invasive species were foreign to the Abbey’s property, which until 2010, did not have any formal policy on removing them. So, whenever he passed them he felt the disturbing presence as a menace to the health of the forest. He related, “My walks can be disturbed by my work as a forester especially when I see a place just covered in false broom and you think, God, it’s not like its ugly, it’s been ingrained in me how bad it is.” So perhaps not a spiritual lesson, but certainly a reflection of contemporary ecological science’s moral authority, projected onto the land, and perhaps also illustrating the danger in learning the names of each species, one learns which ones do not belong.
The attachment of memories through day to day walking, tasks and dwelling, and ascribing elements of the landscape with moral dimensions, served to enrich and bolster the monastic sense of place especially during the formation period of the monks. This process was inseparable from the liturgical seasons of the monastic calendar, which I will now address.

**A Liturgical Sense of Place**

Whenever I arrived at a new monastic community, it would take several days for my body to adjust to the rigors of the monastic day. Rising early in the dark and finding my way to the washroom in a new room, making my way to the monastery chapel from my cell. Taking my place in the choir, a monk would usually help me find my place in the psalter, or book of antiphons. Observing the other monks, I could usually follow along fairly seamlessly, standing, bowing and sitting with the rest of the community, alternating lines in the psalmody. Sometimes I would make a mistake, bowing too long, sitting too early, starting a melody a moment too soon, or hitting a wrong note. But after a few days, I didn’t have to think about it, and my body effortlessly moved from place to place, from movement to movement, and my voice blended into the body of the monastery choir. In this section I will focus on the liturgical dimensions of the monastic sense of place which generates a habitus around the symbolisms of the darkness and light associated with the times of day and seasons of the year.

The Greek origins of the word *liturgy* translate as “the work of the people” from *leito*, people, and *ergos*, work. In contemporary religious parlance, liturgy is most often used to refer to Jewish and Christian worship services. Roman Catholic liturgy is most often associated with Sunday Mass, where the Church gathers to read scripture, pray for the world and partake of the Eucharist. The liturgical life of the church has both annual and daily cycles. The liturgical calendar cycles through the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (referred to as the Pascal mystery) punctuated by various solemnities, feasts, memorials and remembrances. Starting in November with Advent, the Christian calendar passes through Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and various periods of what is referred to as Ordinary Time, which are those weeks between major solemnities.

In addition, the Church, through its various Orders and clergy performs what is called the Liturgy of the Hour, or Divine Office, which is prayed seven times a day at hours
developed mostly from Benedictine monastic tradition. The root of the word Office literally means work-doing, from the Latin *Opus*, and only within the last 200 years has it meant a place to conduct business. Traditionally only the clergy and professed religious were required to say the Divine Office, and especially contemplative monastic orders such as Benedictine and Trappists have preserved the Gregorian mode of chant that was developed in the 4th and 5th centuries by Pope Gregory the Great.

The liturgy is in a way, a kind of spiritual ecology within which the monks dwell and carry forward from their monastic forbearers. Comparing the liturgy to a forest, German Priest Romano Guardini wrote “The liturgy creates a universe brimming with fruitful spiritual life, and allows the soul to wander about in it at will and to develop itself there.” In other words, the liturgy, like the formation process, is fused to the place in which one carries it out. The daily repetition of the Divine Office, which shapes the body and the person, is in turn shaped by the contours and character of the place. For this reason, it became clear that the monastic sense of place was also a *liturgical* sense of place.

These two concentric circles of the diurnal and annual cycles of the church provide the structure within which monastics shape their day to day *habitus*. By this I mean that daily regimented repetition of the Office forms the monk’s body and person to the liturgy, and each Psalm repeated on a weekly or semi-weekly basis offers an opportunity to examine the contours of one’s soul against the wisdom of ancient religious poetry. Walking from cell to chapel, to refectory to library. Walking the land. Hearing the bells mark the hours. Entering the chapel, dipping one’s fingers in the holy water, bowing to the altar and tabernacle. Standing and sitting in one’s choir stall.

*Seasonal Liturgy*

For the monks that I interviewed, there was blending between the seasons of the year and the times of day wherein liturgy and land complemented each other. As monks are busy forming themselves in the theology and history of the monastic tradition, they are also learning the rhythms and cycles of the places they call home. As one monk put it, “being with the land is a very grounding thing for your spirituality, and you get a feel for the rhythms of life, the seasons.” For Brother Berengar, for whom the land was so important

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during his difficult formation process, the liturgy was *populated* by his experiences on the land:

I found I would bring into choir my hikes, my experience in the woods. If I could get an afternoon to hike up to the ridge, the top was very different then, the trees were much smaller. On a clear day seeing Mount Hood, or just discovering a new path. Seeing this time of year the Trillium in bloom, or the wild iris, the daisies and wild roses.

Struggling with his vocation and reflecting on the impetus in the monastic tradition to become a ‘lover of the place,’ Brother Berengar began to pay more and more attention to the seasons and cycles of the place, and the land began to bleed into his experience of the liturgy, which he admitted he often found rather boring. The changes in the liturgical cycles, and the changes in the seasons, bled together in ways that enriched his experience of both. On one occasion, watching the leaves fall from tall maple trees in the autumn from the window of the Abbey hermitage during Mass he said he began to realize something:

Everything flows from liturgical life. That is the real Catholic praxis, that in the early church it all flowed from the liturgy. I bring my life into the liturgy; my experiences with the woods, or when I was the gardener working in the soil watching things grow.

My time alone in the woods helped me see what’s being done here in the liturgy. What is being done, according to Catholic theology, is the slow reconciliation of God and world.\(^29\) The liturgy is a yearly unfolding of the central events of Christian history and the Paschal mystery, but the celebration of that calendar is intimately tied to the cycles of the seasonal calendar, and for all of the communities in this study, the cycles of land and liturgy are a seamless whole.

As we walked along a paved road that cut New Clairvaux’s orchards into geometric blocks, Brother Remigio showed me how to prune the branches of a prune tree so that it took on the shape of a chalice. This shape not only reminded young monks of the Eucharist, it also provided optimal light conditions for the ripening of the plums. The branches were all naked in the dormancy of winter, and as we walked and talked, he shared memories, and technical details about the proper management of these trees that he cared for so deeply, looking back

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fondly on his 30 years of work as the orchard manager. Working in the orchard was, despite the noise of the tractors and harvesters, meditative work, where one could lose oneself in the repetition of tasks. Sometimes he let the meditative aspects of farming get the better of him. One early morning, when he was preparing the soil with a tiller, deep in thought, he crashed into an irrigation ditch. Luckily he was not hurt, and the tractor suffered only cosmetic damage.

Even though it could be draining and difficult work, there was a spirituality to farming that had to do with the resonances between inner and outer landscapes, and between the agricultural cycle and the liturgical one. Pointing out an historic section of prune orchard he abruptly said, “You look out from the living area and during the blossom time this would be all white except the trunks of the trees at the bottom, beautiful.”

“That is beautiful, I would like to see that,” I responded. We continued past row after row of naked walnut and prune trees and he again spoke softly, but enthusiastically,

“Each season has its own beauty, and that’s very much part of the spirituality of farming.”

“The seasonal aspect?” I asked.

“Yes, each season the trees go to sleep and then come back to life again, they resurrect, bearing fruit.” We continued walking in silence. For Brother Remigio the orchard was the perfect marker of the Paschal mystery that was celebrated in the liturgy and his sense of place was tied to the unfolding of the agricultural cycle. Prune trees, with their chalice shape, and the cycles between death and life rooted and reinforced the theological aspects of the liturgical cycle. Monastic work had its own allegorical dimensions, which will be explored below.

Each season brought new lessons, and pointed to the spiritual seasons the monks themselves might be passing through. Brother Bertrand of Christ in the Desert, during my April 2016 visit explained that:

Singing the last couple days with the strong winds we’ve been having and that sense of we’re moving on towards Pentecost. The wind of the spirit and is revealing something. So it’s just being alert to everything in nature and trying to cultivate within oneself that sense that every moment of life and every experience is somehow a revelation of God and bring us into a deeper experience and not to take things for
granted and that’s what it seems to me is really all about it connecting to this bigger picture.

Pentecost was the day, recorded in the biblical book of Acts that after Jesus’s ascension into heaven, God sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples. It is celebrated as a liturgical Feast Day, and for Brother Bertrand, the land participates and points to its arrival not just on the calendar, but in his day to day spiritual life. As the liturgical cycle moves through the year, elements of the seasons and the liturgy blend together in ways that are both phenomenologically significant, and symbolically charged, each dimension, embodied and cognitively constructed adding to the rootedness of the monk in place.

Diurnal Liturgy

This seasonal and liturgical cycle is made up of diurnal cycles. The Liturgy of the Hours is often referred to as a way to “sanctify the hours of the day with prayer.” Thus what are often called the hinges of the day, dawn and dusk not only take on the symbolic importance of light and darkness, the surrender and return of light as symbol of Christ, but point to a time beyond time where the monks hoped to one day be one with God. Each day at the noon office of Sext, we sang: “O God of truth, O Lord of might, who orders time and change aright, who sends the early morning ray, and light the glow of perfect day.” The hours of Lauds and Vespers too had their own time specific chants, canticles and Psalms. Sitting on our bench in the Abbey cemetery, Brother Adelmo reflected:

Especially during the Ordinary Season if you listen to the hymns during Lauds, the hymns during Vespers that we sing—they are all drawn from the middle ages—those hymns tend to reflect the time of day where the sun comes up. If you look at some of our hymns, it will talk about that. As evening draws, you have the setting of the sun and the hymns talk about that in reference to Christ being entombed and rising up the next morning during Lauds. So there’s that rhythmic cycle that we hear and sing and so that definitely penetrates your soul and I think those early Psalms were intentionally sung during those, what we call the ‘hinges’ of the liturgy….The hinges of the liturgy: Lauds, breaking into morning from the night; Vigils into morning, and then Vespers into evening, and Compline completes the cycle.

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The monks at each of the monasteries I visited rise in the early hours to chant Vigils, the earliest being New Clairvaux who holds vigils at 3:30am. This chant used to be sung at midnight, to keep watch, or vigil for the return of the Lord. Today, chanting in the darkness of the early morning hours, the monks both keep watch, and prepare for the coming day, many doing their Lectio Divina in the hours between Vigils and Lauds. The daily experience of chanting the liturgy, speaks to the unfolding of the day itself, which is a direct allegory for the pascal mystery. The monotony and repetition of this schedule is also an ascetic practice. It requires vigilance to stay present to the repeated words. But in repeating the motions, melodies and words of the Divine Office, the monks are better able to roots themselves in the particularities and subtle changes of each passing day and season.

Speaking of the importance of light and darkness Brother Bertrand of Christ in the Desert told me:

Beginning the day in the dark, having Vigils in the dark is very important to me. I would find it difficult to live in a monastery that didn’t do that. There are those more active monasteries especially you know they start much later. You lose the sense of that expectation of the dawn and the coming of Christ again and the whole notion of awakening and being alert for light as it comes and physically certainly, but in terms of insights or, you’re waiting always, and darkness just lends itself to that kind of thing.

Light and darkness are not only symbols, though they absolutely are that, but affective aesthetics which temper the experience of the liturgy and the place. Immersion in both the physical transition between dark and light, and meditating on its symbolic dimensions reinforce one another and strengthen not only the symbol’s spiritual power (see Ch. 5), but the affective power of living through its daily and seasonal cycles.

While this study is focused on the monastic relationship to land, monastic buildings also form an essential aspect of the monastic sense of place. Sense of place and habitus thus also includes the built environment, for as Edward Casey writes, “a building is a place for places.” Monks are daily moving between cell and chapel, chapel and refectory, etc. and the spiritual ecology of a monastery includes these indoor, sacred and quotidian spaces. Many of

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31 Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 32.
the daily work spaces for example are adorned with icons, which remind monastics that work and prayer can also mean that work is prayer.

However, reflecting the pre-Vatican II ethos of being closed off the world, two of the churches, New Camaldoli Hermitage and New Clairvaux Abbey had completely opaque windows. The founders sought to block out the distractions of the outside world, in favor of the beauty we find within, and both churches had their charm and sacred quality. New Camaldoli has a sky light at the top which plays differently in the sanctuary depending on the hour of the day. Whereas New Clairvaux’s windows were simply an opaque colored glass. This is however changing as they restore the 12th century Cistercian Chapter house that will eventually become their full time church. New Clairvaux and New Camaldoli did however, make use of adjustable lighting in their chapels depending on the hour of the day, and Vigils and Compline were said in almost total darkness.

The churches of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Christ in the Desert however, allowed for almost unobstructed views of their surrounding landscapes speaking to a theological response to this notion that the inner and outer worlds needed each other. So, while all of the Offices are chanted indoors at each of the monasteries in this study, at both Guadalupe and Christ in the Desert, one is keenly aware of both the time of day and the weather. These diurnal changes were deeply ingrained into the symbolic and embodied experience of the monastics daily lives. Brother Benno Guadalupe related:

The church was designed by the community as a container for the Psalms. Now the Psalms, oh there’s what, is it a quarter that refer either to a time of day, a season of the year, morning, night, moon, sun, you know? So that church was designed because of that, we have to be in touch with the seasons, and the time of day, and the moon, or the sun.

Even while they are inside, monks at Guadalupe Abbey and Christ in the Desert have an intimate connection with the time of day, weather and seasons. Having recently visited a Trappist monastery in the eastern US, whose windows were high above the line of sight, Brother Benno said he felt claustrophobic, like he couldn’t breathe, because chanting the Psalms was for him an act of breathing them, and the church acted as a permeable membrane through which the Psalms enriched the place, and the place enriched the Psalms.
As we stood in the cloister garden of Guadalupe Brother Salvatore related to me how important it was to him to be able to take notice of the weather and time of day during the Offices, even though he took frequent walks on the Abbey’s extensive trails, he was grateful for the open light-filled space in which they pray.

Part of the thing about the liturgy, especially in our church, the way it’s built with so much access to exterior light and sense of the seasons and the flora outside is you really notice the change of seasons and so it reinforces your sense of the time of the year. The liturgical time of the year that you associate with that the physical season or natural season or cycle and times of day and night, obviously reflected in the liturgical cycle of the day. It doesn’t always work because sometimes like at compline you have the song we sing and the first week of the two week cycle ‘now in the fading light of day.’ Well [laughs] during winter the light has faded a long time ago. So there’s not always an exact correspondence, but often there is a nice connection between what the words we are saying and the fact that everything is retiring for the day. You are retiring for day, you’re going to sleep with the birds and the critters of the forest or a lot of them anyway, so you’re part of this whole sweep of life within and without and that’s very cool. And there’s also the sense that we are really coming back to in worshiping in the church, in trying to hallow the hours of the natural day. We are joining the rest of creation, and repenting of our sin of not joining in the rest of creation in praising God in worshiping God and honoring God.

Harmonizing the seasons with the chanting of the Psalms was an important aspect of Brother Salvatore’s vocation. And because the times of the daily Offices are fixed, as the days lengthen during spring and summer, and then contract during fall and winter, the quality of light changes during the Offices as well. This repetition of liturgy with the variation of weather and day length allows the monks to sink into the shifts and changes in the seasons of the land and their souls. This shifting and changing was what led me to be stunned by the May full moon during my first trip to Our Lady of Guadalupe, which happened to be perched just over the horizon when I entered the chapel at 4:15 am.

At New Camaldoli Hermitage, where the Church is not open to the otherwise spectacular views surrounding the Hermitage, several of the monks’ commentary on place tended to emphasize the spaces between Offices, and the importance of walking as a mode of
moving the body through place and liturgy: walking from cell to choir, daily work, daily meals, meetings, study time, meditation, Mass, hiking and traversing monastery paths and trails. Even formation itself, discussed above, is a kind of movement through phases of the monastic vocation. Each of these is part of the monastic *habitus*, each is an act of dwelling, of developing a sense of place, which is perhaps what Edward Casey means when he says that “dwelling is accomplished not by residing but by wandering.”

32 The sacred space-time of the liturgy is enacted by the body, known by the body through the habitus of the repetition of daily community practices, and enfolded within the surrounding monastic landscape. Brother Adso framed it this way:

> This place, Big Sur itself and this Hermitage nestled here in Big Sur just evokes a certain kind of spirit, a certain ethos, that I’m absolutely certain has affected each and every one of us in some way. It certainly has affected me. Just walking from the chapel to my cell between Vigils and Lauds in the morning is very often quite a transformative little moment. I don’t know, there is something about that hour, having to go outside the chapel and walk up to my cell, and seeing the sun…and watching the color of the sky. Coming back down to Lauds and just watching whatever God is painting across the horizon at that moment. I think that changes everything.

The Hermitage is nestled into Big Sur, and the motion between and during Offices shapes both who he is and who he is becoming as a monk. Brother Adso repeated a similar gratitude as we walked in the narrow Limekiln Creek Canyon, dwarfed by Redwoods:

> That is one of the reasons I like our place, because we are just so close to the earth. Even the fact that we have to leave our house to go to church. I am always looking to see what the weather is going to do, or I am always looking for fire, or the hawks are nearby. We are not living in little air conditioned cubicles chanting the Psalms. We are really close to the ecosystem here, and in just a couple minutes look where we are!

Weather, wildlife, time of day, each contribute in almost unspeakable ways to the experience of the monastic day which is structured around prayer and chanting the Liturgy of the Hours. It was often difficult for the monks to fully express the ways it had affected them. And even

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32 Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 114.
one monk who has health problems, and works in an office-based role at his monastery, “it’s all a unit, it’s all one.”

Brother Nicolas, also of New Camaldoli, related to me how he noticed the ways living in the place, and attending to his monastic duties began to shape his experience of place:

One of the things I notice since coming here is how much more aware I have become of things like the phases of the moon. I never really noticed the moon, I knew there were new moons and full moons before I joined, but here it really affects things. Like you come out to Vigils and when there’s a full moon you don’t need your flashlight. And as the moon shrinks you start needing it, so just kind of noticing it and appreciating the different phases too. There’s something delightful about it, again the moon kind of being a reflector of the light, and we’re meant to be reflectors too.

The moon became an unanticipated companion in Brother Nicolas’s experience of the liturgy, and experience that provided added insight into his own spiritual path, and his affection for the place. The cycles of day and night, and the annual and liturgical calendars were important markers and co-participants of the embodied experience of the liturgy and the place and symbols for the spiritual life at each of the communities I visited. Being rooted in a place puts one in touch with the way it changes throughout the year.

**Ora et Labora: Work and the Monastic Moral Landscape**

As soon as a monk joins his monastery he is put to work. Young monks in addition to learning the Office, history and spirituality of the monastic life, must also find meaningful work within the community. The Benedictine motto, Ora et Labora, orients each of the monks in this study, especially the Trappist monks, who have maintained a stronger connection to farming and manual work over the years than many Benedictine Congregations. Work is also an essential dimension of the monastic sense of place, wherein monks learn not only the contours of their inner landscapes, but of the place as well. But manual work, where monks engage in farming, craft or forestry work is becoming more rare at monasteries in North America, and the communities in this study. In this section I will show how engaging in manual work in the monastic setting serves not only to provide for the needs of the monastery, but also to balance the monastic inner and outer landscapes of the monk in seeking God in the place. Work also provides experience which serve as allegory
and moral lesson to the monastic spiritual journey, allegory which draws extensively from the landscapes within which the monks work and contributes to the monastic sense of place. However, with the decline of young recruits, manual work is become more difficult to expect of the community as a whole and therefore its demise could have some impact on the monastic sense of place.

A Theology of Work

Manual work provides an essential marker of both Benedictine and Trappist monasticism and if place is the where of the monastic life, work and the prayer are the how. The Rule of Saint Benedict devotes most of its 73 chapters to the Opus Dei, the work of God. In Chapter Four for example, after listing the virtues of a good monk, Benedict calls these the “tools of the spiritual craft,” and the monastery, the workshop within which this craft is to be perfected. The Rule of Saint Benedict mentions the practice of manual labor such as farming only briefly, specifically as an antidote to idleness:

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the Brothers should be occupied at certain times in manual labor…And if the circumstances of the place or their poverty should require that they themselves do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monastics when they live by the labor of their hands, as did our Fathers and the Apostles. Let all things be done with moderation, however, for the sake of the faint-hearted.33

The faint-hearted were of course those born of noble blood, not used to working the land, or those priest-monks who preferred copying manuscripts, chanting the Psalms and celebrating Mass. Father Michael Casey OCSO lists at least 20 roles that monks of this era might have had in the typical Carolingian monastery. Elaborate liturgies, iconography, copying manuscripts, and the keeping of libraries was the spiritual work most often assigned to monks, with lay brothers, tenants, and hired laborers performed the more strenuous and backbreaking manual labor such as planting and harvesting crops.34

However, monks were often called to manage the affairs of the monastery as skilled craftsmen, the monastery cellarers, or the head cook. Monastery Cellarers as they were called

33 See Ch. 48 of Timothy Fry OSB (ed.) RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 69, my emphasis.
were charged with supplying the monastery with its necessities, purchasing large quantities of wheat, beans, milk, butter, cheese, honey, wax, cloth for habits, sheep and pig skin for parchment, timber and stone for building. They supplemented to this with their own vineyards, flower and vegetable gardens, fish ponds, herds of cattle, sheep and bees, but still relied and wider feudal landscape to survive, often becoming local economic engines that eventually lead to the establishment of towns and villages.35

By the time of the Cistercian reforms of the 12th century, Benedictine monasteries such Cluny, were performing elaborate High Masses and liturgies that took up most of the professed, or ‘choir’ monks time. The zealous break away monks of the Cistercian reform sought to return to manual labor as a basic monastic ascetical and spiritual practice. They also sought to break ties with the corrupt manorial system by not accepting tenant workers, tithes or rents. They soon realized however, that some division of monastic labor was not all bad. Their solution was the practice of employing Conversi or vowed lay brothers who were organized into granges and lived and worshiped separately from the choir monks.

This state of affairs shifted after the collapse of the manorial system, and the Enlightenment. Though the Benedictine motto Ora et Labora, or, Work and Prayer, has come to be synonymous with monks living the Rule of Saint Benedict, this phrase itself is not contained in the Rule of Saint Benedict. It was not until the 19th century revival of Benedictine monasticism, and the rise of industrialism, that the more romantic connotations of work in its agrarian and pastoral dimension became a mark of Christian virtue.36 Australian Trappist monk Michael Casey, reflects on how the role of work blends with Benedictine spirituality today:

There is a seamless connection between all the activities of the monastic day: liturgy, prayer, reading, working, eating, sleeping, walking, sitting. The ‘spirituality’ of work is to be found in its harmonious integration in the whole monastic endeavor. There is no autonomous meaning to work: it makes sense only in its positive contribution to a life of prayer and virtue.37

36 Casey, Edward, Getting Back into Place.
This integration is supported by the fact that the Rule of Benedict states that “He will regard all the utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected.”\footnote{Fry, Timothy OSB (ed.) \textit{RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict} in English, #31, 55.} Just as the pathways between cell and chapel are integrated into the monastic habitus, so too are the activities of work, doing dishes, cooking and study.

In the contemporary monastic context, those marks were in plain view in my conversations with the monks in this study. The motto Ora et Labora was cited almost as often as was the phrase ‘lovers of the place’, and monks prided themselves on a balanced and integrated way of life that included prayer and work. The monks in this study universally revered the dignity of work, and its place in the monastic life. Work and manual labor of any variety from cooking, cleaning toilets, writing icons, weeding a garden, harvesting hops, balancing the monastery budget, or sweeping the monastery chapel, were part of the discipline of the monastic life. This sense that even the tools of the monastery were to be regarded as sacred, or part of the monastic spirituality means that work and manual labor was to be seen as integral to the prayer life of the monks. Work and Prayer were to be balanced and integrated.

Within a Christian anthropology, work is an essential component of the human vocation. Work is how human beings care for God’s creation, and participate in God’s ultimate purposes. This anthropology was particularly emphasized at New Clairvaux, who maintained the strongest connection to agricultural work of the monasteries in this study. Brother Aymaro framed the often hard and unglamorous work of farming with this in mind:

I think learning to live and to care for living things we’re helping them, and we’re cooperating with them to make them fruitful. With our help we can make them more fruitful than they could be, for Gods glory, on their own. Now I mean obviously that’s not quite the same thing as the natural beauty of a wild forest, but it’s the beauty of the cultivated orchard, and that has a place too. Cooperation between man and nature. So I kind of see that as one of the fruits of this particular way of life, but it is real cooperation…

Certainly Adam, his first job was, he was told to be caretaker of the Garden. He wasn’t just put in the Garden, he was to be a caretaker of the Garden. There’s that mutual relationship. He was to care for the Garden, and also they would eat from all
the trees you know all the fruit of the trees of the Garden except for one [laughs].
Well we know that story [laughs]. But there is definitely a mutuality there, you know, that man was made to be engaged with his environment, and to be supported by the environment, and support the environment, so there’s a kind of give and take there that’s really interesting.
The biblical narrative of creation puts Adam and Eve in a garden, one that required their attention. And even after being expelled for disobedience, human beings are called to live by the sweat of their brow. Farming and agricultural work, central to the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, provides not only a source of human sustenance and dignity, but a spiritual template within which one can learn and grow. Work was the primary mode of providing for the monastery’s needs, and stewarding the place, but it was also an act of cooperation between human beings and the rest of creation. As Brother Severinus of New Clairvaux framed it, stewardship and cooperation ultimately connected back to oneself:

Well I think work is not just taking, it’s giving as well to the land. It’s not just how I can benefit, but how can the land benefit by my care. What must I do so as not to abuse, because to abuse the land is to abuse creation, and is ultimately to abuse me, because I am part of it. There’s a day I am going to die, and we still have the old practice here, a monk is buried, no coffin, just buried right into the ground, he’s wrapped in his cowl, sits on a little board, but you are just put right into the ground…Our corporal remains become soil, and then a tree takes it up and it helps it to grow. We’re part of this very natural cycle. Being a lover of the place is in service to the spirit, but is carried out in the knowledge that one’s body would in an actual sense become part of the place, and that one’s labor was not just aimed at coaxing a living from the soil, but caring for the land that would be inherited by monks long after one was gone.

Brother Adso of New Camaldoli, which does not have any mandatory manual labor as part of the monastery, though it certainly employs the brothers in the hermitage’s daily work and maintenance, also emphasized this anthropological dimension while reflecting on the role of work in the monastic life:
Work is part of the *ascetical* life, but ascetical not in the sense of penitential. Ascetical in the sense of it’s a *spiritual practice*, it’s a humanizing thing to work, it’s a dignified thing to work, it’s what human beings do, and it’s humanizing to work. The monk seeks God in the place, but seeking God is really about becoming fully human. The monastic spirituality plays out on and through the land, and in most cases is expressed through both work and prayer. Sitting in the Abbey library several weeks later, Brother Aymaro of New Clairvaux laid this out in greater detail for me:

Physical work, not just mental work, intellectual work, or even spiritual work, working the land physically, physical manual labor, plays a part in integrating our whole person. That balance draws us into God.

Work serves as a means of integrating mind, body and soul in carrying out the tasks and labors of the community.

Work not only provides for the monasteries temporal needs, it also provides a rich allegorical ground for the spiritual life, learned by attending to in the place. Work provided a kind of mirror of temporal analogy to what the monk was doing with the inner landscape. As we walked through a fallow field that would soon be planted to walnut scions, Brother Waldo related:

The spiritual landscape is tending to the *inner realm* and purifying it, pruning it, making it fruitful and attractive to the Lord. That’s what the monastic life is all about; it’s a main occupation of ours, to discern the passions and prune away those passions that are disparate and feckless. Cultivating the soul, sowing good seeds and eliminating those weeds, or not eliminating, but at least keeping them under control. The passions are never exterminated, the dangerous ones or the damaging ones, but being able to see it with that metaphor gives you a sense of personal efficacy. Like wait a minute I can participate in the shaping of my life with God. I do have the power, the tools to make good choices and to decide if this particular passion is not in my best interest. And after a while you begin to form habits, and that’s virtue. And once you get the conceptual mechanics down, one is able to live with a greater sense of peace.

Just as he would walk rows of grapes and prune out the vines that would diminish the flow of sap to the clusters of grapes, he was also working to cut out the extraneous vices or passions.
that diverted his energy away from loving God. Carrying out his duties on the land, he saw himself mirrored in the tasks and places where he carried out that work. As we walked, Brother Waldo pointed out a tree that triggered a memory from the last season the monks worked in the orchard. He said,

I remember this tree being shaken and it was our 10 thousandth tree, our very last tree during our very last harvest. We all celebrated around this tree. The shaker came, shook it, all the prunes fell off, and we were all like ‘that’s the last tree!’ Then later I calculated, it was about the 10,000th tree. There was a sense of euphoria there.

All the trees looked alike, but Brother Waldo remembered his accomplishment because of the work he had done, and remembered the place where the monks celebrated together. It was an allegory not only of his accomplishments as an orchardist, but the work he was doing within to sort through, prune and cultivate virtue and a sense of oneness with God.

Lastly, Brother Berengar of Guadalupe reflected on his early years as a monk when the Abbey still had a forestry program run exclusively by monks. His experiences of working as a tree planter on the monastery property, provided a critical depth to a passage he was given by his Abbot, days before his final vows.

I worked in the woods. I would help with the planting of the seedlings in January and February, learning how not to ‘J-root’ the plants. My hand guiding it, there was a beautiful metaphor, I think, of the spiritual life; letting God guide us, and being planted in deeper soil. There’s a line from [Jean Pierre] de Caussade that [the Abbot], before my solemn vows knew that I was in a dark place, knew I loved de Caussade; and he was reading from the Abandonment to Divine Providence just about three or four days before my solemn vows. And he found this line that he wrote and he said, Tim, I think these words will help you. De Caussade says, it’s like a prayer, “You make the root beneath the soil flourish, and you can make fruitful this darkness in which you keep me.”39 So I put that in my pocket right here, and I have it, so it’s over my heart as I was making my vows.

Manual work, which can be dirty and sweaty and difficult, provided the imagery for Brother Berengar’s spiritual toil, and further connected him to the places where he would later walk

and pray. The act of planting the tree was not only affective to his daily life, but symbolic of his spiritual path.

While the monasteries have changed over the years, there was still plenty of opportunities for monks to engage in manual work. Sitting in the monastic cloister arboretum at New Clairvaux Abbey, I asked a shy elder monk without a formal education named Brother Pacificus what drew him to the monastic life. He responded with a much more personal perspective to the importance of work to the monastic life:

Well, I mean Christ lived such a simple life; and to think that he lived, for 30 years, a simple ordinary life, just living working with Joseph and Mary. That’s what I want to do, I wanted to live a simple life, and this was a perfect place for it. I mean it was *Ora et Labora*, that’s all it was, prayer and work. I thought I wanted to be a ‘choir religious’ and go on to the priesthood, but then as I lived my life, I says no, I don’t need to be a priest, I just want to be an ordinary lay brother, a lay person just *Ora et Labora*, pray and work in the environment. And California was a perfect, ideal place to do that labor. To work simply, and I find that fulfills me. Because, I like work, I love work, and I love to do new things; I’ve had almost every job here in the monastery: I’ve been the cook, and the baker, and I’ve been the tailor, and the mechanic, and the orchardist, and the welder, whatever. I’ve learned all these different jobs just here in the monastery, and that’s very satisfying, you know. And California is a beautiful place, I mean all these trees here [gesturing] there wasn’t anything here, this was all flat land, there weren’t any trees here at all I planted most of these.

Woven together throughout this meditation on his own monastic vocation is first and foremost his desire to live a life of prayer devoted to God, in a way that was as much like Jesus lived as possible. Second, we get a sense of his love for the setting, doing work in California’s central valley, where trees and crops crow in abundance. And third we get a sense that whatever task he was assigned to in the monastery, was integral to his vocation as a monk whether that was in the kitchen, the orchard, or the shop.

Brother Alinardo, from Guadalupe Abbey also related his work on the land. While converting an old plum orchard into a planted Douglas fir forest, the worked became an integral part of his formation process:
They killed the plum trees, and then the firs are coming up, and what was happening was if you didn’t cut the plum trees down and break them up, a wind storm, with the roots they fall over and crush the firs. So it was basically saving the firs. So it had this noble purpose, but just being over there every day, and just the different scenes, and then the land kind of holding you. You are working out your own spiritual journey. You are battling stuff. So now when I’m with the chainsaw, it can be an aggressive instrument, so it can bring that out in me. If you are struggling in deep ways and you don’t even know you are, but it can bring up stuff. So just working through that in the land. It’s all going on right there in the land. The land is a lot more [meaningful] to me than if I was let’s say a logger, who is going to someone else’s property to chop down wood. Because it’s so intertwined with all these others components.

Brother Alinardo, who above compared his relationship to the land with a marriage, expresses well the sentiment of one’s spiritual life being held by the land, and through work becoming intertwined with it. Actually carrying out this work, both on the land and in the soul, creates a landscape rich with memory and moral lesson that enriches the sense of place, and populates it with personal significance and memory. Work gives rise to experiences that give rise to spiritual lessons that then become attached to the place.

Working in the garden was also a powerful spiritual allegory for many of the monks. Brother Beoca was enthusiastic as we stood in the ¼ vegetable garden just below the Church at Guadalupe Abbey. Gardening, he told me, was an “apostolate” in service to the community that provides some fresh, pesticide free food to the monks. It also provided an opportunity for honest Trappist work, and many important spiritual lessons. As we stood in the mud above a waist high canopy of mustard greens in full yellow bloom, he said: “It’s a good kind of work, outdoors, healthy kind of work, and you get something. You have to get the weeds out, the undesirable things out, and the same with the spiritual life, you try to get the undesirable sins and temptations out of your life, there’s a relationship there, you try to get the weeds out of your soul, pull the weeds out. So there’s a relationship there.” Gardening and farming are classic symbols of the spiritual life, and for this monk they two reinforced each other. The garden was an icon for his soul. These moral lessons are embedded in the landscape as signs to embodied experiences that emerged from the landscape and their
immersion in the monastic sacramental ontology. This moral landscape was of course on display among the monks of New Clairvaux who continue to farm.

**A Difficult Decision**

Riding shotgun in a dinged up Ford pickup truck, Brother Severinus and I drove along the northern boundary of New Clairvaux’s walnut and prune orchards. Having just recovered from pneumonia Brother Severinus lamented, “If I was in better health, and we had more time, I would be walking, because then your feet are getting into the soil, the leaves, you’re feeling the branches, the weeds, the smells, the birds, the insects, the sun, the shade. You’re getting more of the real experience.” Intuiting my core research method, our stops along the periphery of the property still gave us plenty of time outside the cab of the truck.

Much of our time was spent talking about his experience working in New Clairvaux’s orchards as a young monk, and the ambivalence he felt toward changes in orchard management, and the recent decision to hand day to day management tasks over to a management company, the first time the Abbey had done so since it was founded in 1955. It was a practical decision, but the monks hoped that in the future, if vocations increased, they might take it back on.

“You know it’s a little sad” Brother Severinus said, “because we worked these, and we got to know the trees and each orchard block has its story.” Pointing out the window to the left, he noted, “This is our oldest current block, I believe this was planted in 1962.” He told me about how, before they installed the modern drip and timer irrigation system, the monks had to dig levies by hand to control the flow of water from the canals. As he said, this, he remembered a story, from one of the canals:

One time I was out here but one of the brothers walking the levies suffered heat exhaustion I guess, I don’t know, anyway, just kind of collapsed, and the other Brother panicked and brought him in and then meanwhile he wasn’t out here and the water was running and the levy broke [laughs] anyway it raised havoc.

Memories of working the orchard flowed like the slow silent water of the irrigation ditches as we drove and talked. While I was experiencing the place for the first time, for Brother Severinus, the place was rich with memories and lessons from his days working the orchard. Not only was work an important expression of monastic spirituality in the Benedictine
tradition, it also served to index stories, lessons and experiences to the landscape, which in turn enriched a sense of place. Chuckling, Brother Severinus related a story about pruning trees as a young novice.

There were a lot of valuable lessons in it. Again because it could be applied to one’s own person. Out there in the cold or sometimes in the rain and then a branch would slap you in the face, and you just want to, you know, you would not want to say pious words in that moment [laughs]. So it constantly taught you a lot about yourself and the trees really were images of you in many ways, what you needed to remove from your life.

Repeating the spiritual theology of work, seeing the trees themselves as images of the monks, deepened his understanding of what he was trying to become as a monk. Pruning trees provided strong spiritual lessons for what it meant to be a monk, and how one should go about pruning one’s vices. This work was tiresome and monotonous and the Central Valley can reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summers, but that work often paid off, both in supporting the monastery, building solidarity between the brothers, and providing spiritual lessons for the monks. Brother Severinus related to me one such moment he had in the orchard as a young novice. This story came to him as we passed the orchard block where it occurred:

There was just kind of a critical moment in my vocation in this orchard…a moment of great purification and I guess you’d say a moment of great trial but a moment of great grace.

But before he related the full telling, he lamented the necessary process of removing older orchards, which inevitably occurs when a block dips below its economic level of productivity.

So this [orchard] is still there now. Its 43 years old, and it will probably be around for another five years but then it gets removed. And something of your soul, I don’t want sound too romantic here, but at least for me, some of my life story is in here and then it’s gone. Now, it might be another prune or walnut orchard, but it’s not going to be the same.

Asking him to continue telling me about the experience he had in the grove, he said:
It was a very trying moment, kind of ‘dark night’ and then epiphany as it were. Very early on, within a week or so after I entered the monastery…in fact it took place right in this first row here [pointing]. I don’t even know what I was doing, I know it was October and it was in Benedict Orchard. It was right around here. A very intense moment of purification and then just a moment of breakthrough and enlightenment. I guess kind of like a ‘4th and Walnut’ experience you could call it, a mystical experience.

Brother Severinus knew that to maintain the monastery one had to keep the orchard productive. But, as the orchard industries developed more advanced methods, and the blocks became more and more homogenous, Brother Severinus felt something of a loss. His own spiritual autobiography was written on the pages of these blocks, and to tear them out was not to completely erase, but to somehow do violence to those precious experiences. His own moment of ‘grace’ as he calls it, was compared to a mystical encounter written about by Thomas Merton, as he was visiting Louisville for a doctor’s appointment in 1958, and felt a sudden deep connection and sense of belonging to the people around him.40

Working the orchards provided brother Severinus not only the ability to support the community, but to work out his own spirituality through a balance of work and prayer. As he did so, the land became a kind of moral landscape through which he both read and inscribed his own moral lessons and spiritual growth. The changes to the orchard’s management, like that of Guadalupe’s manual labor practices are practical adjustments to the monastic way of life that ensure the future of the communities in uncertain times. It is to these difficult times that I turn in the final section of this chapter.

*The Changing Face of Work and its Impact on Sense of Place*

When I arrived at a monastery, I would often get settled, and then get a tour by one of the monks, who would diligently show me around the campus and property. When I arrived at New Clairvaux in February of 2016, I noticed that Brother Magnus spent a lot of time telling me about what buildings used to be used for. Monastic livelihoods throughout North America, and in three out of four of the monasteries in this study, are now generated mostly through hospitality, other small business ventures, and from generous benefactors,41 and I

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41 See Table 3.
began to wonder what impact these changes had on the monastic work ethos and sense of place.

As I have discussed, New Clairvaux Abbey, which still relies on its prune and walnut orchards for its livelihood has nevertheless began contracting out its orchard management work due to a lack of young monks who can reliably manage the work. As Brother Magnus showed me around, I gleaned a sense of just how much monastic work has changed over the years, and how, despite the romantic images I may have had about monastic farming, manual labor and self-sufficiency, monasteries still had to make a living.

Going out to the orchards has always been the biggest thing for us from the beginning up until very recently. Only recently, in the last five years have we had someone do contract work for us, because we couldn’t keep it up and it’s more an agribusiness. The old family hobby farm doesn’t work today and if you don’t keep up with the new ways of doing things, it just doesn’t help.

The most important work to be done at a monastery was the *Opus Dei*, the work of God, and economic arrangements that did not allow that to continue had to be adjusted despite the beauty and importance of manual work to the monastic life.

As we toured the monastery workshop, where tools were arranged in neat rows on the walls, Brother Magnus lamented the fact that while the wood for the new church choir stalls were from Black Walnut trees harvested on site, the carpentry work was not in house:

We have hired new carpenters for the new stalls, but we don’t have any brothers that are able to do carpentry. It used to be that everything was done in house, but with technology going on, it’s kind of like a dying breed…it’s a hobby, and not necessarily a profession. We are more educated. So I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. It is nicer that we would do our own work instead of paying for it, but we don’t have that luxury.

Certainly supplying labor from within the monastery saves money, money that could be put to other uses, but in most contemporary monastic communities, there are simply not enough monks to cover all the roles it takes to run a monastery, and they are forced to look outside the community for help. In addition, Brother Magnus believed, when recruits do come, they often do not know skill-based trades such as plumbing, electrical, carpentry, etc. as many of them used to during the rise in vocations after World War II.
Moving from building to building on New Clairvaux’s spread out campus, it almost seemed like a museum tour. ‘This is where we used to can fruit,’ ‘this is where we used to sort out the quality of plums,’ ‘this is where we used to shell walnuts,’ etc. Brother Magnus lamented these loses, but didn’t have much time to think about it. He had a monastery to run, and the romantic agrarian image had to take a back seat, at least for the time being.

These changes were more worrisome to other monks, who worried the changes would affect their vocations. As Brother Patrick of New Clairvaux confessed:

The whole idea of the Trappist monasteries being based on *Ora et Labora* and having farms and physical manual labor was very much a part of who we were. And what I am wondering, personally wondering, is what’s going to happen? Because what are we going to offer somebody if somebody has that kind of vocation? I mean I didn’t know I had that vocation, but boy when I got here, I discovered that I did. It’s been wonderful. So if somebody is here because of the vocation that God has planted in them whether they knew it from a long time ago, or they are just learning about it. And they come here, and then it’s not here, they’re not going to stay!

Because farming and manual labor are so much a part of the Trappist identity, vocations to that life call people to it whether or not the monastery is engaging in land-based work, and that, it seems, may be a reason for diminishing vocations, a kind of Catch-22 in which a decrease in vocations separates the monks from land-based work, and the lack of land-based work fails to attract vocations.

Brother Patrick also lamenting the distance he sometimes felt in his own life from the orchards, from manual work. He worried about climate change’s effect on the trees, but pointed out with the monks no longer working with the trees directly, the younger monks might end up losing that not just the vocational and spiritual benefits of work, but the monastic sense of place that he had developed throughout his life.

Now the thing about it is, I’ll lose that because I’ll lose the sense of what is happening with the trees as I get more distance from them. They’re just out there. As long as I’m still totally connected to those trees, I have a sensitivity to all this. So why does having the right weather and the wrong weather makes a big difference? I mean if you’re in the city you go to the grocery store and you buy stuff, you have no idea what’s going on on the farm. But when you’re on the farm you’re really sensitive to
how things are growing. And then that ties into your spiritual life very easily, I mean you just move into it. You don’t even move into it you are in it.

The intimate connection between liturgical cycle and the seasons of the orchard could of course still be observed by the monks, but farm work, like liturgy, allowed one to enter into the cycle, and with the monks no longer engaged in the orchard’s day to day management, the sense of place and liturgical life of the monastery was being impoverished as well.

New Clairvaux Abbey has sought to continue the tradition of work by still assigning the monks a daily work detail that includes the maintenance and running of the monastery, but many monks find themselves working in offices, rather than orchard rows. One way that the monastery has been able to keep one foot in manual labor is by partnering with a Napa Valley winery to create a Trappist brand of wine which installed a vineyard on the property in 2005. The monks are involved in this process from pruning, to harvesting, to pressing and bottling the wine, and they were very proud of that fact, even though the operation is co-managed. This model of co-management could be a more attractive option for contemporary monastics, who in the past simply decided to either sell or lease their farmland, taking monks out of the operations all together.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey took a more dramatic transition out of full time farming in the early 1960s, and directed the monks’ labor into a church pew carpentry business, a book binding, and eventually in the 1980s and 90s, a fruitcake bakery and wine warehouse business. However, the maintenance of the grounds and trails, a large garden and the forestry operation have continued to provide opportunities for manual land-based labor. And yet, Brother Salvatore reflected:

I kind of lament the fact that we don’t have farming at all because I think there’s something that very much ties you to the rest of the earth and your spirituality when you get your hands in the earth. You’re really seeing what God is doing in his creation at every moment and making it possible for you to live by the work of your hands in the most literal way. It’s humbling too, I mean those guys would get tired, they talk about you know baling hay and stuff, being ready to drop dead at the end of the day. I mean, I wouldn’t necessarily sign up for that, but I admire it, and I think something is lost in a monks life when the work gets a little too soft or it doesn’t tire.
you out, and you don’t feel the weakness of your creature-hood and your dependency on God to keep you standing, and holding you up.

Manual work, especially within the Trappist lineage is a prized characteristic of their identity and vocation, and often blended seamlessly into a land-based theology as discussed above. Certainly they have had to make adjustments, but there is something altogether different about industrial, manufacturing or office-based work. It is not just that work should give monks something to do, and support the day to day operations of the community, which it should; but rather, manual work, or land-based work ideally enriches the entire monastic vocation. Reflecting on his work in the more industrial setting of the monastery enterprises, Brother Rabano of Guadalupe reflected:

It’s so totally different from monastic life in a sense that you don’t identify with it. If they got rid of the fruit cake bakery I wouldn’t leave, I don’t think anybody would leave. But people left because we got rid of the farm. Because it was more synchronized with the monastic thing. So I miss that a little bit that kind of manual labor. So there is a little bit of a, you know: I have my monastic life and then I go work in the book bindery; or, I work in the fruit cake industry, kind of a split.

Whereas one monk did tell me he saw his office job and monastic practice as a seamless whole, many more seemed to feel that something was lost in giving up land-based livelihoods, even at the necessity of preserving the community and continuing the Opus Dei.

There was, in land-based work, a kind of symmetry between the body, land and soul that is just not fulfilled by disengaged, monotonous tasks labeling or storing wine bottles, boxing fruitcakes, or entering data into a spreadsheet for an academic journal. I certainly felt this way during my time at Guadalupe, where I engaged in the most manual work, under Cellarer Brother John’s (1932-2016) close supervision. But farming at such a small scale is no longer a viable option, and many in the region who do farm either have large patch works of leased properties, or another jobs. Thus while there is still a deeply rooted sense of place for the monks of Guadalupe, there is a sense of loss in the shift away from manual work that is more deeply connected to their identity as Trappists as to their love for the place.

New Camaldoli Hermitage and Christ in the Desert were in very different circumstances. While the Italian monks who founded New Camaldoli Hermitage planted an olive grove when they arrived, it was soon abandoned, and the monks have continually relied
on hospitality for their livelihoods. Their sense of place is rooted in contemplating the beauty of the Big Sur Coast, and they do so mostly through walking and hiking, though of course all the monks must pull their weight by participating in the Abbey businesses, duties and maintenance assignments such as dishes, cooking and garbage. While I was there, I helped with dishes, garbage collection, and packaging granola. In addition, New Camaldoli has a high number of non-monastic residents who live on site to help with daily tasks such as landscaping and firewood cutting.\textsuperscript{42} Their identity as hermits was affirmed by the very remoteness of the locale, and the beauty of the place, the ocean and the mountains, connected them archetypically to the symbols of apophatic spirituality. Even their potentially beautiful garden was inactive while I was there, which when I asked one monk about it he shrugged and said, “Camaldolese have never been big gardeners.”

Christ in the Desert, with its small beginnings, harsh unforgiving climate and remote location, has always struggled to maintain any single land-based enterprise, from chickens to goats to sheep. Their primary work has been hospitality, the liturgy and arts and crafts by the various monks, supplemented by generous benefactors. However in the last decade the monastery has established a hop yard, and revitalized the monastery gardens in two areas in hopes of increasing the agricultural productivity and provide more work for its burgeoning novitiate. Yet, they also faced resistance from some of the monks, who would rather study than work in the hot New Mexico sun.

Reflecting bluntly on the state of labora in the broader Benedictine monastic movement, Brother Venantius, who did much of the manual labor for the community himself said:

Has Labora been lost? Here’s what I think. I think in most of these monasteries Labora has come to mean cleaning the bathrooms and working on the computer. And if you can get guys out to work in gardens, and I mean gardens not farms, you have advanced it, you’ve pushed it back to what it ought to be. To have guys with dirt under their finger nails, as opposed to clicking on a keyboard is a better thing; to have them looking at these mountains and those animals as opposed to looking at a computer screen is a better thing.

\textsuperscript{42} See Table 3.
Brother Venantius worried that too much emphasis on study was depriving the monks of a crucial element of the Benedictine charism. However, because Christ in the Desert was such an iconic location, there had also arisen a tension in the monastery community between those who wanted to further intensify the community’s land-based farming activities, and those that saw the landscape better suited as a quiet respite for world-weary retreatants. For Christ in the Desert, whose sense of place rested on it being a particular incarnation of the Rule of Benedict, and with dozens of young recruits, there was sufficient zeal in the community to push for a return to the monastic life of farming. As Brother Ubertino told me on one of my first days at the monastery,

*The Psalms grew out of a people who got their nourishment from land and sea ‘you send the rains upon the earth, you soften its furrows, you prepare it for the planting.’ There’s all these rhythms that come from people who were very much in touch with the land, who knew the night sky, who knew the seasons. So the Psalms are their language, and the more people’s lives—for thousands and thousands of years were basically the same all over the world—until the industrial revolution: Boom! [laughs] So the language of the Psalms that are spoken to them are at that level, and in so far as people today still live in touch with the land, I think the Psalms will speak to them more deeply. Thus the tie between monasticism and agriculture, that marriage has been a long one, and insofar as monks have departed from agriculture it’s meant we’ve lost something. So this monastery is firmly committed to a future of agriculture, to continue, not just maintain our land, but to plant and to grow food. Some of the fields you see fallow now, like these front fields here, we’ve been grooming for the last three years to restore them to agricultural use, and it’s something we’re committed to.*

The property was not ideal for farming. The soil was sandy and infertile, they were between two tall canyon walls, and the weather was often unpredictable. But as Brother Ubertino and many others related to me, the spiritual life and the liturgy are enriched by the practice of farming and manual labor, and those who are in touch with the rhythms of farming will be better able to understand and experience the poetry of the Psalms and other stories from scripture.
But in aspiring for a more agrarian land use Christ in the Desert is also putting itself in tension with some of the reasons people come there in the first place. Sitting with Brother Venantius on the banks of the Chama River, I asked about the pros and cons of having a more self-sufficient monastery, and whether there wasn’t something of a romanticism in seeking this out. He replied in his characteristically blunt fashion:

They [retreatants] want Canterbury Tales. I’d like to come and see Canterbury Tales. And they think we grow our own food, and we have our own garden and the monks are out there, it’s all so authentic! I just sit there and go, no lady, in order to make this work I gotta be riding a combine ten hours a day and you’re not going to want to sit out and read your book with me out in the field working a major farm.

While he acknowledged that they do get help from retreatants, he expressed frustration with the desire of retreatants to work with the monks as a sort of recreational-spiritual-therapeutic hobby. I quote his rant in full:

Well it’s a gorgeous setting, and if they come out to the most remote monastery in the western hemisphere, Christ in the Desert, they’ve come out to be remote and they’ve come out to be quiet. And then they want to participate in the work and work alongside monks and chat and all that kind of good stuff. And they’d like to be doing some agricultural work, but again we’re talking about some fifty or sixty year old retreatant. Because they’re not all in their 20s. Those are the people that are all out making money you know earning a living. People that have a disposable income, they come out and spend 90 to 100 bucks a night to come out and stay in one of our guest rooms and they want to participate.

Ok, so I got a fifty or sixty year old lady who wants to come out and pull some weeds. That’s who I got! I’m not going to get forty men coming out here who are all in their thirties and they want to bust ass for three weeks and pull in my crop. We do the hop harvest every year. We’re going to harvest the hops. Ok, so they give me you know I’m assigned ten monks to help harvest the hops. The librarian, 84 years old, he’s almost blind. I mean I get the guys who have nothing else to do and then I get a couple of guests who are interested. They are usually here for two days, then they bag. Just pick the hops by hand, and chat, and talk about God. Lady! I got three freaking rows I gotta get in today between now and 12:30 when everybody quits out,
move it! Pull the dang things off the dang vine and move it! Which they don’t, so I do it, but now I’m sitting there going ok why am I so ripping ticked? I’m ripping ticked [laughs] because we’ve got this non-sense agricultural presence and I’m doing all the work by myself! I get one other guy and I can do more in two hours than I can get ten guests to do in four hours.

Working the land would require a more intensive use of machinery, and some retreatants might find that objectionable. While on one side, there is a desire to increase agricultural production to both reap the theological benefits of farming, and provide food for the growing community, Brother Venantius saw the primary purpose of a place like Christ the Desert as follows:

God is primarily interested in human hearts, and to bring more human hearts into a place of interior quiet and peace where he can speak to them. I don’t think he’s worried about getting potatoes in front of them that the monks grew.

Increasingly, monasteries are sanctuaries for those seeking to get away from noise and chatter of the cities. A full scale farming operation seems to put that at least partially in jeopardy. In the future, monasteries will have to balance their need for livelihoods, fealty to the monastic tradition, and the expectations of retreatants for quiet, nature-rich places to escape from the world where they can participate in the ancient rhythms of Gregorian chant. However, whether monastic communities will return to a more agricultural existence seems unlikely.

Benedictine monasteries pride themselves on offering hospitality, treating the visitor as if she were Christ himself. As more and more visitors seeks both authentic work monastic encounters and genuine rest, contemporary monastic communities will need to balance their desire for working landscapes, and landscapes of retreat. And as monastic communities grapple with declining vocations, the unique sense of place that manual farm work offers may not be available to future recruits. As Brother Venantius stated, God is primarily interested in human hearts. The land is a major part of the appeal and draw of these monastic communities to the increasingly world-weary stressed and over worked people who come on retreat and find peace here and monastic communities will have to grapple with the contrasting values of working landscapes and the benefits it offers, and the needs of a growing retreatant community that seeks solitude and sanctuary.
Conclusion

Entering New Clairvaux’s chapel for Compline, the final Office of the monastic day, I had to feel my way to my choir stall. The lights were off, and only a single weak lamp illuminated a distant statue of the Virgin Mary. I sat in stillness as another day ended, reflecting on my interviews, my walks, and my life after research. The Abbot rapped his staff, and we stood, facing the illuminated Virgin Mary and the monks began to chant from memory the 4th Psalm. I closed my eyes and hummed along. Then after some readings, and silence, they chanted the Salve Regina in Latin before exiting for the cells in silence. I was getting the hang of the monastic horarium but lingered for a few minutes in the dark silence of the incense laden air of the chapel. As I exited the chapel, the stars were brightly shining and I could hear the turkey vultures rustling in the stone pines over head as they settled in for the evening. I was beginning to catch a glimpse of the monastic sense of place, rooted in liturgy and the hours of the day, and it brought a deep peace to my typically racing mind.

The monastic sense of place begins with the vow of stability and takes shape during the monks’ formation period. The long line of Benedictine and Trappist monks who take pride in seeking God in the place, see rural and wild places as the ideal locations for doing so. To be a monk is to belong to the place, and that place begins to work on the monk in their desire to love and serve God. Monks wrestle with their demons, confident that the land is holding them in their work, and finding moral lessons, symbols and allegories which deepen their love for the place and their love for God. The land in many ways is a partner to the monastic spirituality which is deeply rooted in the rhythms and cycles of the days and years.

Manual work attaches memory to and gleans allegory from the land while balancing the monastic devotion to prayer with engaging the body. Thus the monastic sense of place is both constructed from religious symbols, traditions and theologies, and performed through embodied habitus that incorporates sacred space, religious symbolism, and embodied, affective, performative (liturgical) habitus. The monastic sense of place is in every way oriented toward the purpose of monastic life of seeking God in all things. Yet, the particularities of place undeniably enrich and shape the spiritual and liturgical lives of the monks. Changes to the practice of manual labor threaten to diminish the participatory contact between monks and the land, though, sense of place will always remain an important component of the Benedictine vocation.
Chapter 4: Mysterium Tremendum: Landscape and the Experience of the Sacred

“It’s not that God is in the universe. The universe is in God; God is the greater of the two; God is being, pure being, and all that exists is brought into being from nothingness.”

–Monk of Christ in the Desert (2016)

“When through a rent in the rain-clouded sky a ray of the sun suddenly glides over the gloom of the meadows...We never come to thoughts. They come to us.”

–Martin Heidegger (1947)

Introduction

The March rain was holding off, even as dark clouds threatened, but Brother Salvatore and I decided to do the interview on foot anyway. We exited the north side of the cloister, and chatted as I adjusted my microphone and clipped it to my left shoulder. Just as we entered the closed canopy Douglas fir forest that had been planted, harvested and maintained by the monks of Guadalupe Abbey since their arrival in the 1950s, we passed a rather large, and I confess, quaint, statue of Jesus who stood with open arms at the head of the trail, seeming to welcome us into the woods. We immediately began to climb the steep grade that dominates the eastern half of the property.

In his early 40s, Brother Salvatore was one of the younger monks of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and that morning we had ambitions to hike to the small brick shrine dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe at the very top of the monastery’s property. He had a soft demeanor, and a sharp intelligence, and as we walked and talked, he pointed out a place that he said, had always felt particularly sacred to him though he was not sure why. As we became winded from climbing the steep slope, we would stop to look up into the canopy, or down at a beetle or lethargic rough skinned newt. I would elaborate on a question, and he would focus on his response.

Brother Salvatore decided to become a monk at a young age, because, he realized that throughout his life God had as he put it, been looking at him; and it was time for him to look back. Having grown up in the Midwest, he was attracted to the Trappists for their balance of
work and prayer, and the Abbey of Guadalupe for its rural, beautiful location. He said that the place often felt like a world within a world, a refuge. When I asked him what the land contributed to his purpose as a monk he responded:

The land and its ecology and its diversity of life that all holds together and contributes to its continuance, for us who are humans upon the land living our way of life, it refreshes us. It gives me a sense of belonging to a creation that’s good, that is not something that can be gainsaid as far as its goodness or badness because none of our sin has contributed to what it is. It just is what it is from the creators hand and it reflects the goodness of that hand and its beauty. It’s a kind of tonic and a balm for all the scars we carry with us from the world.

Just as the nature was for Brother Daig (Ch. 3) a kind of model of peace, for Brother Salvatore, creation is intrinsically good because it comes from God, and thus acts to ground and orient the monks on their journey to God. Growing up, I had always heard the biblical theology that creation had ‘fallen’ into sin with Adam and Eve when they chose to eat the forbidden fruit in Eden; that thorns and thistles, pain and death were a result of humanity’s disobedience to God.¹ And yet, in Genesis Chapter 1, after God created the world, he declared it “very good,” and for Brother Salvatore, creation’s ultimate goodness and sinlessness reflected the ultimate goodness of God which he strove to experience in every aspect of his life as a monastic.

In Chapter 3, I explored the development of the monastic sense of place through their vows of stability, the blending of the cycles of the liturgy with the seasons of the land, and the practice of manual work. In this chapter, in light of contemporary environmental discourses such as Spiritual Ecology which proposes to “re-enchantment” of the earth as a sacred entity or manifestation of the divine, I will explore what exactly the monks experience land to be within the grand scheme of their deeply rooted belief in the God as creator. Is the world, the land, in some sense sacred? Is all land equally sacred? Or, just consecrated places?

In asking the monks whether or not they believe their land to be sacred, I reveal my own hand. For I too, with my background in forestry and theology am interested in returning to a more reverent approach to land. The Catholic position as I found out however, is neither consistent nor straightforward. Whereas the monks universally agreed that the Eucharist

¹ See The Book of Genesis, Chapter 3.
contains the real presence of Christ, there was far less consensus regarding the sacredness of
land, the immortality of animal souls, and whether or not Christ is present in the land in
similar ways as he is believed to be in the Eucharist. Thus, this is clearly an area that is being
actively bridged with more ecologically minded perspectives, and each monk brought his
own experiences and theology to the discussion. Lastly, however, I argue that in addition to
the sophisticated and esoteric theological implications of my question, the experience of the
sacred often showed up in unexpected ways through affective experiences on the land which
demonstrates that questions of the land and the sacred are not simply abstract theological
speculation, but an essential component to the monastic lived, embodied experience of place
and landscape.

**Landscapes of the Sacred**

In this section I will outline the contours of sacred landscapes from a place and
landscape perspective. From its Latin root, ‘sacred’ means to set apart, usually for religious
purposes, and is rooted in the sacred groves and temple precincts of the cults of the Greek
and Roman pantheons. This Polytheistic sense that certain deities had dominion over
particular areas is almost universal among pre-Christian European paganism, and the practice
of protecting sacred groves devoted to sometimes vengeful and demanding gods is still
practiced throughout the world, particularly in India.²

In Roman religion the *Genius Loci*, or, the ‘spirit of the place,’ was venerated,
consulted, or at the very least revered as an unquestioned reality. Collective associations built
shrines or temples to these spirits, and with the rise of the Roman Emperor in the early years
BCE, the *Genius* became the protective spirit of the entire Roman Empire.³ This ‘enchanted’
quality of the land was a widespread assumption in virtually all Pre-Christian European
paganism, where local gods and goddesses were associated with specific places or ecologies
such as springs, wells, mountains, groves, the sea, caves, etc. However, the *sense* of these
places was not always affection or fondness, but could just as easily be fear.⁴

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In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, French sociologist Émile Durkheim distinguishes between the domains of the sacred and profane as the unifying characteristic of all religion. Through symbolic totems embedded in the landscape, religion functions to promote social cohesion through collective storytelling and ritual. These relationships to the sacred, mediated by gods or the nonhuman world were theorized as stories a society tells itself about itself.\(^5\) Thus the material world becomes a kind of symbolic landscape through which a society makes meaning. In a similar way, Roy Rappaport’s classic 1968 ethnography of the *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* argues that the slaughter of pigs as offerings for the ancestors, serves to regulate the Tsembaga of Papua New Guinea’s relationship to their environment.\(^6\) These common social scientific approaches take an evolutionary lens for granted, and assume that religion and the sacred are projections of the human mind onto the material world which serve some adaptive function.

Sacred places and landscapes are as diverse as the world cultures and religions. Sacred groves, mountains, rivers, lakes, caves, gardens, burial sites, wells, springs, and shrines all share deep human significance and value that set them apart from other elements of the landscape, or more economically oriented land uses. Sacred sites often carry with them certain taboos or restrictions on subsistence or economic activities. For example, ‘Sacred Natural Sites’, which can be defined as an “area of land or water having special spiritual significance to people and communities”\(^7\) are often surrounded or located within protected areas. Many are being recognized through the UNESCO World Heritage program or through national or local protected area status.\(^8\)

For example, in India, there may be as many as 100,000 Sacred Groves devoted to a huge variety and number of deities each with its own personality and set of taboos and requisite appeasements from devotees.\(^9\) In Diana Eck’s *India: A Sacred Geography*, she documents the dizzying diversity of India’s sacred sites, their diverse and sometimes

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contradictory stories, and their religious significance for Hindu religious and spiritual life. Many Hindu’s go on pilgrimage to these sacred sites, and temples are often built atop areas of particular sacredness. Sites commemorate a sacred story such as the birth of Krishna, or the defeat of Ravana by Rama, or can be sacred in themselves. For example, the Ganges River is experienced as a goddess to many Hindus, and bathing in her waters is a means of ritual purification.\(^\text{10}\)

However, using the word *sacred* in nonwestern contexts has proven problematic because of its specifically Western religious connotations and its tendency to confine questions of ontology with a narrow Western frame that assumes a universal distinction between sacred and profane and subject and object. For a great many indigenous and nonwestern cultures, the numinous, holy, or simply other-than-human persons bleed into everyday life in ways that a conventional understanding of religious or sacred space in the West does not. The world itself for example could be considered sacred since rocks, trees, rivers and mountains are experienced as real actors in this world or another spiritual realm. This ontological animism experiences the diverse elements of the human and nonhuman world as sentient and interconnected; and while there are certainly times and places that take on greater sacred or metaphysical importance, the line between sacred and profane as understood from a Western perspective is much more blurry. For example, in Japanese Shinto the Kami spirits inhabit prominent features of the landscape. In Taoist-Confucian cosmology earth, heaven and human being are intimately linked in a cosmic dance between absence and presence, wherein the Tao, or the Way generates the forms of this world in a dialectic. The goal of the human being is to achieve harmony with this natural state of flow.\(^\text{11}\)

In his ground breaking ethnography of the Ojibwe of North America, anthropologist Irving Hallowell suggested that the Ojibwe experience the world as nonhuman *persons* rather than simply assuming that animism was the false belief that there were spirits in nature.\(^\text{12}\)

As the Enlightenment drove a wedge between mind and matter, culture and nature, and the industrial revolution began to more aggressively exploit the earth as a resource for

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\(^{10}\) Eck, Diana L., *India: A Sacred Geography*.


human consumption, Spiritual Ecology joins a long line of voices in the Western tradition calling for a more reverent treatment of the earth. For Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, nature was itself a kind of material symbol of spiritual truths, and wilderness, places devoid of human cultivation and modification, became the new sacred groves.¹³

Contemporary environmental discourses such as Deep Ecology, the spiritual implications of the Gaia hypothesis, and an emerging commitment to ecocentrism have continually emphasized the idea that the earth is sacred and that the human attitude toward her should be one of reverence. Proposed by James Lovelock, the Gaia hypothesis, after the Greek goddess of the earth, suggests that the earth acts like super-organism which naturally regulates the planet’s conditions so as to maintain optimal conditions for life. While Lovelock himself never proposed that the earth was in fact divine, his ideas quickly spread into more spiritual circles which took up his scientific claims as evidence for more metaphysical or eco-spiritual ones.¹⁴ While each school of thought varies in its approach, from seeing life itself as sacred though remaining naturalist in ontology, to believing that the earth is in fact a conscious being or divine, the primacy of the earth as a sacred community of life has been emphasized by each. For Sufi activist Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, the environmental crisis is not a technical problem but a moral-ethical one:

The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong. The deepest part of our separateness from creation lies in our forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature. We are all part of one, living spiritual being.¹⁵

As we enter an era of climate change and mass extinction which some are calling the Anthropocene, rather than proposing more technological solutions, Spiritual Ecologists are calling for cultural transformation which seeks to re-enchant the world as sacred, which is seen as the root of modernism’s alienation from the natural world. We must usher in a new ecological age that promotes a kind of mutually beneficial relationship between humans and

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the rest of creation. This intuition is expressed well by cultural historian Thomas Berry, a founding father of the Spiritual Ecology movement, and a Passionist Priest:

The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun, and all heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice.¹⁶

Spiritual Ecology, Deep Ecology and Ecocentric ethical approaches seek to re-enchant the material world, not as the creation of a transcendent being, but as an intrinsically interconnected and life-giving world out of which human beings emerge, and to which we owe reverence and awe.

**God and the World in Christian Ontology**

In this section, I will outline the basic contours of a Christian ontology of God in the world, and its implications for claiming that the world and land are sacred, and how God is experienced through the world and land within a Christian and monastic framing. This will be the final section of background before entering into the empirical sections of this chapter which will describe the contemporary monastic relationship to the world sacred in relation to their landscapes.

Asserting that the world is sacred is not as straight forward from an orthodox Christian perspective. The heresy of *pantheism*, in which God is assumed to be the same as or coterminous with the world, has always been a thorn in the side of theologians who wish to keep God and the world at a distance. However, unlike their monotheistic (Unitarian) Abrahamic religious cousins in Judaism and Islam, Christian theology is *Trinitarian*, meaning that God is experienced as a unity of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In philosophical terminology, Christian theologians speak of God being one in substance, nature or essence; but forming three distinct persons or ‘hypostases.’¹⁷ The Father generates the Son, who became human in the person of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is the love shared between Father and Son and the world.

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¹⁶ Berry, Thomas (1988). *The Dream of the Earth.* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 44.
Theologians will always argue about what God is like, but for most Catholics, Thomas Aquinas captures the basic paradox of God’s knowability, though of course there is a rich theological tradition with more diverse views than his. Although for Aquinas, God’s reality is ultimately beyond human understanding, we can catch a glimpse of what God is like analogically. To say that God is powerful, is not the same as saying Jason Brown is powerful, but the human concept of power certainly captures something of what it means to be God. So while it is commonly said that God is all powerful, all knowing and all good, this doesn’t mean that God is simply the sum total of power, knowledge and goodness as human beings conceive it.\(^\text{18}\) God is also frequently equated with truth and beauty, but this does not mean that God is all the truth we know of, or the most beautiful object in the world. God is not a being, with perfect qualities, but in more technical theological language, as Aquinas argues, God is: Ipsum esse subsistens, the act of existing itself, or being itself.\(^\text{19}\)

For theologian Paul Tillich, unlike some medieval theologies which sought to ascribe qualities to God’s being: Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence, as if God were simply the highest being, God is rather the “Ground of Being.”\(^\text{20}\) As the ground of being, God nonviolently creates, or brings into being, the world ex nihilo, out of nothing, and sustains the world at each moment. The purpose of creation is to return glory to God, whose very existence is an act of love by God. This is reinforced in the Catholic imagination by the New Testament verse from 1 John that simply states, “God is Love.”\(^\text{21}\) And ultimately, Christians understand what God is like by looking to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Incarnation of God in human form. In addition, the Holy Spirit which is the love shared between Father and Son, was sent to the Church after Jesus’s Ascension, and accompanies Christians in the world.

Despite this Incarnational aspect, wherein God became matter through the Son, and pervades the world through his spirit, mainstream Christianity has often emphasized the transcendence of God, or otherness of a radically separate being that sits as a kind of King over the world. Taken to its logical extreme, God is a distant creator, who gets the world


started and then steps back to observe with indifference. This philosophical position is called ‘deism,’ and many of the Founders of the United Stated adhered to this position.\textsuperscript{22} However deism is not the God of the Bible, who is intimately concerned and involved in the lives of his worshippers. And yet, in a transcendent model God who sits like a divine law giver on a throne, disapproving of human actions from on high, is all too familiar for those who have become disengaged from Christianity.

There is another just as orthodox, and ancient model for God, which in the current climate of ecological consciousness, is gaining increasing popularity within Christian eco-theologies. \textit{Pan-en-theism}, while not denying God’s ultimate transcendence, emphasizes God’s immanence in the world. The world is in God, and God is in the world. This simply means that because God created the world, and sustains it in being at every moment, God is manifest to that world. Unlike philosophical pantheism, as argued by philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza and others where God and the world are coterminous, in \textit{panentheism}, the world and God intermingle, but God is not coterminous with the world.\textsuperscript{23}

There are many examples one could provide for this understanding, but here is one from the Apostle Paul, where he is preaching to the Greeks at the Areopagus in Athens, and attempting to relate God to Pagan-Greek understanding: “For in him [God] we live and move and have our being.”\textsuperscript{24} While panentheism is not common parlance for the average parish Catholic, the monks in this study used it frequently, and demonstrated that their experience of God was radically immanent: in creation, in the liturgy, in the scriptures, and in themselves. Thus God is \textit{both} transcendent and immanent. The Father, the source of being is transcendent and utterly different from the created order. Through the Son, or Logos, manifest in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit, God is immanent to the created order and the human heart. To say that the world is sacred from a Christian perspective is therefore to say that its origins and continued existence lay in God as creator. To say the world is a divine being, is to mistake creation for creator, or to confine God to some particular location within the material universe.

\textsuperscript{24} Acts 17:24-28 (NIV).
Experience of God

How then is God experienced in the world? In a Christian context, God alone is sacred, holy and divine. Christian spirituality is meant to be a process of becoming holy as God is. Catholic anthropology asserts that human beings are hardwired with a fundamental desire for union with God. Humans are seen as a kind of hybrid creature, both earthly in body, but heavenly in consciousness and soul, as the ‘priests’ of creation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads, “The desire for God is written in the human heart.”25 The process of becoming more and more like God is referred to as Theosis or Deification, which has a stronger emphasis in Eastern Orthodox traditions. The Saints are those who have exhibited some quality or character of holiness, not through their own merit, but through grace. Grace is that which freely given by God, for God’s purposes,26 and to say that someone is holy, is to say that they had been purified and changed by God’s grace, not by their own merits. For Tillich, religious experience does not give way to the irrational from the rational, but rather transcends the rational to the Ultimate beyond human understanding.27

While God is experienced as everywhere present through the spirit, the fullness of God is absent, and the human longing for unity with God gives rise to worship and prayer. Monastic spirituality is aimed at a lifelong devotion to intimacy with God, which the monks often framed their vocations as seeking God. Through study, prayer, liturgy and cultivation of virtue, the monks seek to give more and more of their hearts to God, and to allow God to shape more and more of their habits, dispositions and desires.

Traditionally, the experience of God has been associated with flashes of insight and inspiration, a subtle feeling of peace, in visions, voices, dreams or ecstasies. Through the beauty of a human child, or the natural beauty of a forest or sunset. And God’s absence is often felt in times of sickness, pain, anxiety and loneliness. In German theologian Rudolf Otto’s (1869–1937) The Idea of the Holy, he described religious experience as an encounter with the numinous (Gk. divine power). For Otto, God was a mysterium tremendum or

mysterium fascinans in other words, God being wholly other, is experienced as outside the self, and either as a kind terrifying absence, or reassuring peaceful presence.\textsuperscript{28} He writes,

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deep worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience.\textsuperscript{29}

An experience of God can be a kind of dread, or awfulness, or a kind of joy or delight, and Otto often alluded to the monastic desert fathers and mothers’ language of apophasis and cataphasis to illustrate this.\textsuperscript{30} The lives of the Saints and writings of the mystics are filled with attempts to describe an encounter with God, often described as a kind of journey or ascent through the stages of purgation, illumination and union as discussed in Chapter 1. John of the Cross spoke of his ascent of Mount Carmel, the anonymous 14\textsuperscript{th} century author of The Cloud of Unknowing spoke of entering a cloud of illuminative darkness, and Teresa of Avila spoke of an experience of ravishing ecstasy. In her autobiography she describes her famous encounter:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet


which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.\textsuperscript{31} A mixture of terror and awe, pleasure and pain, God’s presence is only accessible through metaphor, analogy and vision.

For subsequent social scientists who have bracketed Otto and other’s metaphysical claims, experiences of the Numinous, divine or the sacred serve to orient and order religious space and time, which in mythological language is contrasted with the surrounding chaotic and disorganized realm of the profane (Latin: pro-fanum, outside the temple). Anthropologist Mircea Eliade writes that “The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world.”\textsuperscript{32} The contours of the sacred serves to delineate a given culture’s center, and orient it to the world around it. There is a social constructionist approach to the sacred that emphasized space and time as human social, political or religious constructions. So while a monastic community does feature sacred space, spaces that are more sacred than others, for example the church where the consecrated hosts are kept, God as ground of being means that the entire world is pregnant with sacred or sacramental significance. This hierarchical view emanates out from God and saturates every corner of the monastic existence. And yet, God is not fully present in a tree, rock, or even church as he is in the Sacraments or the human heart.

The experience of the sacred can occur in transcendent moments that were not anticipated or planned. In his study of sacred landscapes, theologian Belden Lane suggests that encounters with the divine are not chosen, but arrive at unexpected moments. Theologian Belden Lane, tapping anthropologist Michael Taussig, insists that land “demands its own integrity, its own participation in what it ‘becomes,’ its own voice. A sacred place is necessarily more than a construction of the human imagination alone.”\textsuperscript{33} Martin Heidegger, in his existential phenomenology frames it this way “When through a rent in the rain-clouded sky a ray of the sun suddenly glides over the gloom of the meadows…We never come to thoughts. They come to us.”\textsuperscript{34} This affective quality, which geographers John-David

\textsuperscript{33} Lane, Belden, Landscapes of the Sacred, 4.
Dewsbury and Paul Cloke describe as “co-constituting sets of relations between bodily existence, felt practice, and faith in things that are immanent, but not yet manifest.” The experience of the sacred in the land is bound up in the relational aspects of an embodied experiences with it. Thus, while God may be inaccessible as an object of phenomenological analysis, the quality of the relationships the monks have developed with the land, includes their faith in this immanent and pervasive metaphysical commitment.

Yet, for Christianity place and landscape are significant loci for encountering God. As I described in Chapter 2, the landscapes of the Old Testament are pervaded by sacred significance: wells, trees, groves, mountain peaks, etc. Each represents an encounter with the divine, or a sacred event, but none is worshipped in itself. Rather places sacramentally and incarnationally mediate God’s relationship to the world. Theologian John Inge writes that from a Christian perspective, while God is everywhere present, the tradition of experiencing God through particular places and locales is thoroughly biblical. In addition, the idea that God becomes human through Jesus, suggests that God is most wholly experienced through the particularities of this world.

We might say, therefore, that it is clear from the incarnation that places are the seat of relations or the place of meeting and activity in the interaction between God and the world, and argue further that place is therefore a fundamental category of human and spiritual experience.35 Thus to speak of Christian sacred sites is not a contradiction in terms, but it is also not to say that God is fully contained within those sites, places or landscapes.

The Sacramental Tradition

In order to understand land that speaks of God, we must also define what is meant by sacramental. In the Catholic understanding of the world, God is everywhere. But God’s presence is also understood to be distilled or concentrated into certain times, places and spaces. A primary mode of experiencing God in Catholicism is through the Sacraments. In the liturgical life of the church, a Sacrament, defined as early as Saint Augustine (354–430), is “an outward sign of an inward grace” which means that a sacrament reveals something of God. The person Jesus of Nazareth, the second person of the Trinity, revealed God’s nature to the world through a human being. His life is a template to follow. Thus the sacraments are

said to have been implemented by Jesus as signs of God’s presence in the world. There are
seven officially recognized Sacraments in the church and they are Marriage, Baptism, the
Eucharist, Confession, Anointing the sick, Priesthood, and receiving the Holy Spirit.36 Each
of these reveals something about the relationship of God with the world. For example, in the
liturgy of the Eucharist, which will be discussed in greater detail below, bread and wine are
consecrated in commemoration of Jesus’s last supper. The bread and wine are outward signs
of the inward grace, which Catholics experience as Christ’s spiritual body and blood.
Baptism, which initiates a person into the Christian path, is a sacrament, or sign of Christ’s
death and resurrection. When a couple is married by the church, that union is said to
participate in the love between the Father and the Son, etc. In addition, God is said to be
present in the person of the Priest who presides at the Mass. They perform and say the words
of the Mass in persona Christi or as Christ said them. When the Gospel is read, Christ is said
to be really present as well. And the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ claims that Christ
is present in the church as a whole.37

Within Catholic theology and tradition, sacramental theology not only theorizes the
meaning and function of the official sacraments, but also describes the sacramental quality of
the world itself. French theologian Henri de Lubac’s sacramental theology as summarized by
Christiane Alpers affirms that:

Nothing that comes from God can be a mere thing, but everything created inevitably
participates in God’s being and thus ultimately reveals God. Everything is always
more than it naturally displays on first sight, because being full of potentials any
materialized object bears within it all that which it is not. The primary revelation
through anything created is therefore that it is, and only secondarily comes what
precisely it is.38

Sacramental theology affirms with classical monotheism and Christian Trinitarian theology
that God is ultimately transcendent, that is beyond and more than, of an entirely different
nature than our everyday reality. However, because God’s creative act is imagined not as a

38 Alpers, Christine (2014). ‘The Essence of a Christian in Henri de Lubac: Sacramental Ontology or Non-
Ontology’ *New Blackfriars* 95, no. 1058: 430-442.
onetime winding of the clock as deists presume, but an ongoing event, God is actively and continually imminent to his creation through the incarnation and the Holy Spirit.

The uncreatedness of God gave rise to the created world which as Du Lubac writes means that “the whole of nature is symbolic in so far as it intrinsically points to the supernatural and in this way, makes the supernatural present in the natural realm.” That is, the world sacramentally points to God. In addition, God is present in a special way through the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, which dwells in the human heart. This indwelling is was taken very seriously by the monks that I met, many of who spoke of God being “resident” within them. For this reason contemplative spirituality puts such as strong emphasis on silence and solitude, for in stillness and quiet we are more fully able to hear take notice of God’s subtle presence within, and more fully surrender ourselves to that presence which will gradually convert our manners more and more into God’s likeness.

Creation in sacramental theology, especially before Darwin, was often described as a kind of text, book, icon, image, or word precisely because of this semiotic understanding of creation’s contingency on God for its very being. In the Bible, the world began with an act of speech; in Genesis 1 God speaks and the world came into being. The Gospel of John, conscious of this Genesis tradition writes of Jesus Christ as the Logos, or Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the word was with God and the word was God…Through the Word all things came into being.” Christ is the Logos through which the world has come to be. Greek in origin, Logos means ‘word’ but also ‘reason,’ or reasoned argument. But for the Stoics, the Logos was the governing force of the universe, and in some sense identical with it. Plato saw the Logos as the Anima Mundi and wrote:

[T]he universe resembles more closely than anything else that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts, both individually and by kinds. For that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things, just as our world is made up of us and all the other visible creatures.40

To modern ears, Plato recalls the ‘World Soul’ of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the pantheism of Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, or, more recently the “Gaian Spirituality” derived from

James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis.41 The cosmos is a divine being of which we are an integral if small part.

However, in the Christian theological context, and for the monks in this study, Christ as Logos is not a 1:1 relationship to the world. While early Church Fathers from Clement of Alexandria to Tertullian embedded Jesus Christ within this Greek/Stoic context of the Logos, there was always a transcendent aspect to the Word that was beyond the world. Rather, the world as word speaks of God’s presence, intention, love and person, but is not synonymous with it. The world is not worshipped as a divine entity, but reverenced as God’s creation.

The theology of Logos can also be extended to creation itself, which has been conceived as an expression or God. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “One has every right to call God’s creatures God’s ‘words,’ for they express the divine mind just as effects manifest their cause.”42 In this way creation is sacramental because the particularity of each thing reveals something about God.

If the world is made up of words of God, then the world can be read as a book, and there is a long lineage of spiritual writers who claimed that creation was in fact God’s first book of scripture. Saint Anthony the Great (251-356), the Egyptian hermit, who, when asked what he did without any books remarked: “My book is the nature of created things; whenever I want to read the Word of God, it is always there before me.” Church Father Saint Augustine (354-430) follows a similar logic:

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: ‘God made me!'43

Here, Augustine mixes the metaphors or text and uttered words, to show that if creation is derived from and created by God, then it says something about God. In terms of monastic spirituality, this meant that in seeking God, creation was an important text that the spiritual

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seeker must be familiar. Cistercian Abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), wrote of his landscape, “You will find something greater in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.”44

With the rise of the Enlightenment in Europe, the Book of Creation, remained a common analogy for nature, and was also a strong motivation for much of the Western scientific tradition. To better read the book of creation, was to better understand the Creator. In a letter Galileo Galilea (1564-1642) wrote, “We conclude that God is known first through Nature, and then again, more particularly, by doctrine; by Nature in His works, and by doctrine in His revealed word.”45

Genesis 1 also says of human beings that we are created in the “image and likeness” of God. While the likeness to God is what gives human beings our privileged status in the created order, the rest of creation is also said to be an image of God as well. An icon in Catholic as well as Easter Orthodox spirituality, acts not as an object of worship, but as a door through which one enters. Just as Catholics assert that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the icon reveals something of what God is like. In sacramental theology this is directly analogous to the whole of creation which acts as a sort of icon, or image that points back to its creator.

This image of God, is not just in human beings but present in all creation. In the poetry of Jesuit Priest Gerard Manly Hopkins, who writes that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God” he uses the term Inscape to describe the world’s inherit sacramental reality. Inscape can be derived from the Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus, whose Nominalism proposed, contra Aquinas that we could not speak in Universals but that following Aristotle, only particulars existed, which he called Haecceity, literally a things “thisness.” Literature scholar Stephen Greenblatt writes of Hopkins Inscape that,

[Hopkins] felt that everything in the universe was characterized by what he called inscape, the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity. This identity is not static but dynamic. Each being in the universe ‘selves,’ that is, enacts its

identity…ultimately [the] inscape leads one to Christ, for the individual identity of any object is the stamp of divine creation on it.\textsuperscript{46}

Each creation in its individuality presents a unique but incomplete picture or image of God. Thomas Merton developed this idea in his own nature writing in an essay entitled “Everything that is, is Holy” wherein he beautifully describes the intricacies of his own monastic landscape outside of Louisville, Kentucky. His description will be cited in full below.

In Douglas Christie’s Contemplative Ecology, he laments that much of Christianity through Enlightenment modernism has adopted if not the world-denying dualism of the Gnostics, at least a fraught tension between the ephemeral things of this world and the eternal nature of the Word.\textsuperscript{47} For Christie, it is essential for the world to recover this intimate knowledge of the way the world speaks of God. In his own journey as a contemplative, he writes, “Not only during the appointed times for meditation and prayer, but also in the spaces between—walking in the woods, eating, sleeping. A space began to open up within me that I came to see as reflective of both the place itself and the silence to which the monastic discipline seeks to create and foster attention and awareness.”\textsuperscript{48}

Thus the sacramental tradition which emphasis God’s immanence in the world, has seen a fertile cross-pollination with the Environmental Humanities. Drawing on its own incarnational and sacramental imagination, Eco-theology has attempted to reclaim and reconstruct a more ecologically conscious Christianity. Ethicist Michael Northcott suggests that there are varying degrees of pantheism in theologians’ attempts to reconcile environmental issues with the world. For example, in Humanocentric approaches, God remains at a distance, and human beings take on the role of stewards over God’s mostly materially gifted creation.

For what Northcott labels theocentric approaches, God’s transcendence is balanced with God’s immanence, and the Trinitarian and Incarnational character of God as existing as three Persons. For example for theologian Jürgen Moltmann God exists as a spirit in creation,
meaning that God inhabits the world. For James Nash in his book *Loving Nature* this means that creation possesses intrinsic value because of this intimate relation to God through its being and continuing existence in God. Creation is thus a locus for communion between God and human beings, the mode of which is love. For Northcott, Christianity’s sacramental theology and ritual, uniquely practice this mode of sacramental ontology through the ritual of the Eucharist, he writes, “The transformation of bread and wine into elements which mediate the presence of Christ is a reiteration of the potential of all material existence to reveal God’s grace.”

However, as Northcott points out, several ecotheologians have gone too far in emphasizing God’s immanence and the sacredness of the world as divine in itself. These ecocentric approaches as Northcott calls them, have radically departed from Christian orthodoxy and in the case of John B. Cobb founded new branches of theology rooted in the philosophy of Alfred Whitehead (1861-1947). Cobb’s ‘Process Theology’ articulated in his book *Is it Too Late?* seeks to overcome the dualism between humans and nature, God and nature. Cobb argues that because human beings emerged from historical evolutionary processes, the world is characterized as a process of “being in becoming.” Rather than command the universe unfolds and develops as God, with each event in the past is related to the present and the future. From big bang to evolution of stars and molecules and God guides the process and is in every event. The world itself is sacred because it is coterminous with God, which might as well be labeled Nature, Cosmos or Creative Process.

While Northcott labels theologian Sallie McFague as an ecocentric pantheist, her own work claims to be pan-en-theist in theory. In her landmark work *The Body of God*, uses sacramental theology to put forth a model of the world as God’s body. Beginning from a critical stance, McFague points out Christianity’s tendency to too easily skip the signifier (Creation) for the signified (God), without allowing Creation to exist in its own right, with its own intrinsic value. Yet her model, to imagine the world as God’s body maintains God’s ultimate transcendence, but draws God into the world with a metaphor that is less outdated.

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than the problematic and patriarchal language of God as King or Ruler. Thus following the lead of Arne Naess’s distinction between the shallow and the deep ecologies; I would suggest, that there is a spectrum of sacramental theologies, from the more ‘shallow’ notion of the world reflecting God as an icon, to a ‘deep’ sacramentalism wherein the world participates in God through its very being. And as we shall see the monks in this study adhere to positions all along the spectrum.

A Note on ‘Eschatology’ in the Sacramental Tradition

The monks cited in this chapter make frequent reference to the eschatological aspects of creation. Eschatology, from the Greek Esckatos, the last things, is the theological discussion of the end of time, or the afterlife. In common understanding this relates to the human soul’s post-mortal journey to “heaven;” but within sacramental theology, salvation can be understood in more broad strokes. While Creation was created as “Good” as it reads in Genesis, Creation is was not finished after God created it. In the Catholic understanding, Paul’s letter to the Romans Ch. 8 suggests that “creation is groaning” in labor pains in anticipation of its fulfillment and rest in God. In other words, God’s activity in the world can be said to be saving all of creation, not just human beings.

Christians affirm a hope for salvation, through the merits of Jesus’ death on the cross. And just as the purpose of creation is to give glory to God, its Telos, or final purpose is a return to God in some way. It is unclear what this final status looks like, and the age old question do dogs go to heaven, seems to grasp for an answer. But sacramental theology does affirm that Christ died to redeem all of creation. As Paul deduces, because Adam caused the fall of all creation, Christ must have redeemed all of creation (1Cor. 15:22). Sallie McFague summarizes the sacramental position on this broader understanding of Christian eschatology when she writes that “Salvation is the direction of creation and creation is the place of salvation.”54 In Jürgen Moltmann’s work God in Creation he also affirms that creation is moving toward its final fulfillment in Christ. As theologian Christopher Southgate writes, “Christ’s ultimate act of kenosis, felt by his Father as the uttermost alienation, begins the

final phase of the creation in which the evolutionary process itself will be transformed and healed.”

Sallie McFague echoes the insights of French Paleontologist and Jesuit Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin whose was one of the first Catholic theologians to engage with evolutionary theory. His work was suppressed for many years, and he was essentially exiled by his Jesuit contemporaries to China, but his writings have seen a renaissance in the years since his death. For Teilhard, evolution is nothing more than the idea that creation was moving toward what he called the “Omega Point,” the last letter in the Greek Alphabet, to mean Christ. Admittedly, Teilhard saw creation doing this through human beings, which he saw as the pinnacle of evolution. While much of Christian traditional theology has been concerned with human salvation, the rise of ecological theology has retrieved the possibility of a broader salvific destiny for the world as well, not necessarily as a continuation of the world, but as its fulfillment in God. This theological question continues to be bridged with post-Darwinian science. However, as far as the monks are concerned, creation’s goodness is also creation’s incompleteness, and many of the monks framed creation as unfinished, or in motion toward ultimate fulfillment in God, even if they were a little murky about the details.

**God and the World in the Experience of Catholic Monks**

Having laid the foundation for a sacramental theological ontology, I will now bring in the voices of the monks, as we walked and talked about these ideas in the places they call home. For monks it seemed that every aspect of land, sky, water, creature and soil was an iconic sign of God, they were steeped in the theological tenants of this claim, but it was also a lived reality. Walking with Brother Nicolas along the narrow entrance road that leads to the New Camaldoli Hermitage, perched on the tenuous cliffs of the Big Sur coast, we were stopped by a small rough skinned newt motionless in the middle of the road. We knelt down to see what she was up to and Brother Nicolas said:

Gosh to me they seem like the world’s most vulnerable creatures, just no protection!
And they move, you know, anything could squash them [laughs]! I love to see them.
There’s a beautiful expression have you ever heard this? It’s credited to Meister

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Eckhart.\textsuperscript{57} ‘Every creature is a word of God, and a word from God.’ These creatures we see they’re just like a little word. What’s God saying!?"

If creation was a book to be read, creatures were words of God and the land was an icon through which one could catch a glimpse of the mind, intention, purposes and qualities of God. I asked what he meant by this and he clarified that,

I believe that creation is \textit{sacramental}. Reflecting God, conveying God. Somehow speaking of God. Everything kind of showing forth some aspect of God. Maybe the mountains more his strength, and the flowers his delicate beauty…What is God saying? Sometimes it’s more obvious; the deer, I love to see the deer. Just again a reminder to me. The deer are almost like creatures from another world. They move so delicately and beautifully and they make no noise. They just seem to vanish! They are kind of a reminder of a world beyond this one, and just a plain beautiful thing to see.

The land is not God, the deer is not venerated as divine, or an ancestor spirit, but their existence \textit{speaks} of God’s qualities and purposes. The deer is a reminder of God’s mysterious immanence, but ultimate transcendence; here one moment but beyond reach the next. As Brother Michael reminded me of the distinction between a sacramental view of creation and what he would call a more overtly Pagan approach, “we don’t worship trees but we very much reverence trees.”

This sacramental view, does not mean that for Christians the world is simply dead matter. For Brother Aymaro, of New Clairvaux Abbey, who has spent much of his time working among the trees and vines of the Abbey’s orchard and vineyards, the world is alive with God’s purposes and bounty:

The vines and the trees are living creatures and when I look at them and work with them I do that with respect and I don’t want to see it as an assembly line, like a mechanical thing. I am mindful when we are harvesting those grapes that the vines they’re alive. I am grateful and respect their contribution to our life [laughs]. I see things as being connected in that way and of course I also see the generosity of God working through those creatures so when I’m pruning or when I’m planting or something I try to be mindful of the these beings that come—I mean not that they’re

\textsuperscript{57} Johannes (Meister) Eckhart (1260-1328) was a German Dominican Priest, theologian and mystic.
the same as human beings, I’m not saying that; I mean they are not human beings but they are living beings. They come from God and they are beautiful [laughs].

Hoping to answer one of my sprawling questions with respect to the how his work and prayer fit together, Brother Aymaro both taps into the sacramental tradition, and explicitly enforces its boundaries against an ecological or Pagan pantheism. Creatures are alive, vibrant and beautiful, but they are not in fact the same as human beings, nor are they divine.

Talking with Brother Ronan of Guadalupe Abbey in my cell on a rainy March afternoon, he made clear that his experience of the landscape as a place for prayer was rooted in an incarnational, Eucharistic perspective of a sacramental ontology. Speaking of his first arriving at the Abbey he recalled:

I fell in love with this place, and some of the people too…there was a quality of incarnate silence in the place that had to do with the oak and the fir and the hill. It’s a little hard to articulate [pause]. I guess I would say that a Christian commitment to the reality of the Incarnation, both from the historical Jesus obviously, and the Incarnation as extended into the mystery of the Cosmic Christ isn’t just about the whole of the evolving cosmos, it’s about each part of it…

Because God became a human person in Christ as the ‘Incarnation’ the universe as a whole and also each particular aspect of creation is in some sense blessed by God, and speaks of God. Because Christ is the Logos, the Word spoken by God through the world. This idea of Christ being the coming together of spirit and matter, God and the world, is sometimes referred to as the Cosmic Christ. He continued,

…To be fully Christian means to be incarnate, and if the particular intensity of seeking God in all things is more than a notional seeking, in one way or another it seems that for Christians that has to be incarnated. And for most people that’s their family and, for some people who still live by agriculture it includes the earth. As [Pope] Francis says in *Laudato Si* beautifully, talking about the Eucharist, ‘Grace tends to manifest itself tangibly.’ And this is most radically offered to us in the Eucharist when God gives himself to us in the tiniest morsel as our food. So I guess I would say there’s a Eucharistic manifestation of the Cosmic Christ in seeking God in the place.
A ‘Eucharistic manifestation of the Cosmic Christ in seeking God in the place’ is both an affirmation of the Benedictine vocation to seek God through stability, and an affirmation of the world itself as a vehicle through which to seek God. In this sacramental approach, the world is not ‘evil’ or ‘base’ or even a temporary exile; it is the locus of God’s saving work and presence. Thus, to be a Christian is to be uniquely committed to God’s grace as it is manifested tangibly, through other people, through the Eucharist, and through the land. Below, I will go into greater detail on the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Later that year, sitting under the shade of a willow tree on the Chama River, Brother Venantius painted with broad strokes how sacramental theology played out in Christian history, and taught me a lesson in the theology of the Logos:

There was a deeply agrarian nature to the way God formed his people. He formed human beings through the original word of creation. ‘In the beginning was the word, the Logos, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things are made through him and nothing was made without him.’ So all of creation is made through the Logos, the word of God, and the logos is the logic, the reason. We get both logarithm and loquacious, so it’s both the verbal and a rational component to Logos. So all things have a rationality to them, and since I do, and you do, therefore, the created order is speaking to me.

Before the word is Jesus, the Word is just the word, the Logos, the eternal Logos of God… It’s not that God is in the universe, the universe is in God. God is the greater of the two. God is being, pure being, and all that exists is brought into being from nothingness, however the boys tell us that works out. So, you know E=mc²? It’s a nice little theory. So you’re telling me that matter and energy are perfectly interrelated? Yes. By a constant called light? Wonderful. Do you realize that we have been saying this for quite some time? Well, we didn’t have the formula, but spirit-energy if you will, brings physicality into being from non-being. If that’s the case, then all that exists is in its primal sense a word of God. And therefore, the first book is the Book of Creation, the second book is the book you have with words in it, whether it’s Hebrew, Greek, or translated into English. So if you learn to read the
book of the word in creation, you’ll be more in harmony with the book that you’ve been given that’s written between two covers.

Using the language of the Logos, Brother Venantius, with the skill and precision of a well-crafted Sunday homilist, expresses the panentheistic character of his own sacramental ontology. The world as he experiences it is an expression of God, and thus speaks of God. But as a contemplative, he is also aware of God’s indwelling spirit in all things, especially the human soul. Scientific theories, which he did not disparage or challenge, express what he feels Christian theology has been saying in other terms from the beginning: that God brings all things into being out of nothing; meaning that God is the ground of being who brings all things into existence from non-existence. And because the creation reveals something about the Creator, we can speak of the world as sacramental in Catholic theological terminology.

As we continued our discussion, Brother Venantius began to talk about his cell, which abutted a tabernacle where a consecrated host was housed, and from time to time on display for a practice called Eucharistic Adoration, he related,

A guy one time, about the holy Eucharist, he’s like ‘ya that’s a nice little place you’ve got there.’ I said, ‘ya particularly the fact that I’ve got God in the room next to me is helpful.’ He’s like, ‘God’s everyplace!’ And I said ‘it’s true.’ God is everyplace and God is everyplace since the Incarnation is every place. And some place in particular. So God is everywhere, and he’s in that six foot, 175 pound carpenter in a way that he is not in that stick or stone or even in that other guy there.

God is everywhere through the spirit, and certain places in particular such as the body of Jesus Christ, and the bread and wine during the Eucharist. Jumping back to the Jewish era, where God was imagined to reside in the Temple he said,

God says to the Jews build me this cool little stone box on top of a hill in Israel. We’ll call it the temple. Solomon is not an idiot when he inaugurated the place he said if the heavens and the highest heavens—his way of saying the universe cannot contain you; how much less this temple which I have made. I’m not an idiot. You can’t put God in a box.

Just as God was not fully contained by the Temple of Solomon, his presence in the world or the Eucharist is not the end of God’s spiritual omnipresence in the world which is reflected by, mirrored with and subsistent in God.
Brother Malachi, also of Christ in the Desert, who spoke excitedly and quickly as we exchanged ideas and thoughts on the banks of the Chama River, taught me a great deal about this notion of God’s presence in creation.

God isn’t imminent in nature he’s ultimately transcendent. He’s not incarnate in anything that we see around here, but we believe that the mountains, the grass, the river, everything, is like an *icon* in that way… Any sort of natural experience, any sort of experience of natural beauty can be spiritual in that way. It’s not God, but it’s God who upholds it in being. Saint Paul, in one of his letters, he said ‘in him we live and move and we have our being.’

So, as he went on to explain, just as an icon of Christ reveals something of the divine nature, because Christ was God incarnate, so too does creation as icon reveal the love and purposes of God. This is the essence of a sacramental ontology. God is not a distant watchmaker, but intimately involved with all of creation. Brother Malachi continued,

God didn’t make you and then leave. God is the reason why you are still alive. God is the reason why everything around us still exists. From the most complicated city down to the simplest ant that’s crawling in the grass somewhere. So, if the idea of an icon— and I’m not an expert on iconography—but if the idea of an icon is that by looking at an icon of the human nature of Christ it reveals something of the divine nature, then nature itself, the created order, isn’t sort of dual in the way that the person of Christ is dual—one person with like a human nature and a divine nature—that’s not exactly analogous to what nature is. But still, since God is upholding nature in being at every moment, there is an invitation in nature to see the divine reality that is making all of this possible from moment to moment.

A painting of Christ was not an idol because God truly took human form. Reverencing creation as an icon of God is similar in that its very existence points back to its source.

Whereas much criticism has been levelled at Christianity for alienating human beings from the created order, sacramental theology in fact embeds human beings in the wider creation. And while much of modernist Christianity has neglected this point, it is in fact quite orthodox. For Brother Jorge of Guadalupe, human beings are not separate from nature, but nested in creation like the yolk of an egg:
We’re not in a connection with creation, we are *in* creation like a yolk of an egg. We’re not with creation, we’re part of it, we are it. We are creation and it surrounds us and it is wonderful. And if there’s concrete slabs around us then we’re surrounded by human achievement and human progress and human arrogance…but when you’re surrounded by trees you’ve surrendered your human ego, achievement, and allowed yourself to be one with nature, which is to die with it, to live with it, to accept the diseases it brings, accept the sickness that comes with it, the health that comes with it, the beauty to be with it, a part of it, to be reminded that I am not separate from creation, I am it. I am the created and some people think, oh I’m surrounded by creation as if you’re God surrounded by creation. I am creation, whatever flows through me was probably flowing through the sap of a tree one time maybe last year. New trees are probably running through me are probably running through [one of the] beet roots last year. There’s great peace comes with that surrender that comes with that which we just which cuts out this drive for achievement and goal and progress.

His profound sense of being within creation, and deeply connected to each part of it, even the beet roots from the Abbey garden, demonstrates some influence from a contemporary environmental discourse that posits human’s interconnection with the rest of the world, which acts as a kind of foil to human hubris and folly. However, rooted in the monastic tradition, creation’s goodness is a means of finding peace within himself. Brother Jorge’s connection to God allows him to tame and transform his own selfish or sinful drives, which is modelled and mirrored by creation because of its very existence and by its existence its obedience to God.

A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace, and creation as experienced by the monastics in the study was experienced as sacramental of God, the ground of being, who they experience as the reason there is something rather than nothing, and the reason that anything exists at all. As one monk impatiently put it, after I began to trail off into an abstract line of questioning: “Here’s the tree. You see? If there’s no God, there’s no tree. What do I have to think about?”

**If the Land is Sacramental, is it Sacred?**

All of this theological apparatus now allows us to explore in more simple terms, the question of whether or not the land if sacramental, was also experienced as sacred by the
monks. Again, by sacred I mean possessing some intrinsic worth or connection to God. I received a wide variety of answers from the monks, some of which were contradictory. Because creation is sacramental, some monastics hesitated to say land was sacred, they might cross over into pantheist heresy by saying yes. If the land is sacred, does that mean we are saying it is divine, as in the same nature and substance as God? That was dangerous territory, and some of the monks were very aware that this was not an acceptable view. Others were less cautious and insisted that creation had intrinsic value in and of itself, that it was sacred, but none of the monks spoke of it as God, or as a divine being such as Gaian spirituality might assert, or Neo-pagan pantheons might worship.

As I walked with Brother Salvatore of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey up a steep trail, he provided me with a thorough historical overview of why some Christians were wary of the term being applied to creation, but also, why others were beginning to embrace it as synonymous with their own sacramental ontology. When I asked him if he thought of the land as sacred, erudite as he was, he reflected and then responded with this historical preface:

I’ve heard it said that from a more animistic or ancient pagan way of looking at nature or creation, you couldn’t mess with it, you couldn’t alter it too much because everything was ‘God-haunted.’ I mean there were gods everywhere and spirits, and so you had to be very careful how you related to everything. Well once Christianity became dominant with the sense that creator and creation aren’t exactly the same, and there is a transcendence of creator from creation on the one hand, that bestows a different way of looking at God. But also a sense that creation comes from an all-powerful, all-wise artificer. Also, because God is an artificer and a creator, a fabricator, and we are told we are made in his image [Genesis 1], that allows human beings a certain sovereignty over creation, and a license to do as God does in terms of shaping things and altering things and creating things out of the material of the rest of creation. I think that makes a difference in terms of the way the [Cistercian] Founders looked at the land, and what you could do with it; but of course since they were living off of it, they had enough of a sense that they wanted to respect it, so that this is sustainable, and we’re not going to ruin it. So there’s a sense of ecology even there.

Brother Salvatore started by acknowledging Christianity’s departure from European paganism, which, generally speaking dwelled in a more ‘enchanted’ or animate world of
immanent divinities, spirits and forces. Christianity’s emphasis over the years on a transcedent, ‘artificer’ was reinterpreted by the Enlightenment thinkers to mean that human beings could and should modify creation to improve human wellbeing, to be creative as God is. Of course, the eventual industrial revolution took this to an extreme, and as a result, starting with the Romantic Movement, Christianity’s complicity in the ever widening destruction of the natural world has been the focus of critique environmental discourses such as Deep Ecology and Spiritual Ecology. The Cistercian Founders were agrarian in outlook, meaning the respected the beauty of creation, but also sought to make it more productive through human labor, the biblical vocation of human beings.

Reflecting on the development of his community, Brother Salvatore acknowledged that the Christian theology of the transcendence of God, and human uniqueness has tinged their own history with a utilitarian focus:

I think that prior to the changes that came from the [Vatican II] Council in the Order, there was a strong emphasis on withdrawal from the world, mortification of the senses, and asceticism in general, framed in terms of reparation for the sins of the world, doing penance. Everything kind of shifted in the basic attitude and approach, the Order took its own spiritual heritage, I think from the council onward, in keeping with the spirit of the council, to be much more open to whatever is positive in the world and in life and in people, cultures. Obviously that would also include the created order, so it was ok to have an affection for birds and trees and natural things and even for little innocent pleasures, for eating and drinking, certainly for friendship; a lot of things changed.

Brother Salvatore saw the Vatican II Council as the beginning of an opening of the community to the world. He also admitted that the environmental movement had had a real impact on his own thinking about the natural world, and worried about the realities of climate change, pollution, technology, and overconsumption. Using the language of intrinsic value that the environmental movement seeks to engender, Brother Salvatore believes that the monastery has made significant progress:

But for us, I think it has advanced in the sense of both we want to, out of our enlightened self-interest, to maintain the land from generation to generation in good condition for our own welfare; but also, that we recognize that it has value in itself,
because God made it and loves it. And so it has its own dignity as well. Whereas you might have had in the middle ages, or at least in some schools of the middle ages, a very strong sense of God’s transcendence and not as much of a sense of his immanence; now, there’s more of a balance and God’s immanence is much more en vogue. Now people are reminded of it, and talk about it, and think about it. So I think we have that sense too; that God is not only the transcendent creator and artificer, but also is here in everything and with everything.

Brother Salvatore does not deny God’s transcendence, but claims that emphasizing his immanence is more “en vogue.” By this he is referring to the emerging Eco-theology and Spiritual Ecology movements, which are attempting to reconstruct a model of God that is immanent in creation discussed above. This notion of God’s immanence opens the possibility for it to be considered sacred because its inherent dignity is inseparable from God.

In my conversations with the other monks, however, there was a wide margin of responses to this question of sacred land. The question does not fit into any one Catechetical response or category. For example, if I were to ask if God was sacred, the answer would be unequivocal, if I were to ask if the human soul was sacred, again, unequivocal. But as we began to move farther from God in the Catholic cosmos, the question became more open to interpretation, theological persuasion and personal experience. Theologically more conservative monks, tended to see creation and creator in more stark separation; whereas those with a more ‘progressive’ or sacramental theological grounding, tended to make less distinctions between the sacredness of God and that of the land, or creation as a whole. For some monks, the question of sacred land, was simply not something they had every thought about. One monk shrugged, but stated simply:

Generally of course, God is the one who created everything. God is the one who created the whole world and he wants us to take care of it, and to be good caretakers of the land, do a good job of it.

Appealing to a God-as-artificer analogy and an agrarian land ethic, the earth is a gift entrusted to human beings by God, which deserves proper care and respect, but the question of intrinsic value or sacredness, was a kind of theological splitting of hairs he was not interested in exploring.
As I have written above, a sacramental ontology is characterized by a panentheist view of God wherein God is in the world and the world is in God. With this in mind, several monks were careful to distinguish their views from pantheism where God and the world are one and the same:

No I don’t feel the landscape is God, and I am really careful about that. I think there’s a presence of God in creation obviously and in creatures and in human beings so we get glimpses of the divine. But I don’t want to say it’s like pantheism or something like that. God is [in] the land though, it’s so alive with God, the landscape, it is like God’s presence and God’s creativity and Gods beauty.

Glimpses of the divine presence in land, but not necessarily sacred in the full theological sense of the word.

*Sacred Land as Native American Concept*

Interestingly, when I asked this question, several monks started by appealing to a general or local conception of Native American spirituality, in much the same way that Western environmental discourse does. Indigenous people, from the time of at least Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have been interpreted in terms of the trope of the ‘Nobel Savage’ or, ‘Ecological Indian,’ wherein Native people are inherently more environmentally conscious, attuned or respectful. This is often because they are perceived to believe that the land is sacred, that creatures have spirits, and that the human and natural worlds are intimately interconnected. At New Camaldoli Hermitage, walking along a road lined with Eucalyptus trees, one monk said, “This is very sacred land, really, and they say that the Indians on the Pacific Coast were the most peaceful in the country.” He was no doubt sincere, and had a sense that the land was sacred, but that word resonated more with what he knew of Native people than with his own theological background.

Interestingly, as I noticed later, the New Camaldoli Hermitage Cloister Garden featured a Native grinding stone and metate, used by pre-European contact peoples for making corn meal. When I asked about them, I was told that they were meant to reverence the Native heritage of the place. It does not seem a coincidence that these items were located in the theologically rich cloister garden, where monks remember the story of the Garden of
Eden, and associating Native peoples with an unspoiled nature has a long lineage in Western culture and the trope of the “Noble Savage.”

This notion was reinforced by Brother Michael who, while describing why the Hermitage had decided to declare itself a wilderness and wildlife refuge, drew on common stereotypes of Native American nature spirituality.

The Native Americans were here before we came. The Salinan, their main tribe was on the other side of the mountains, in the city of Salinas, but they had a little outpost here. Well they had an amazing way of reverencing nature you know; if they killed a beast they would apologize to the beast, so we try to carry on some of that harmony with wilderness.

Appealing to the reverence for the life of the slain animal is a common understanding by Western peoples of how Native peoples “reverence nature.” However, living in “harmony” with nature for the monks, meant implementing a strict prohibition of hunting, fishing and cutting down trees, inspired more by Preservationist discourse than Indigenous lifeways.

At New Clairvaux, one monk referred to an ancient Native American village that archeologists had located on Deer Creek, and said that that might have something to do with the sacredness of the land. At Christ in the Desert, one monk responded, “I wish we had a Native American in community because he or she would then be able to say, you know, I’ve spent 20 years thinking about that [laughs].” Because Native peoples are understood to reverence the natural world more than Western peoples, monks who heard the word sacred, often felt that a Native person would be better qualified to answer such a question; that their own formation in Catholic theology was somehow not adequate, or that sacred was outside of the conventional way of describing creation, and perhaps even heretical.

Sacred as Consecrated Space

Other monastics interpreted the question of sacred land, not as a question of some intrinsic or divine quality, but as being devoted to or dedicated to God. In other words, sacred space or land is something that develops through the ritual use of the monastic structures and property for the monastic vocation. This notion that sacred space is constructed through religious identity is common within representational views of landscape. As Belden Lane

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writes, “sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.” Sacred space then, rather than emerging from the land itself, is a cultural and religious act of setting apart and constructing through worship, ceremony and habitus. In many ways, the monastic landscape fits this notion, that while technically not different from its surrounding landscape, it was sacred in that it had been set aside to serve God’s purposes.

Sitting with Brother Ubertino of Christ in the Desert in his office, I asked if he thought the land was sacred. He sat for a while, and then drew out the question, testing his own assumptions against it, but ultimately not willing to say one way or the other whether the land was sacred in itself but sacredness had more to do with the purposes of a given space:

My hesitation is this. A church is four walls, and it is four walls where we human beings set aside a space to worship God, thus it becomes sacred. One foot outside of the church, is that sacred? Well it could be, but is less so. Anything set apart for God alone, that has the greatest sacral character and so a church is a sacred place, it’s a refuge, its sanctuary, Sanctus, you know, holy. And the Eucharist is the Sanctus Sanctorum, it’s the Holy of Holies, much as the seat of God in the temple had its Holy of Holies. So everything that exists, reflects God’s hand, and insofar as it reflects God’s hand it can be holy. We can take holy things and make them unholy you know, I’m sure plutonium has good uses [laughs]; because it exists, and God created everything. There’s not a destructive drug among them, but it’s the way we use them. So clearly land has been put to abysmal use, and land has been put to holy use. So is the land sacred? It’s nuanced.

Brother Ubertino’s nuanced answer speaks to the purposes and uses of a thing or place, which ultimately determine whether or not it is sacred. Following its Latin root, to be sacred is to be set apart, dedicated, and a church fulfills that classical religious definition. The land, in as much as it is set aside for religious purposes might also be considered sacred, but this felt like uncomfortable territory.

As we stood in the restored 12th century Chapter Room at New Clairvaux Abbey, I asked Brother Bernardo to talk about how the land contributes to the purpose of monasticism.

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59 Lane, Belden, Landscapes of the Sacred, 19.
After discussing the importance of good stewardship, he anticipated my question on whether or not it was sacred,

The community of monks and nuns take the land and make it a sacred space. Of course in terms of creation, God created it so that’s why creation itself is sacred, its beauty puts one in touch with God. That’s why parks are so popular today, the mountains or wilderness areas, the idea of going out and enjoying the beauty, and then for some people it’s a spiritual experience, whatever they mean by that. But I think here in the monastery, I think Cistercians, how much the community is aware of it I don’t know, but I think that we take the property and make it a sacred space, make it a sacred place. So in that sense, where the land was supporting the monastery, and it does, on the other hand, the monks take the land and make it what it is. So the monks are transforming the land into something sacred; more than mere technology, more than agricultural income. We make the place something sacred, the land something sacred, it’s a sacred place.

Monasticism consecrates land, which he says is sacred, but follows by saying “its beauty puts one in touch with God” thus clearly defining sacred as in fact sacramental. In true agrarian mode, the monks cooperate with God to make the place sacred through their liturgical and agricultural work. Secular people who may find spiritual fulfillment in nature, are really, in his opinion, getting in touch with God, though they may not know it. To draw out his answer, I asked if he really meant that it was their work alone that made it sacred, or if it was already in some sense sacred, he replied,

Well theologically in terms of creation its already sacred from my point of view, like all land is sacred, but I think the monks give it a special character because what makes this place important from the viewpoint of agriculture or land my first point was we do a good job in the orchards, we take care of the land. Theoretically anybody could do that, but we do it. But everybody can’t take their land and make it a holy place, well I guess they could [laughs]. I don’t think they are doing it, but we do it as a religious community. Especially since we are live by manual labor in the Benedictine Rule. I think the community makes this place a sacred place. Why do people come here? Well, to see the monks, and at the same time I think the monastic
presence here transforms the land into a sacred place. From my point of view we’re entering into God’s mystery, if you want to put it that way, creating a sacred [place].

Now, what do I mean by a sacred place? Well by maintaining it for a religious purpose. I mean the rancher next door is using the land, he’s doing a good job, but he’s using it to make money [laughs] but we’re using it for a sacred purpose, so in that sense we are giving a certain sacredness to the land—I hope, I mean that’s how I see it, I guess it’s theologically correct, I really don’t know, but anyway that’s how I see it.

Feeling as though he was perhaps treading on controversial grounds, he trailed off with a disclaimer that that was how he saw things. But again, by sacred he in fact means a place consecrated to God, and creation is already sacred because it reflects God’s beauty and purposes which can be found in many places outside the monastery.

Several of the monks also referred to the prayers of the monks making the land holy.

That because the monks had been on the land for so long, their prayers had, as Brother Bernardo stated, ‘transformed’ the land. Brother Berengar from Guadalupe Abbey, expanded on this notion, by suggesting that all the years the monks were present on the land, praying, in fact has changed it:

A community praying in this valley all those years changes the place, I’m convinced of that. People will tell me that when they turn into the place they sense something different. Praying makes a difference it really does, it changes the environment.

This sacred quality was often noted by guests and retreatants. Consecrating the land to God also influenced the affective atmosphere of the place. This idea often came up when monks cited that there really was a difference between the monastic property, and the surrounding landscape. As Brother Adelmo of New Clairvaux reflected:

We work also with our winery staff, people who don’t live in the enclosure and we sometimes invite them to join us—not all the time, but at certain times during the year at meals, just to celebrate with them—and, they pass through that portal gate coming into the enclosure and they experience, I don’t know, a kind of a profound—it impacts them in a way, in terms of the silence and there’s a real shift, there’s a real shift that they have mentioned kind of offhand and customers coming onto the property for the first time will generally have that impression.
There was something different about the monastery, that everyone, including myself noticed in terms of its affective power, and this was attributed to the sacred work done by the monks both to care for the land, and to participate in the Opus Dei. This difference was not interpreted by the monks as an intrinsic property of the land, all of which was sacramental, but as an effect of the monastic presence there.

This notion of the monastery as a consecrated space, was also affirmed by the monks of Christ in the Desert. For Brother Malachi, there was a stark boundary between the sacred and the profane, or, places devoted to God and those devoted to the everyday world:

This is consecrated ground. My Spiritual Director at the monastery will tell me that when he goes out with his horses to the south, there’s a particular spot near the sign that says ‘Peace’ that you see when you come in, and the horses always sort of like shimmy in a particular direction when they go past that sign. He says it’s because this is consecrated ground, there’s an angel there, the horses sense the angel and we don’t sense the angel.

This monk and at least several of his brothers experience the boundaries of the monastic community as being guarded by super-natural beings, angels who attend to the protection of the monastic community.

A sacred space is a space devoted to the worship of God. And in fact monastic landscapes are devoted to God’s purposes through the monastic work, hospitality and efforts to protect the local ecology. The land is also experienced as being impacted by the prayers of the monks in ways that make a different to those who visit the properties.

*Inscape as Sanctity*

A more complicated reading of the landscape, was to infer that in fact creation was sacred, not just reflecting God, but participating in God’s existence. Creation is experienced as inherently or intrinsically sacred because it is from God, but does not simply reflect or point to God. Brother Michael from New Camaldoli suggested that nature was sacred in and of itself:

The basic creation story: God created creation and declared it good, and we talk of natural revelation. God’s love and beauty and wisdom is declared through nature first of all, and then comes a special Christian revelation [scripture]. But no, *nature is sacred in and of itself*, and for me in a special way mountains. We’re on the ridge of
[Santa] Lucia, and the ocean and trees. Thomas Merton in his *Seeds of Contemplation*, starts out ‘all trees are sacred, all trees are saints’ he says, because to be a saint you have to do the will of God, and a tree is just what it is the way God made it, it doesn’t aspire to be a bush.

For Brother Michael, mountains have sacramental qualities: they point to God’s strength and they are symbols of the monk’s journey to God. However to say that nature is sacred in and of itself, is to make a metaphysical claim that many of the monks were not comfortable with. While Brother Michael did not grant the tree an independent spirit, or godly status, but a kind of saintliness because of its obedience to God. The tree comes from God, and at some level actually participates in God. Brother Michael often said he preferred the theology of the Franciscans, who emphasized the *Inscape* of created beings.

This idea can be traced to the Franciscan Scholastic theologian Duns Scotus’s position against Universals called *Haecceity*, or “this-ness.” Unlike the Thomas notion of Universals, Scotus, like William of Ockham denied the existence of Universals in creation, claiming that only particulars existed. So for example, Humanity is a universal, but Jason M. Brown is a particular. To assert that Humanity exists above and beyond the thisness of Jason M. Brown is to somehow constrain God’s creative power. Each thing that exists expresses God’s creativity in its own way, and in the natural world, creation does this by its very existence. It is human beings who strive to be what we are not, and thus end up lost.

This notion of the Inscape, which originated with Jesuit Poet Gerard Manly Hopkins was adopted by Thomas Merton who was a unique and prophetic voice for his time. His views on creation were widely influential among the monks in this study. In his work *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Chapter 4 is entitled “Everything that is, is Holy” and Merton used the theology of the Inscape to suggest that all of creation is ultimately sacred because of its origins in God, and its inherent goodness which is modeled for human beings. For Merton, this inner sanctity pervaded all of creation:

The form and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity…The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this April day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom and it declares the glory of God. This leaf has its own texture
and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape, and the bass and trout hiding in
the deep pools of the river are canonized by their by their beauty and their strength.
The lakes hidden among the hills are saints, and the sea too is a saint who praises God
without interruption in her majestic dance. The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is
another of God’s saints. There is no other like him. He is alone in his own character;
nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way.
That is his sanctity. 60

Here Merton sees the minute details of a leaf, the particular shape of a horse, or the patterns
of erosion on a nearby mountain as expressing God’s creative energy and wisdom. Creation
is Holy for Merton because it is sacramentally present to and emanated from God. But again,
this is not to say that it is God, or is divine. Creation is not merely a symbol of God, an empty
sign, but is also existentially contingent on God’s being at all times, and thus in some way
sacred.

The Inscape assumes creation to be inherently good, whereas human beings are
sinful. In my experience, I had learned that creation had fallen with humanity. This question
of sanctity and the doctrine of the fall was on my mind as I walked with Brother Salvatore. I
asked, “Is creation fallen?” He thought for a moment and then responded,

No. I mean well, there’s a lot of theology you can do around that, but original sin as
someone said, is a doctrine in the repair shop, because it’s sort of hard to once you
have an evolutionary conception of the universe, or the biosphere; some of what we
took for granted in our previous traditional formulations of the fall or original sin
can’t be taken at face value anymore. So there needs to be a reformulation around
that. On the other hand I mean it’s not sinful, I mean creation is innocent, it hasn’t
sinned, but there is a sense that what Paul says in Romans [Ch. 8] is still perfectly
valid, that the whole created order is waiting for liberation from decay and death. So
even though they are natural in a sense, in this space-time continuum, ultimately, the
creation we experience around us is to be freed from them too in the final kingdom of
God, the new creation.

This eschatological perspective, sees creation as inherently good, but unfinished, moving
toward its fulfillment in God. From a more agrarian standpoint, human beings are co-

redeemers of the earth through manual work and the Opus Dei, which sanctifies the world. But because of the work of scholars in retrieving and environmentalists in bridging Catholic and monastic worlds, creation models redemption for the monks, as they strive to become more in tune with our true nature which was loved into being by God. In this way, several of the monks could in fact imagine considering the land as *sacred* because all of creation is ultimately sustained in existence by God, and at its core contains something of God. However, the term *sacramental* was overwhelmingly more preferable and comfortable to the monks.

*The Holy Eucharist and the Real Presence of Christ in the Land*

In asking if the land is sacred, I would often draw a comparison. I would ask monks to compare the presence of Christ that they felt was real in the Eucharist, with the presence of Christ they may or may not feel as part of the land. This comparison got a couple of quizzical looks, but for the most part, the monks enjoyed the analogy, and often had to think about their responses for several seconds before replying.

To begin with, the Eucharist is the central rite of the Catholic liturgy. From the Greek *Eukharistia*, meaning ‘thanksgiving, gratitude,’ the Eucharist memorializes the Last Supper before Jesus’s death on the cross. Before he died, Jesus was with his disciples in Jerusalem for Passover, in which Jews memorialize their liberation from Egypt by preparing a Passover lamb. Thus, in New Testament theology, especially that of the apostle Paul, Jesus himself becomes the Paschal Sacrifice on behalf of the Christian community that is then memorialized and consumed by the Christian faithful.

During the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist takes place after the Liturgy of the Word, which includes scripture readings, a responsorial psalm, and a passage from the Gospels, on which the homily is usually based. When the bread and wine have been placed on the altar, the celebrant Priest, lifting first the bread and then wine, says the following prayers:

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands it will become for us the bread of life.
Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you: fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink.\(^6\)

I include these Eucharistic prayers because the language of the fruit of the earth being turned into Christ’s body and blood was a significant aspect of the way several of the monastics see the relationship between land and Eucharist. These initial Eucharistic prayers acknowledge both the earth, and human work that are then offered up to God. They are said to sacramentally model what is happening throughout the cosmos in God’s saving work as discussed above.

During the remainder of the liturgy, prescribed prayers “Transubstantiate” the bread and wine into the ‘Real Presence’ of Christ’s divine body and blood. The Catholic dogma of Transubstantiation, though it existed in nascent form from the very earliest times of the church, crystalized during the era of Scholastic metaphysics (1100-1700 CE), and asserts that the “substance” of the bread and wine are mystically transformed, while the “accidents” (appearance, chemical composition) remain the same.\(^6\) As the Priest raises first the bread and then the wine, he repeats the words of Jesus at the last supper: “This is my body” and, “this is my blood” and the act of consuming the body and blood of Jesus is imagined as the means by which God sanctifies his Church. Catholics do not see this as a symbolic gesture, but as a metaphysical, if mysterious, reality. As novelist Flannery O’Connor is famous for saying of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, “If it’s just a symbol, to hell with it!”\(^6\)

At each of the communities I visited, Mass was celebrated daily, typically after Lauds in the early or mid-morning. The monks I spoke with universally expressed their experience of the presence of Christ as literal and real. This notion that the bread and wine, which come from the earth were transformed into Christ, was also a factor in the land being perceived as sacramental as I hinted at briefly above in discussing the sacramental character of creation. As Brother Aymaro of New Clairvaux Abbey who make their own wine proudly reminded me:

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One of the things that I appreciate that we’re able to do here is, we make our own altar wine so actually the grapes that we’re harvesting out there become our altar wine and we also bake our own altar bread so it really is the work of our hands and it’s the work of nature passing through human hands that becomes the body of Christ which is the presence of God. So that’s kind of a powerful connection for me that we are able to do that ourselves rather than just purchase stuff.

Referring to the prayers discussed above, the fruit of the earth is cultivated and then offered back to God. Brother Bertrand of Christ in the Desert framed this aspect of the Eucharist in sacramental terms: “The land is sacramental because the land produces wheat which makes bread which makes the Eucharist. All of these things are integrated, and so yes, water is sacred, the land is sacred.” Here by sacred he means that they are devoted to sacred things. They will become Jesus’s body and blood. God the Father remains transcendent, but through the mystery of Jesus’s gift at the last supper, gives himself in body and blood to Catholic believers through the Eucharist which is very much immanent to the world.

Brother Adso of New Camaldoli Hermitage wonderfully summarizes the implications of this theology for how he experiences the land:

I take the symbolic language of the Eucharist pretty literally. ‘Blessed are you Lord God of all creation through your goodness we have this bread to offer which earth has given and human hands has made.’ And the wine, ‘fruit of the vine and work of human hands.’ Both the earth and humanity are in that. The bread that’s offered and the wine that’s offered it’s the earth that’s being offered up and being brought back and being offered back in right relationship with God. Secondly the phrase I use when I am teaching about the liturgy is before it’s the real presence of Christ it’s supposed to be the real presence of me, because that’s supposed to be the symbol of my life that gets lifted up. That’s why there is supposed to be two people not the priest that bring the gifts up because it is supposed to be, we are now in response to the [Liturgy of the] Word, we bring the fruit of the earth and the work of our hands. So it’s the earth and it’s what we have done with the earth that we are bringing to the table. That’s what gets lifted up and accepted and transubstantiated into the body of Christ. I get lifted up, the earth gets lifted up, everything gets lifted up and gets transubstantiated,
becomes the body of Christ and then broken and passed out again and we get to share it again, we get it back in right relationship.

Brother Adso’s mystical emphasis on the transformation of the person and earth into Christ is in fact quite orthodox. The Church is often referred to as the Mystical Body of Christ, and the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist are intended to sanctify the entire church, slowly transforming the world into Christ, which will ultimately happen at the end of time.

The Eucharist is the central rite of Catholic liturgical life. The monks universally expressed awe, wonder, and reverence for the Eucharist. And if I asked them what the most sacred place in the monastery was, they would inevitably respond by saying that it was the Tabernacle, the place in the church where the consecrated hosts were held. Eucharistic adoration, the ritual of exposing and venerating the exposed host in a receptacle called a monstrance was also a weekly and sometimes daily spiritual practice in the monasteries.

Brother Malachi succinctly summarized just how central the Eucharist was to his experience of the world, and the question of sacred land:

For Catholics everything that is sacred is ultimately indexed to the Eucharist somehow. Land where Jesus is present in the Eucharist, a place where Jesus is physically present in the Eucharist is different than a place where he isn’t present in the Eucharist.

In a sacramental ontology, God is everywhere present, but in the Catholic imagination that presence is most real and concentrated in the Eucharist, so anything that was to be considered sacred, had to be in some way connected back to the Eucharist.

Theologically, Catholics speak of the result of this rite as the “Real Presence.” The bread and wine are experienced as being the objective, real presence of Christ’s body and blood. This dogma of “Transubstantiation” solidified in the wake of the Protestant Reformation and with assertions that the presence was merely symbolic or spiritual.64 To ask if the “Real Presence” was in the land was essentially to ask if the land was Christ. I did this to elicit a response and a comparison. The majority of the monks insisted on a distinction. The Eucharist was Christ’s actual body, whereas the land was a sacramental kind of presence and reality. For example, sitting with Brother Ubertino on my first day at Christ in the Desert

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he, like most of the monks insisted on at least some distinction between the presence of
Christ in the Eucharist, and in the land: “God is present everywhere, everywhere. And God is
truly and really and intensely present in the Eucharist.”

Continuing our conversation in an open stand of oak and maple trees, I asked Brother
Salvatore, “Would you feel comfortable with phrases like ‘Real Presence’ when we talk
about trees and plants and the land?” Walking slightly ahead of me, he looked back with a
smile and said,

Oh sure, I mean, because [laughs] I am always a little vague about what God’s unreal
presence would be, you know? It’s like, well ya God is really present in the Eucharist,
and I believe that is special and distinct and unique; but how it is, is really kind of
hard to categorize and describe. So I mean, I would say God’s really present
everywhere, but not in exactly the same qualitative way in each case.
The difference between the Real Presence in the land and the Eucharist, if not rejected out of
hand, was most often qualified by a kind of gradation, or hierarchy of God’s presence. As
another example, sitting with a wise and elderly monk named Brother Jerome, at Christ in the
Desert he responded:

Somehow God must be really present in nature. There must be some presence of God
there, some energy of God in nature. The same as God is in you and I, that energy
sustaining you and I, it must be also be in the animal world and in the plant world as
well. Somehow there must be the presence of God. But the Eucharistic presence is the
presence of God incarnate of Jesus; it’s different than the transcendent presence of
God in you and I, or God in those plants.

Through God’s sustaining and creating power, God is present everywhere, but again,
objectively and substantially present in the Eucharist. Brother Berengar of Guadalupe Abbey
suggested that in fact there was only one sacrament, Christ:

The Sacraments don’t give us something we don’t already have. They awaken what is
already present, and I have always liked that we are really conceived in God, a ‘word’
from God as Romans says. I think the woods are sacramental for me, it awakens what
is already present, the desire for God…In the early church they had more than seven,
but canonically they put it down to seven, the number seven is perfect. But I think it’s
all Christ. There’s a Dominican theologian that says there is really one sacrament,
Christ, and out of that flows these encounters in our life. So I think it’s all sacrament, it’s all a sign of something deeper, but for me, here, the woods, this ridge, gave me so much that helped me live the life with greater fidelity and awareness of what is here. The Eucharist as a sacrament simply points out what is already there so that we can deepen our awareness of that reality.

Others however, sought to make a stronger distinction between the presence of God in the Eucharist and that in the land. Sitting with Brother Patrick in the chapel of New Clairvaux Abbey, he put more distance between the land and the Eucharist. He believed seeing God in creation was, a “special grace”, but one that moved away from the Eucharist in degrees:

Well I always say that the further away you get from the actual Mass, where you have bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ, the further away you get [from God]. Moving away would be seeing Christ in people, and then Christ in the landscapes. The further away you get its going to be harder to do. If then you get somebody like Saint Francis of Assisi who sees the presence of God in every little bug well I mean that’s getting pretty, that’s getting even further away. I mean he’s sitting there and preaching to the birds and its beautiful, I mean that’s fantastic, you know, but I think that’s a special grace, and we certainly don’t as Catholics, we don’t subscribe to that…to God being in the little bug or even in God being in the grape vineyard or wheat field or forest.

Certainly he would agree that God created and sustains creation, but to say that God is present in those things in the same way that God is present in the Eucharist seemed uncomfortable and outside of his way of understanding the word sacred as a Catholic, and as a Trappist monk. Brother Patrick did not ascribe to the theology of the Inscape, but rather saw creation as reflecting God’s gifts, purposes and beauty. If God is perfectly good, true and beautiful, then anything that participates in those qualities, participates in the nature and God. Brother Bertrand of Christ in the Desert taught me this distinction using the analogy of sex:

Um, [pause] I wouldn’t use Real Presence in its strict sort of philosophical, metaphysical sense. But yes I do think there is a real presence in nature and in the environment that does mediate God. It’s not the same as the Eucharist. It’s just like I would say you know the role of sexuality is to participate in God’s creation as creator.
We co-create physically but I don’t think God is sexual. But sexuality is how we as human beings participate in that Trinity of God, Father, Son and Spirit, that community of love that is producing life all of the time. And our sexuality is the way that we relate to that and participate in that generative life giving. And that’s what sexuality should be all about.

Hinting that contemporary society often strays from sex’s mystical sacramental participation in the life of the Trinity, the land too participates in God, but is not exactly the same as God or God’s presence in the Eucharist.

Several monks framed the idea of the Real Presence was to talk about it in evolutionary terms. As Brother Michael of New Camaldoli taught me, there was a kind of hierarchy of real presence, which he drew from the theology of 20th Century Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin, whose writings were condemned as heretical for a time during his life and shortly after his death. Brother Michael related:

It is different certainly, because Christ himself said ‘this is my body.’ Teilhard was really into evolution, so the different levels, from insentient creatures to sentient creatures then to apes etc. and then to the humans. He feels there is a development there. God’s revelation in nature is foundational but it assumes a whole higher personal level in the Christian mystery. The Eucharist is kind of a culminating, we call it a sacrament, it is an outer visible sign of an inner spiritual grace.

Again, there are degrees of God’s presence in the world, but in this instance Brother Michael puts an evolutionary lens on it. God’s presence is more potent as the evolution of consciousness becomes more developed. This was a key Teilhardian idea, and Teilhard saw this culminating in the “Omega” point, of the eventual consummation of all things in the universe in Christ, but through the human species.

In another interview, Brother Daig, who spends a lot of time walking the trails of Guadalupe Abbey, felt, like many Catholics, that the Eucharist was spiritual as well as physical nourishment. And in answering my question, about the Eucharist, he turned to a personal experience of the sacramental quality of creation, of how ultimately creation does objectively participate in the reality of God, appealing in many ways to the theology of the Inscape, though he does not mention it by name. He said:
The Eucharist is Jesus organically, mystically, spiritually feeding us and changing us from within, that’s our faith. So when I think about the land in that context, for me, you know, I can have a pretty busy mind sometimes that’s running on different thoughts based on some of the things that I experienced as a child, so I’ve had to go through a lot of healing space here at the monastery. I remember when I was a novice, I was up at about one in the morning, couldn’t sleep, and I was walking down the driveway and it was one of those clear nights where there’s no artificial light out here and the stars were just shining, and it was kind of this image of, well my head is shaking loose right now but, the universe isn’t. The reality of God is that everything is ok. Our minds get into spaces where things are off kilter, we’ve got to change this, or fix that, but what’s true is that God’s got it all in his hands, and we just have to trust. So part of the reason I go walking, is just to, I call it, participation in the stillness. That’s what I try to be when I am walking. Because the water, and the dirt, and the trees, and the animals they can’t not do Gods will, which is to be at peace; to be calm and at rest. That’s kind of the focus for the monk too, is to try and understand that that’s the truth about who we are interiorly and exteriorly. So when you bump up against some thought patterns that are pretty anguished or frustrated or hard to deal with, it’s nice to go out into the woods and say, hey, it’s ok and to really have an experience of that, to have it inform you.

Like the Inscape, to be sacramental, was viewed as not just symbolic in the sense of pointing to a distant artificer. Ultimately the Real Presence of the Eucharist concentrates the real presence in the land. Participating in the Eucharist is experienced as slowly transforming a sinful person into Christ, returning him or her to right relationship with God which is modelled by nature, as it also awaits redemption at the end of time. By walking the land, by “participating in the stillness,” for those monks who are looking, the land participates in God in a very similar way as the Eucharist, though not precisely the same way, or in the same objective quality. Brother Daig continued by extending this Eucharistic theology to the whole of creation,

Interacting as human beings is one thing, we’ve all got our stuff; but when you interact with the nature, nature is just what it is….nature is a curious thing, I think because it has elements of just simple nature and super-nature. If we believe in a
super natural being who cares about what’s going on within us and among us, well then I think that we have to take that belief system and transfer it over into everything that we encounter. So when I think about the Eucharist, this is death and resurrection; so life, death, and resurrection. So Jesus’s own experience of being in this world as an icon or paradigm for what happens to everything. When you go out in the forest, its living, its dying, and its being resurrected at the same time. So when we think about biological processes and how it works in the world itself, there’s an element of what’s happening at the Mass in nature itself. Whereas we used to go out there and if there was a log down we’d cut it up for firewood, well now we just let them lay most of the time. Not because we’re lazy, but because our forester said hey there’s all kinds of nutrients that we want to give back to the land. We don’t want to send it off just to burn in our furnace. So it’s kind of a movement of organic life that’s happening, and I think that that’s what’s happening with the Eucharist. As far as what’s happening in the universe is this life, death, and resurrection, all the time.

Life, death and resurrection, as embodied in the Eucharist points to that reality in the world through what I am calling a sacramental ontology. God is a super-natural reality, one that extends beyond the world as we know it, but one that participates in the natural reality, historically through the Incarnation of Jesus, and on a day to day basis through the Eucharist. Even the decision made in the mid-1990s to convert the Abbey’s forestry operation to an ecological model was interpreted in light of a sacramental ontology in which the process of life, death, and renewal was being restored to the land, and served to reinforce what Brother Daig felt was happening in his spiritual life, the inner mirroring the physical landscape.

Finally, sitting with Brother Ronan of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we talked about the importance of the Eucharist for his prayer practice on the land, and about the real presence of Christ in the land. He began by defining sacraments,

As integral and essential and crucial, sacraments are distillations if I can use that term of the mystery of God’s presence. The particular distillation of all seven of the sacraments are privileged instances of the incarnate mystery: transcendent, immanent. And by incarnate I don’t just mean cataphatic, I mean apophatic too, because this mystery of kenosis as presence is paradoxically what makes incarnation possible. So
there’s an emptiness as well as a presence in this immanence and that also is a very strong theme of Christian monasticism from the beginning. Speaking of God’s kenosis, which is viewed as an act of ‘self-emptying’ into the life of Jesus, God is certainly present in the official sacraments as “privileged instances” of God’s sacred reality, but the sacraments should then lead us to God’s deep imminence in the world itself. This attention to both the cataphatic, or spokenness of God, and the apophatic, or unspokenness of God is both paradoxical, but also what makes possible God’s incarnation in the world. “But would you be comfortable using the language of Real Presence?” I asked, Oh ya, but we need to find it there panentheistically. And the sacraments as distillation open us to this broader mystery as Paul’s says: God will be all in all and monks in a particular way need to be paying attention to that as a kind of realized eschatology. It includes this place here and now and the mystery of God’s life is unfolding in the land, in each other, and in God giving himself to us as food, in the tiniest morsel of matter. Since I’ve given my permission, I’ll try to be careful here, I don’t want to just sound like a pantheist.

To believe in the reality of the Incarnation, is to believe in a God who became human. Seeking God in the place, the Benedictine charism of the monastic life, is thus a wholly incarnational affair that is as Brother Ronan said, indexed to the Eucharist. God’s self-emptying (Kenosis) into the world, is marked by both presence and absence. Pantheism with its “stifling immanence” as Pope Francis refers to it in his Encyclical Letter Laudato Si, leaves no room for God’s absence, which is why Brother Ronan refers to both apophatic and cataphatic traditions. God is both immanent and transcendent in the land, present and absent. But in becoming bread and wine in the Eucharist, there is a qualitative difference from the general sacramental presence of God and Christ in the land.

In this section I have presented a variety of views of the monks in response to the question of whether or not the land is sacred. From a symbol of God, to a more real presence, as to whether or not land should be considered sacred is not a clearly defined position for the monks in this study. Even to say it is sacramental had a variety of nuances and distinctions which put more or less symbolic emphasis on the meaning of sacramental depending on the monk’s theological background. Those more comfortable with ecocentric or pantheistic
approaches were willing to admit a kind of real presence of God in the land, though it often varied by degrees rather than kind.

**Do Animals Have Immortal Souls?**

Working through the question of sacred land and God’s presence in the land as compared to the Eucharist, I would also often ask if the monks believed that animals had ‘souls’ however they understood that to mean. This question more than any other was often met with amusement, and speculation, and many monks who confessed they simply did not know. In this section I will outline the monk’s response to this question, and what it implies with respect to the question of sacred land.

The monks I spoke with all had great affection for the wildlife and domestic animals of the monastery properties. At New Camaldoli, they were proud that there was a recovering population of condors, and lamented that for some reason the foxes didn’t come around anymore. There were a couple of monastery dogs, one of whom I only met briefly because he was recovering from a broken leg. New Clairvaux Abbey co-existed with a flock of turkey vultures and wild turkeys who had both made their homes within the cloister arboretum. There was abundant bird life, and even a black bear sitting a few years back. Guadalupe had no domestic animals, but an abundance of birds, deer and squirrels, with the occasional fox or coyote. Christ in the Desert had two dogs, several cats and about five horses. They were also visited each summer by a small herd of free range cattle, and a noisy flock of Canada geese. Beavers lived on the river, rattle snakes came out in the summer and there was abundant migratory bird life. There were also several tales of black bears coming down from the mesas to help themselves to the monastery’s pantry food.

The monks enjoyed being part of both their human and nonhuman communities, and spoke fondly of their fellow creatures, though some of the monks at New Clairvaux were slightly annoyed by the boldness of the wild turkeys. However, whether or not they had souls was another question. When I asked one monk if he thought animals had souls, he replied, “Do dogs go to heaven? There’s no dogma on that” as a joke, but ultimately admitted that he did not know. Another simply responded, “I don’t know, I don’t know how to answer that question, I have never been asked that question.” Another made his position emphatically clear when he sneered, “I don’t think of [animals] as having anything remotely close to human souls.”
In traditional Catholic theology the human soul was created in the “image and likeness” of God, and thus is most like God of all his creatures here on earth. In the cosmic hierarchy, human beings are below the angels and above the rest of creation (See Psalms 8:5). This hierarchy is sometimes referred to as the Great Chain of Being, and expresses the reason God created a diversity of creatures. Thomas Aquinas, one of the most important theologians in the history of the Catholic tradition wrote of this purpose:

God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided.65

Being an Aristotelean, Aquinas saw levels of degrees in this diversity, from the rock, to the plant, to the animal to the human, to the angel to God. Each aspect of creation possessed soul, but there were, once again distinctions between the souls. After the Enlightenment, and Descartes’s philosophical dualism between mind and matter, human beings were enshrined as the only creatures with soul. So to the contemporary mind, to ask whether animals had souls, was implicitly to ask if animals had human souls. My question failed to see a distinction made by medieval scholastics that there are various types of soul. It was in fact a dualistically framed question: either animals have (something like a human) soul, or they do not.

Brother Malachi of Christ in the Desert, presented a very thorough explanation for how the modern West had departed from this medieval notion:

[Rene] Descartes has this idea, you know, 1640, Meditations—I think this is where this comes from—everything is either thought [cogitans] or its extension [extensa]. So you’ve got thought and you’ve got extension and the people who think that thought is primary become Rationalists; the people who think extension is primary become Empiricists. But there’s an older idea. Saint Thomas Aquinas is this change, this sort of argument of this hierarchy of being, and all the Medieval thought like

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this. You have the ‘Vegetative Soul’ everything that you see here [pointing to plants] has a vegetative soul. Then you have things that have a ‘Sensitive Soul.’ Then you have things that have a ‘Rational Soul.’ For the medievals *everything was ensouled.* Everything in the cosmos was both subject and object, or in Descartes’ language everything in the cosmos was in some sense thought and extension. There was never a purely material reality that is just dead on a spiritual level. For the medievals nothing falls into that category. And I think that when we look around us, at this canyon, we look at this river, we look at this bush in front of us that is in the very, very, sort of early stages of spring. And it’s got these bright, bright green leaves. But if you come back and you look at this in a month, the leaves are going to be darker, there are going to be more of them, and it’s going to be much more fully in bloom. This is changing from moment to moment, from day to day, from week to week, and the complicated natural processes that make that possible—everything from the river and the nutrients and minerals that are in it to the sunlight—only God is possibly capable of ordering something like that.

This subtle distinction that everything was ensouled, but not necessarily with a *human,* rational and immortal soul was expressed by many of the monks, who had developed strong bonds of affection for animals, and as part of their ascetical practices abstained from the meat most of the time (some ate chicken and fish).

Walking along the northern path at Christ in the Desert with the two small monastery dogs in tow, Brother Berach gave a more confident reply that invoked the medieval scholastic tradition:

All animals have souls, that’s Thomas Aquinas. All the philosophers have recognized that the soul is what holds something together. We’re not talking about our kind of spiritual soul, but today when we say soul, everybody presumes it’s the human soul. So when you say does a dog have a soul, they’re meaning does a dog have a human soul. I say no it doesn’t have that kind of a soul, it’s a dog soul.

Cutting through the confusion, Brother Berach makes a key distinction: animals may have souls, but it’s not a human soul. Brother Venantius described this Great Chain of Being is cosmological, Christological terms:
God reached into the far end of the universe, like grabbing the back end of a balloon and pulled it back the other direction. He’s made himself present by becoming part of the created order [Jesus] precisely so he can pull the entire created order back up into himself. Christ is the head of everything, and everything is present in him. Everything finds its expression before God in Christ. So when I’m encountering the beauty of a flower, or what have you, a tree, this or that, any part of creation, the land as you say, I’m encountering some part of Christ, some radiance of Christ. Christ is present to that thing, but I’m not so foolish as to think that Christ is present to this flower in the same way he is present to the infant that I’ve just held in my arms. That’s silly, I mean to me it’s silly.

God created the universe as a divine outpouring of love, and as an expression of the goodness which in God is simple and unified, but in the world is diverse. Through the Incarnation, God became part of, or immanent to the universe. His purpose is to bring it all back to Him through Christ. God is present in the land, and animals and plants, but there are degrees of God’s presence moving up the hierarchy of consciousness.

However other monks were not so sure, or even aware of this distinction. For example, Brother Ronan felt more comfortable saying that animals and plants share the principle of life:

Well not an immortal soul, there’s a principle of life there and in fact depending on the animals they have a certain amount of intelligence. Some dogs are just whizzes you know, whereas a frog or a gnat they have more instinct.

Brother Donnon of Christ in the Desert, framed his answer in sacramental language, but also grasped for words that would not come:

Those rocks are not just minerals, they are something that I couldn’t really put it into words, because I can’t think of the words. But I know that that is sacred. That that is Godlike. There is something there; it isn’t God, but it is [pause] the result of God. God is present everywhere, and God is thus evident in the smallest particle of matter. There is no set doctrine on animals’ souls, so this felt fuzzy for him.

Brother Ubertino simply threw his head back laughing and pleaded ignorance, but having been a farmer before he came to Christ in the Desert, he knew animals very intimately:
I have no idea whether animals have souls or not; I suspect they don’t but I know human beings have souls. I know that’s defined. I know that reality. I think we tend to anthropomorphize animals. And by the way I love animals and I’ve raised cows and pigs and goats and slaughtered them and loved them. And every animal I have ever raised had a name, but I understand my purpose, which is to know and love and serve God in this life and have union with him in the next. But animals have incredible qualities. Anybody who raises cows, I’m not talking raises 5,000 cows industrially, but if you raise a dozen cows, you have a dozen personalities. And cows are very bright and you watch them teach their young; eat this, don’t eat that, you know. Cows have such distinct personalities, so do pigs, so do goats. You raise goats, you’ll laugh every day of your life. They’re just wonderful animals. So ya I love animals, but if God wants to tell me in the next life that animals have souls, then I’ll learn that fact.

Intelligent, personable, useful and entertaining, but not necessarily ensouled. And because there is no dogma on the subject, and because it doesn’t seem to impact his primary purpose as a monk, he hasn’t put much thought into the prospect, and is willing to wait until the next life to see if it is a humans-only affair.

Brother Sachellus, who had an indoor office job at Guadalupe, and suffered from a health problem that limited his ability to go outside, framed animals in more anthropocentric terms, as God’s gifts to us:

I think they’re basically gifts to us. Souls in an eternal sense? I mean obviously they are alive, if they are animals. No, when the geese are flying over, the swallows are here, they usually come back about this time of year, another month maybe, and that’s always a treat to see them back. They are just great to watch. The deer they’re always a treat. The rabbit, or the bushy tailed squirrels I always delight in, and I thank the Lord for the trees, because it can transform your day to have something like that cross your path, so they’re a gift as far as I am concerned.

Despite his limited mobility, he was very much keyed into the cycles and seasons of the monastery, and enjoys to watch the birds and deer from his cell window, or the cloister garden, but he held a more dualistic, or modernist view of animals, that in fact they were not ensouled in any way like human beings.
Brother Adso, from New Camaldoli held a more pan-psychic view, meaning that consciousness pervades reality, and the God is the ultimate consciousness:

I really have no trouble whatsoever in thinking that all things have a share of psychic consciousness...with animals it just seems so easy to me. I don’t think it’s the same self-reflexive consciousness; like, we really are matter coming into consciousness, the human person. But it seems undoubtable to me that animals and wildlife have some share in that consciousness too. Certainly animals being able to respond to the emotional environment of a place; but even plants, being able to respond to the emotional environment of a place: oppressed trees, and happy trees, in a very very subtle way. I don’t necessarily get much of a vibe off the chair [laughs] for instance or the plastic bag, but I would want to believe that there is consciousness that permeates all this in some way. It’s a little more evident [laughs] maybe with the plants and the animals than it is with a refrigerator. Cars though, I know cars have souls! [Laughs] There’s no way around it!

For Brother Adso, who was well versed in Hindu philosophy, the operative word was consciousness, because the world was more subtle and unified than the Cartesian subjects and objects, but it was also not quite as rigid or fixed as the medieval Chain of Being. Rather, using the language of Teilhard’s evolutionary model, consciousness was everywhere present in the universe, and human beings represented an evolutionary threshold in which the universe itself was seen as coming into awareness of itself. And being something of a car lover, he felt that perhaps his favorite models of car were conscious as well!

Each of the monks had their own stories and affections for the animals at their monasteries, but one story in particular related to how Brother Sillan came to believe that animals truly do have immortal souls like human beings. As Brother Sillan and I sat in the unplanted spring garden of Christ in the Desert, talking, a Canada goose flew low over head, on its way to the nearby banks of the Chama River. We both paused to watch as she noisily splash landed on the water, and then Brother Sillan broke the silence, “How beautiful that one is” before continuing his train of thought:

You have to treat them with respect, they are your brothers. ‘No they are not my brothers!’ Yes they are your brothers! Who made you? God. Who made them? God. Oh! Same Father? Brothers! [Laughs] They are kindred. They can feel love,
attachment, they can suffer. Have you ever seen a pig cry? Tears running. And have you seen a cow in terror? You seen a dog suffering with a broken leg? Or a dog really being himself with sheer joy? It’s part of us, it is part of God. It’s part of feeling. I don’t dare say it’s a collective soul, they’re sentient beings!

Again, avoiding the language of pantheism, I assumed that meant he did not believe they had souls. So I asked, “But no soul?” He corrected,

Yes! I think they are, yes. There will be some traditionalists who will say ‘oh no, they are creatures!’ I have a really cute story. I had this dog her name was Silvia and she was my friend for ten years, she was three years old when I got her. She was my friend for ten years, and we hiked together and everything. She was my companion, we even shared the same room and everything. I let her sleep on my bed, and sometimes I would sleep on the floor. We just treated each other as equals and when Silvia died something very interesting happened that convinced me more of the animal soul. I knew she was passing and so I held her. She looked at me and all that I could see was that she was going to leave. Hanging in my window, inside my cell, I have this mobile that was made of clay that is so heavy that of course it’s never going to move. I mean a hurricane could come through the window and those clay things hanging there are never going to move. When Silvia died, those things started spinning, and bling, bling, bling, bling, making sounds like bells. I just looked up and I knew it was her. I just looked at her and I sensed that she left this body. I felt this kind of like joy energy.

This experience convinced Brother Sillan that animals had souls, that they shared in the ‘energy,’ as he put it, that permeates the universe, and that they must in some way participate in life after death.

This question of immortality of animal souls, of salvation also came up during my interviews with the monks. What was the ultimate destiny of creation? As I continued my walked with Brother Salvatore, I asked, “Would you be comfortable with saying trees and plants have souls?” After thinking for a moment, he said:

Well, after a fashion, I mean I like to think for instance that there’s some kind of life for every living thing in the hereafter, in the ‘New Creation’, that is represented by whatever mode it exists in here below. So that nothing is wasted, nothing is totally
lost. I believe that. I’ve heard from near death experience stories about this kind of thing. That people find their dogs again in their experience, and it’s hyper real. Well, I think if that’s true of dogs, or other animals then, in some fashion there’s no reason in principle why it couldn’t be true of trees or plants.

Not quite comfortable with granting animals and plant immortal or human-like souls, Brother Salvatore instead speculated on the telos of creation, and how everything, not just human beings are headed for completion in God.

Brother Michael, who wrote his dissertation on Teilhard de Chardin framed this question of salvation this way,

The Teilhardian theology is that from the beginning, mysteriously they are all created in the Word that is in Christ as he is foreseen by God the Father, and now they are all part of what we call the glorified Body of Christ. Saint Paul says each one of us are members of Christ, but Teilhard extends this. We are so interconnected with nature through breathing, through feeding, etc. that Christ can’t save just me without saving all of humanity; and can’t save all of humanity, and incorporate it in his expanded reality, without saving all of creation. So it’s all not just sacred, but Christic.

For Brother Michael, creation was in fact sacred because it was inextricably linked backwards to the creation through the Word, and forward to the eschatological fulfillment of all things in Christ that Christians await at the end of time.

At Christ in the Desert in particular, questions regarding animals souls struck a particularly emotion chord against a strong Catholic pro-life stance, and what they saw as some of the more absurd claims of the environmental movement. Being candid with me, Brother Berach complained: “My problem with environmentalists is they say that the earth would be better without humans.” From a Catholic perspective, the dignity of the human soul was to be protected from conception to natural end of life, and many environmentalists seemed to be misanthropic from his perspective. He said that the monastery wanted to be ecologically sustainable, but in their own way:

It has to be an ecology from the Christian point of view that values all of creation, and all peoples. Most of ecology is about creation, not about humans. We’re the menace, we’re not part of it. But from the beginning, Saint Benedict or Saint Francis later on, these people who had a sense of care for everything. A monastery should do that; in
the way it treats its guests, the way it builds, the way it does architecture, and the way the brothers relate to each other. We’re all part of that ecology. Now, I’m an ecologist: ‘that poor cow, we shouldn’t eat cows anymore.’ OK, but five million abortions, that doesn’t matter? The next thing we can see moving toward is assisted suicide, old people. You know they’re polluting the planet too, so let’s get rid of them!

Drawing out what he as a hypocritical stance, which would criticize the excesses of slaughter houses while at the same time remaining silent on abortion, was where he broke ranks with environmentalists, who he saw as promoting a kind of eugenics. In Pope Francis’s recent Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, he calls this approach an integral ecology, because it balances the need for caring for human beings, especially the most poor and vulnerable with the care of the earth.66

Animals who in Scholastic theology were ensouled, after the enlightenment became material creatures. Catholic humanism enshrines the human person as possessing the greatest dignity and worth to God of all creation. However, as the environmental movement reclaims the place of creation in our ethical purview, many monks are warming to the idea, or have always been convicted of it, that animals do in fact have soul, with some believing that they have immortal souls and a place in the afterlife.

**Charged Moments and the Absence of God in Sacramental Landscapes**

Until how I have described the variety of ways in which the monks understand the term sacred in its relationship to sacramental theology and their experience on the land. In this section, I will show that these experiences with the landscape also took on an embodied affective quality that transcendent the cognitive and constructed nature of sacramental theology. Whether walking, working or praying, the sacred often broke through the land at unexpected moments.

During my interview with Brother Adelmo, we decided to have a seat on a bench on the outskirts of New Clairvaux’s Abbey cemetery, which was lined on two sides by Italian Cypress trees that used to form a cross, until several of the trees were killed by disease. The weather was clear, but the air was still chilly with morning moisture, and I shivered a little until the sun rose above the trees’ canopy. Soft spoken and insightful, Brother Adelmo

66 [Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si.*](#)
responded to each of my questions, and as we neared the end of the interview, I stiffened my back to stretch. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that the pollen that had been wafting from the cypress trees all morning had caught the sunlight as it was now rising over the Abbey church, and we were suddenly in the midst of a transcendent display of light that danced in rays through the thick cypress pollen behind a massive cross at the center of the cemetery. It was beautiful, and we both simply paused and watched the display in silence.

While much of the literature on sacred landscapes is concerned with specific sites, or the ways in which a given cultural or religious group constructs an idea of what is sacred and what is not, within the monastic context experiencing the sacred through the land is not as simple as walking into a church or attending Mass. While God is understood to be present in all things, especially the human heart, everyday reality tends to obscure this fact. Praying in the cell, in church, or on the land, engaging in manual work, opens one to God’s presence in different modes and avenues, but one cannot simply expect to return to the same place or activity every day and feel the same connection. Yes certain vistas or times of day have consistent affective qualities, but many of the monks reported having experiences of the sacred that were not at all expected. As Dewsbury and Cloke suggest, spiritual landscapes are “co-constituted” through embodied practices that anticipate something that is “immanent but not yet manifest.” In other words, while God is everywhere, he tends to manifest himself in particular places through particular experiences. This *immanence* is of course reinforced by the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the status of the world as brought into being and sustained by God in an ongoing act of creation. In other words, the question of sacred landscape is not just a “semiotic problem” of interpretation, or even of blending subjective and objective elements, but an event of visceral encounter that can shift and change at unexpected times and places when God bursts forth into the heart or onto the scene unexpectedly and without warning. This can be during a spectacular sunset, a walk, the mass, or, while mowing the lawn, pruning the orchards or simply walking from cell to chapel.

As I sat watching the pollen dance in the morning sunlight, the cemetery cross took on its full visual potential as a symbol of resurrection, life and light. God seemed to be playing with the time and place in such a way as to enthrall us to this divine dance of everyday elements. God had been there the whole time of course, but in that moment burst
through the surface in a display of beauty that held Brother Adelmo and I in speechless silence for several minutes.

Unlike the bounded, consecrated area of a church, or the domain of an ancient goddess protecting a sacred grove, a sacramental ontology means that the simultaneous imminence and transcendence of God can shine through at any given moment. Certainly the monks had their favorite places to pray, or think, or recreate, to walk and hike, but it was often in unexpected moments or locales that the presence of God was most experienced, that the sacred was most intimately felt. This proximate distance, negates the pantheist understanding of the divine as equal to the world, and leaves room for internal growth, for the desire to seek God when we feel his absence.

Just as in Chapter 3, the monks consistently reported experiences where the land served as a kind of moral lesson or allegory during walks or working, these experiences were also invoked to respond to my questions regarding the sacredness of landscape, or whether or not the monks had a favorite location on the property. For example, during holy week, Brother William of Guadalupe Abbey noticed three familiar trees silhouetted in the distance, trees that had been there for as long as he could recall, but on that particular day, at that particular time touched him profoundly. He said that their symbolism was “a really charged moment.” Perhaps during other times of the year, the trees might not have spoken so powerfully, but at that time, and place they did. These charged moments bring together inner and outer landscapes which can sometimes be experienced as separate.

To get at these kinds of experiences, I often asked the monks if they had a favorite place on the property. Or, if they were able to go for a walk, I would ask them to take me to it. Sitting in my cell in the evening with Brother Abo of Guadalupe Abbey he said this:

I cannot say I have a favorite spot, but I can say you go and you start walking and you turn off here, because the land always changes, you turn off here and my goodness gracious turn around and look at that what a beautiful moment, you know? Then it just changes, so really I cannot say that I have a special spot.

Trying to answer my question, he revealed a deeper meaning to the sacramental approach that monks carry with them, a constant openness to spiritual meaning, symbol, sign and affect, to the ways that the land speaks of God.
Brother Alinardo of Guadalupe Abbey had a strong sense of the profound impact the place had on his soul, not only through formation, liturgy and work, but through those mysterious moments of encounter that could not be repeated:

There’s beauty anywhere. You can go for a walk anywhere, and say it’s beautiful; the trees are beautiful, there’s certain views, there’s certain spots that are just meaningful for you at a certain time. You can look at it, take a picture and say, ‘oh that’s beautiful,’ but that can be fleeting too. I’ve been blessed, where I’ve been to a lot of different parts of the country and backpacked and gotten to beautiful spots in nature, so I really do appreciate those moments, but the deeper moment of what the land has meant to me is just it’s more of a mystery. Where you’re on a hike and it’s like somehow God touches you in the hike in this particular spot and you can’t repeat it. You go back there it’s not going to be the same as when God touched you in that spot, but the memory is there.

Beauty was very important to Brother Alinardo, but the most profound moments on the landscape, where those “charged moments” that could not be repeated. Just as work and prayer inscribe certain places with moral lesson or memories, charged moments accumulate on the landscape, and become their own semiotic triggers for God grace manifested tangibly for the monks on the land.

Brother Berengar, shared this experience with me about a kind of epiphany moment, where God was revealed in the most familiar of places:

One experience I do remember was with Brother John; we had to make a book run into Lynnfield College in McMinnville, and it was late afternoon, it was in December and we were driving back and it was dusk, and you could see where on Abbey Road before you turn into the drive way coming close to the turnoff, I could see the ridge, this ridge behind the Abbey [pointing]. And it was just palpable, it just spoke to me of God. You know Edith Stein, when she went to Paris she said ‘there’s a there there.’ So, to me it was like it was palpable, there was a silhouette up against the sky, it was dusk, winter day, and I’ll never forget that. It was just very consoling. Like, God’s behind all of this…I’d seen that ridge many times so you can’t make it happen, so my experience of God, is God hits you from the side, surprises you.
God surprises you. Whereas the Eucharist was a ritual, predicatable and repeatable encounter with Christ, that could be entered into at will through attention and repetition; the land was more open, more apophatic, or unspoken, and to say it is all equally sacred at all times is to lose that nuance. The sacramental character of the world provided a doorway through which the monks sought entry, but the door opens from the inside. Brother Berengar also described an experience he had with a gash in a tree.

This Doug fir was just alive really and there was sap facing it there was this gash and sap dripping out of it. Immediately I thought of Christ you know his side gash and the blood and water flowing from his side and it was just I remember touching it and it was a very holy moment for me and running back to the scriptures and looking and it was his right side and it was the right side of this tree...My eyes were kind of opened to the experience of God that God is always with us. We’re the ones that just don’t always see it. And then I tried that next day and went back and it was not the same it’s the same. It was alive but the light wasn’t there that there was that day; but I’ll never forget that tree.

The open gash on the tree became a sign of Christ’s wound; but it was not experienced in the same way the next day. While this tree became a part of his moral landscape through the formation of habit memory, the charged holiness of the moment was fleeting. The symbolism was always there, but the affective quality was now only a reflection.

The rural and wild setting of the monastic communities was experienced as sacramental of God’s majesty and beauty, but it was also a vehicle to a sense of God’s very real presence. As Brother Malachi of Christ in the Desert taught me as we sat on the bank of the Chama River, the wilderness can carry us into an encounter with the divine:

I think it was Evagrius of Pontus who said that ‘the contemplation of God is preceded by the contemplation of nature.’ Words something to that effect. We’re all so intuitively familiar with that idea. Being in a mall, there’s nothing about a mall or a parking lot or something like that predisposes us to have a contemplative experience of God. But there’s something about a wilderness setting that if we let it will sort of like this river just sort of carry us into a spiritual moment.

Contemplative spirituality is so often land-based because wild and rural places are sacramental of God’s presence; and somehow, as Brother Malachi seems to imply, the
conveniences and achievements of human industry are monuments to ourselves rather than to God.

On another occasion, during one of my longer interviews, at another shaded section of the Chama River, where song birds chirped and Canada Geese were rearing their young, Brother Venantius taught me a parable about how he experienced God in the world, and why the practice of contemplative spirituality matters:

The universe is in God, as opposed to the other way around. God is holding all of creation in being. We are present therefore to God as fish are to the ocean. He’s all around us and my soul or my being is like a semi-permeable membrane. God can soak in and soak out; soak in and soak out. I’m called to let that soak in more and more and more; to let the inflow of God, the divine inflow, soak into deeper and deeper dimensions of my being. So like with contemplation you have been casting your fishing hook into the river, doing it every day because you’ve been told to do it, and today, CHHH!, something snagged on the other end of the line, and its alive. Fishing has just become a very different reality for you. Something is alive on the other side. Same thing in prayer, you’ve gone to pray, you’ve gone to pray, you’ve gone to pray. CHHH! something popped on the inside; something pulled back on the other end of the line. Ok, this is different. So now to go into prayer, I can’t create that, I can’t make the fish bite the line. You realize of course he’s actually the one with the rod and I’m the one with the hook in my mouth.

The monk is called to sink into God’s presence in the world, and through doing so, bring God closer to the world. Prayer is not a kind of vending machine, but a sort of holy waiting. But you realize that this has become a place, the interior has become a place to encounter God. The memorization of the words of scripture or the repeating of words, concepts, thoughts, has been an aid. Perhaps images have been an aid, but they’ve just been that, an aid. Now I’m into something, I’m not in control of this, I don’t bring up a pretty picture and have a fish bite the hook. I don’t repeat a bunch of words, however sacred, and have this interior experience. I’m the one being caught, OK. So when that happens to you, apart from scripture, and apart from Eucharistic adoration, when it happens to you, sitting and you sense his presence, because it’s a magnificent moonrise, because there seems to be a greater stillness in and about you, I’m like oh,
you’re here now; of course you’re always here, but you're here now in a deeper way inside me. I’m being spoken to now by a creation, but again it’s all going to pass away one day.

Liturgy, adoration, cataphatic spirituality in general, is training for the apophatic encounter of God in the inner landscape of the soul.

Or, let’s put it this way, I’m not going to go out for a horseback ride or go into the mountains and create that experience any more than I’m going to get it by reading John’s Gospel, or a book of the mystics; I can’t create it. The Lord makes himself present, as he makes himself present. Since I’m inside God right now, the inflow of the ocean into my soul happens at his discretion, not mine. If it happens at his discretion while I’m reading scripture, or while I’m in Eucharistic adoration, or praying the Rosary, magnificent; if it happens while I’m walking alone, or sitting, or watching the river, magnificent; His choice. I’m not so foolish as to think my reading of scripture or my walking alone, looking at this particular mountain is what did it, so that I gotta get back here tomorrow at 4 o’clock to watch God come back into my soul again as if he’s the fish on the hook and I’m the guy with the rod. It’s not that way, you’re not in charge. Like I said, I noticed very clearly in the first six months I was here, praise rising up in me, and I just noticed it one night as I was walking along. I said that’s interesting, I just have a lot more praise inside me than I’ve ever had before, and it seems to all be tied to the magnificence, the majesty of this place.

This profound parable, that human beings are actually the ones on the hook, and God is the one with the rod, perfectly captures the nuances of a sacramental theology/ontology. Creation is sacred because it was created by God, and subsists in God; but there is not a 1:1 correlation between God and the land. The Sacraments such as the Eucharist, and sacramentals such as the Rosary aid in achieving a measure of inner stillness, but they do not produce encounters with God that we are not open to. It is in the charged moments, surrounded by the beauty of the land, or the stillness of water, or the darkness of the sky, that opens one to an experience of connection between the interior and the exterior landscapes. Certain the affective qualities of landscape are co-constituted, but that constitution is not a formula. The metaphysical commitment of the monks to the reality of God ultimately speaks to and explains these
‘charged moments’ and the sacredness of the landscape becomes contingent upon the sacredness of the moment.

As discussed at length in Chapter 3, it was not just moments of leisure that opened the land to the experience of the sacred. As Brother Severinus of New Clairvaux described, his own powerful mystical encounter occurred during a hard day’s work pruning in the orchard (pg. 171). And for Brother Berengar, who worked as a tree planter for several years, his most profound metaphor for making the leap into the monastic life, was gleaned from the experience of planting Douglas fir trees (pg. 167). Walking, praying and working, Ora et Labora, all within the monastic setting opened the possibility, but did not guarantee the presence of God to be felt. Thus God was not synonymous with the land as in pantheism or Gaian spirituality, but God was revealed through land, sacramentally.

From a pan-en-theist perspective, where all things are in God, God is ultimately transcendent, or in addition to the world. Thus moments of encounter are paradoxically also reminders of the absence of God, who is not fully incarnate in any one particular thing or place on the land. However, due to the highly romanticized nature of the land, few of the monks expressed any kind of ambivalence regarding the pain, suffering or parasitism that are also an integral part of land and ecology. Sitting with Brother Jorge of Guadalupe Abbey, however, who expressed deep love and appreciation for the land, he also recounted in somber detail, how on occasion, the land communicates a sense of emptiness and God’s absence:

Sometimes, I feel the absence of God in creation. God is not creation. Because if you look at creation, creation is cruel. There’s war, the trees are fighting each other, are killing each other for air and space and light, so creation is what the poet says, ‘red in tooth and claw.’ So I sometimes I go for a walk in nature and I get this terrible empty feeling. It’s a really empty feeling and I feel nature say to me, ‘don’t look for your beloved here, we are not your beloved.’ And when you read the mystical theology of the church, from Origen to Gregory the Great, Saint Bernard; that mystical theology of the bridegroom our soul is made for God. Augustine has it too, ‘our souls are made for God and they are restless until they rest in him.’ So there’s a part of us that nothing can fill in creation. There’s nothing that will. We are made to see God, and God is not a creation, he’s a Creator. [Pause] So creation reminds me, it says ‘yes, we’re beautiful and you can enjoy us, but don’t forget who you really are and who
you’re really made for.’ And sometimes it reminds me very, very starkly. I go for a walk in the winter and everything is cold and dark and damp, and I just feel the emptiness, the absence of God completely. But that absence is a very, very good thing. It is a spiritual experience in itself.

To live on the land is also be present to death, suffering and natural evils. Brother Jorge was actually one of the only monks that spoke in these terms, with most of the monks affirming creation’s ultimate goodness. If there was evil in creation it was our projection, some might say. But Brother Jorge brings to the fore an important though seldom discussed aspect of sacramental theology: God’s absence. In a pantheistic theology of the land, where God and the land are one and the same, it is difficult to rationalize the reasons for the existence of evil and death. If creation is divine, why is there so much suffering and death that seems necessary for land to exist at all? If Gaia is Mother, why do species go extinct in such quantities through natural calamities? From a sacramental ontology, this is explained by God’s ultimate transcendence from creation, which is said to continue to “groan” in pain as it awaits liberation from death and pain at the end of the world.

**Conclusion**

Brother Salvatore and I never made it to the Shrine. We had to turn back about halfway into the interview in order to return in time for the afternoon Office. Our slow pace and our frequent stops kept us from the top, but as we walked back the structure of conversation wandered away from my research into more personal and general topics. As we descended past the Jesus statue once again, I was reminded of just how deeply many of the monks see Christ in the land; not necessarily as a quaint smiling man, but as God’s cosmic and mysterious presence in and love for the world. And even though most would not say that the land *is* Christ, there were hints and whispers of his presence everywhere, if one were willing to look.

While this chapter has been heavy on theology, there was also a simplicity to the monastic experience that was captured during one of my interviews with an elderly monk, who was at times a little hard to follow through a slurred accent. When I asked him if the land was sacred, he hesitated only for a moment and simply said: “I would say that it is loved.”
In asking the monks whether the land was sacred, I showed that Catholic monks’ views of the earth in general and land in particular are traditionally characterized as sacramental, which means that land points to God as creator, whose indwelling spirit is simultaneously and mysteriously immanent throughout creation, but who remains transcendent of the world. The land insofar as it is devoted to God’s purposes contains sacred dimensions and implications, but it is not in itself divine.

Yet, even within the same sacramental theology, each monk constructed a unique approach to the land based on their own experiences with the land. For some, as a work of God’s creation, the world points to God in the way that a beautiful chair points to a woodworker. The world is an icon or symbol that points to a transcendent God. The world in this view is not comfortably seen as sacred, because God alone is sacred. To see the land as sacred is to tread pantheist waters, or to speak of Native American nature spirituality. Land that is devoted to God’s purposes through monastic prayer is also considered sacred, and in a few cases experienced as being changed by that work in a more holy place than surrounding areas. For others, God is experienced as more deeply immanent to creation through what I have called the Inscape, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharist which is believed to be the Real Presence of Christ is not the same as the presence of God in the land, which is theologized as a Transubstantiation of the essences of the bread and wine. However, the elements of the land, and the entire universe participate in this Eucharistic transformation through God’s saving work which will culminate at the end of time.

Animal souls were often conceived as being lower of lesser than human beings, embedded with a cosmic hierarchy or chain of being. While some monks denied the immortality of animal souls, others affirmed this through personal experiences. God’s absence was seldom discussed in reference to the land expect in one remarkable case.

Charged moments where God’s indwelling presence was unexpectedly experienced or felt in the land were often reported by the monks. There was nothing in particular about the places where these moments occur that triggered the moments expect some combination of openness, change in light or weather, or internal struggle.

These diverse experiences of God’s presence in the world, and opinions on whether or not the land is sacred suggest that it is a place of live debate, bridging and negotiation.
Within the same orthodox sacramental theology, God’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence were experienced and emphasized differently by different monks. Those with more conservative views, held what might be called a ‘shallow’ sacramentalism, which emphasizes God’s transcendence. The beauty of creation speaks to the beauty of God, but not in a single voice, only in hints and whispers. The finger pointing to the moon is not the moon as the saying goes. This stance certainly corresponds with the widely understood position of Christianity which seeks to distance itself from Pagan theologies of pantheism. However, sacramental theology can be characterized as Pan-en-theistic, meaning that it accepts both God’s transcendence and immanence. In dialogue with environmental discourses and with the rise of Ecotheology and Spiritual Ecology, this equally orthodox thread of Christian theology has garnered more attention within Christianity more broadly, and land-based monasticism specifically, which has always affirmed the sacramental quality of the world through various guises.

Thus, through what we might call a ‘deep’ approach to sacramental theology, the world is entwined with God’s presence and intention and love. The world without God would not exist, and to speak of a world without God is to speak of a world of dead matter that is up for grabs to the highest bidder. As one monk said of God’s presence in the world, “God is resident in me. God is resident in you.” Through the Incarnation, in which God became human, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it is increasingly acceptable to talk about land as sacred, because it is sustained by God who is the Ground of Being at every moment. It is not the same as God, but it participates in God’s life giving essence. The Inscape, as several monks called it, of creation, the ‘thisness’ of its sheer being participates in God’s ongoing act of creation, meaning that God is truly and uniquely present to each thing in the cosmos without being synonymous with it.

Within my broader argument, the bridging between environmental and monastic motifs and discourses regarding the sacred are constructed through a long theological and philosophical tradition, a process that continues, as the monks warm to the language of spiritual ecology and the insistence on a more intrinsic value for ecology. However, the ‘charged moments’ reported by many of the monks also show that this theological framework participated in the individual experiences of the monks. Unique affective or transcendent moments often served as semiotic markers of God’s presence in the land,
attaching themselves to the land, and adding depth to the monk’s sense of place and connection to the land through the lens of sacramental theology. Thus the elements of theological reflection which are being negotiated both shape and are shaped by embodied experiences which open the monks to deeper connection and communion with place and landscape.

Perhaps from a more conservative theological stance, the process of identifying the land as sacred is worrisome, however, in an environmental context where one aspect of cultural transformation is reimagining the land as in some way sacred, these are welcome developments. From my own perspective as something of a Catholic spiritual ecologists, monasticism, while it may not present the most progressive positions with respect to ecological theology, certainly models the kind of experiences of place and landscape that will make that this kind of heady theology actually meaningful in the lives of everyday Christians.
Vespers

Chapter 5: The Book of Creation: Symbol, Sign and Embodied Experience of Landscape

“When I look around I see Christ.”
– Monk of Christ in the Desert (2016)

“Landscapes are transcriptions of ourselves.”
– Edward Relph (1967)

“We never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on.”
– Michel De Certeau (1984)

Introduction

Holding his black scapular to one side so he could scramble up the low escarpment, Brother Ubertino had brought me to one of his favorite spots—a standalone rocky outcropping just north of the monastery property in the Chama River Canyon Wilderness Area. It was a mostly clear day in late April, though spring flurries had been threatening all week. Like their monastic forefathers, the monks of Christ in the Desert Abbey find their remote desert canyon—only accessibly by a single 13 mile dirt road—an ideal place to live out their unique vocations of solitude, silence and prayer.

I joined Brother Ubertino on a small ledge and our conversation fell into admiration for the surrounding cliffs. I asked about the stories of Brujos, witches, near Owl Rock, and the circumstances of an experienced hiker who I heard had tragically fallen to his death from one of the nearby ledges several years back. In our first conversation, Brother Ubertino had shared with me his deep love for the Psalms, and how he could not help but think of the imagery they contained as he walked or hiked around these canyons. Like many of his fellow monks, his memories and life experiences seemed to echo and ricochet off the Chama River and the colorful geological strata exposed in the cliff faces of the Chama River Canyon. His sense of place, and his sacramental theology were in constant dialogue with this canyon, and the biblical motifs and religious symbols of monastic spirituality had become an indispensable key to reading the land.
As I interviewed the monks, sometimes walking the property, and sometimes seated near the monastery, or in my cell, I asked them to reflect on the relationship between scripture, the liturgy, the Psalms, and the land. One or two were puzzled by this question, while others launched into story after story. Curious about the impact of motifs such as the Desert-wilderness and Paradise-garden on their experience of the land, I specifically asked them to reflect on these, knowing that the monks were steeped in the morals, symbols, and stories of the biblical and monastic traditions. I wanted to better understand specifically the process by which religious and monastic symbols became attached to the land, and whether or not embodiment, the day to day moving through the land, could be said to be integral to that process of meaning making and attachment.

I was also of course chasing something of a theoretical question. In the literature on place and landscape studies, phenomenological and post-phenomenological approaches have critiqued the role of symbols in what are referred to as “representational” or “semiotic” approaches because of their emphasis on the socially constructed nature of meaning in place and landscape. These approaches are said to inadequately capture the range of sensorial experience of land, and tend to reproduce a subject/object dualism that discounts the importance of pre-cognitive, affective and embodied experience so important to phenomenological schools, and more in line with an ecologically progressive approach to land and nature.¹ To suggest that the landscape is symbolic is to assume it is argued, that something of a dis-embodied ‘Cartesian’ subject projects meaning onto an otherwise meaningless physical landscape, losing the rich intersubjective quality of the world in which we live. While this critique is valid, it is also the case that religious symbols, classically understood as a sign (signifier) that points to a signified have clearly played an important part in both contemporary environmental discourse and land-based monasticism. As discussed in the previous chapter, sacramental theology sees the world itself as a kind of symbol which points to God. The ‘Book of Creation’ can be read as a text about the intentions and truths of God.

In this chapter, I add my final empirical piece to this work by exploring the ways that biblical motifs, religious symbols and imagery from the Psalms act as a common symbolic template through which monks construct meaning with and read the landscape. However,

¹ This is David Abrams project in the Spell of the Sensuous which will be discussed below.
these classically religious symbols are also embedded within wider embodied sign processes which act to enrich the inner landscape through affect, encounter and experience with land. Thus symbolic landscapes are also embodied landscapes because while religious symbols serve to order and interpret the land, the land also populates the imagery of religious symbols and texts in regionally and personally unique ways. In addition, a symbols dynamism and strength, depends in part on whether it is reinforced through and by the surrounding landscape. Without powerful correspondences between a symbol and its context, they tend to fade in affective importance.

**Symbol and Sign in the Experience of Place and Landscape**

In this section, I will outline the place of symbols in the broader place and landscape literature, arguing that much of the criticism of socially constructed landscapes misses this subtle distinction between symbolic construction and semiotic meaning making which as I have attempted to show throughout this work is always both constructed and embodied.

**Symbolic Landscapes**

Theories of landscape have defined symbol very widely. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a symbol as “A mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process.” Thus the letters on this page represent sounds that come together to form words which make sense of an idea that I am communicating about the concept of symbol. The word “tree” is not a tree, but for those initiated into the written English language, the characters which spell out the word inevitably point to one.

To assert that a landscape is strictly symbolic would be to argue that its physical features are employed in some conventional representation such as a virtue, value, story, character, memory, moral lesson or event. In literature, landscapes do often take on these symbolic characteristics. As I have already discussed, the Bible contains landscapes with symbolic dimensions, meaning that the characteristics of desert, wilderness, garden and paradise inevitably point to the moral features of the stories that have been attached there. The desert purifies, the mountain top reveals, the garden provides, and the paradise satisfies. In Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, he masterfully shows how the North American landscape has been assimilated into the age old human motif of the pastoral, that landscape between city and wilderness, which represents a trope in so much of western literature.
Walden, Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, even The Lord of the Rings, each draw out the themes of landscapes as symbolic to their respective storylines.²

As discussed in Chapter 1, the view in social theory that all landscapes were in fact socially constructed, emerges from the post-materialist trends of the 1960s and 70s that postulated the social construction of just about everything, including landscapes.³ Here, human agency and meaning-making are emphasized over the influence of the features of a given environment. There was no objective values or meaning to be discovered in the land, only human cognition and concepts with which to make sense of the world, and negotiate its meaning. This was certainly the underlying assumption for sociologists Thomas Greider and Loraine Garkovich when they wrote that “The open field is the same physical thing, but it carries multiple symbolic meanings that emanate from the values by which people define themselves.”⁴ The object of the open field is engaged by the subjective mind, whose meanings seem to be prior to the object itself, but are malleable with changes to society. For historian of landscape Simon Schama, this meant that landscape and place are “culture before they are nature” again suggesting that landscape is a sort of raw material out of which cultural groups orient themselves and make meaning.⁵

Geographers Dennis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels oft-cited work, The Iconography of Landscape, starts by defining landscapes in terms of this malleability. Landscape is primarily then:

A cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings…a landscape park is more palpable but no more real, no less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem…And of course, every study of landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation.⁶ Like an icon in a church, landscapes acquire certain cultural and socially constructed meanings that are manipulated by the powerful, experienced by individuals, and change over

time with a society. Human groups project meaning onto the land, and in turn use that meaning to organize society, shape identity, and navigate space. Our meanings are deposited like strata on the land, are forgotten or revived as we change.7

Critiques of Semiotic Approaches to Landscape

Critics of the symbolic construction of landscape, or representational approaches as they are also called, have pointed out that theorists have simply put too much emphasis on the landscape as symbolic and textual. Postmodernisms’ obsession with never ending layering of semiosis has perpetuated an unhealthy dualism between body and mind, subject and object. And in doing so, theorists unintentionally or no, negate the embodied, sensorial and intersubjective quality of dwelling in the land, and being in the world in the first place.

In anthropology, this semiotic and culture as text approach has sometimes resulted in the mistranslation of nonwestern ontological categories through a dualistic subject/object framework. For example, Nancy Munn insists on preserving Western ontological categories, wherein Aboriginal animism is a process of translating objects into subjects, rather than an intersubjective world where there are plural subjectivities with their own kind of ontological categories.8 Munn has been criticized for insisting on a symbolic reading of Aboriginal myth which takes the ontological categories of subject and object for granted. As Graham Harvey writes, “What Munn generally reports—but seems unable or unwilling to accept—is the view and experience that the ancestor’s body is wood and stones.”9 Western theorists have it seems, often been unwilling to take indigenous experiences seriously enough to faithfully transcribe its ontological categories, a methodological advantage which has recently been pointed out and refocused by anthropologists Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Petersen.10

As just one example, in anthropologist Keith Basso’s masterful work Wisdom Sits in Places, the author sets out to solve what he calls a “semiotic problem,” or one of interpreting the Apache’s symbolic landscapes which are rich with place names from which moral

lessons are derived. Each place is said to “stalk” people with stories that remind the Apache how to behave, shame them when they transgress, and affirm them when they succeed. Basso writes,

For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think.\footnote{Basso, Keith (1996). \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache.} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 34.}

For Basso the Apache are participating in a semiotic exercise of projecting meaning onto, and then reading it back from, the landscape. However, critics of have pointed out that he seems to be misreading the Apache landscape through a narrowly semiotic culture-as-text interpretive lens. Basso seeks to “render intelligible” the landscape as a “symbolic resource.”\footnote{Basso, Keith \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places}, 40.} While the landscape is absolutely rich with meaning, it appears that Basso’s own informants are not making semiotic claims, but ontological ones. We get a sense that they are not simply re-presenting and recalling meaning from their landscapes but experiencing them as actors in the Apache cosmos. They are not reading the landscape as text, but dwelling within it as subjects among subjects. For example, one informant states, “The land is always stalking people.” The land is not a human person, but it is alive and active in the moral world of the informant. Another states, “The land makes people live right.” The land is an ontological agent that teaches and punishes and guides. And lastly, “The land looks after us.”\footnote{Basso, Keith, \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places}, 38.} These are not symbolic understandings, but relational and ontological ones, which much of the semiotic and structuralist approaches to the social sciences have been rightly criticized for misinterpreting.

In a cross-cultural setting this matters because interpreting non-western ontological claims as Western semiotic ones, can do violence to an entire way of being in the world. In the case of managing natural resources such as water or forests through a Western lens, landscapes take on “competing symbolic meanings” that must then be renegotiated in face of conflict and change.\footnote{Greider and Garkovich, ‘Landscapes’, 13.} However, as anthropologists Elizabeth Povinelli and Paul Nadasdy
have shown, the Cartesian assumption that physical landscapes are universally symbolically constructed, rather than dwelt in realities, with unique ontological features and socialities, automatically puts indigenous ontological claims at a disadvantage, as “traditional knowledge” “environmental value” or “symbolic landscapes” which implicitly assume they are subjective and intangible. These assumptions have done great damage to indigenous resource management interests and claims which are often outlined in reports, and then promptly ignored.15

Starting in the 1970s, geographers and anthropologists began to break down socially constructed approaches through the phenomenological theories of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The symbolic landscape felt too abstract, and rigid, and seemed to discount the contextual setting from which symbols arise and are rooted. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, building on the linguist Edmund Husserl postulated that rather than subjects making meaning with an objective landscape, we live in a *Lifeworld*, the intertwined, intersubjective totality of physical and living entities, experienced by the ‘body-subject’, which negates the harsh Cartesian dualism between mind and matter, subject and object as essential to reality. Rather, the phenomenologists suggest that all of existence is inter-subjectivity a dialogical process between bodies and the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The body stands between this fundamental distinction between subject and object, ambiguously existing as both.”16 Thus any kind of land-as-constructed-object theoretical framework becomes problematic because it assumes a one way semiotic process of subject constructing meaning with object, and object it seemed was almost infinitely malleable to the whims of human subjectivity.

This critical view was also taken up by psychologist Gregory Bateson, whose *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind* was influential during the 1980s and 90s. Bateson states that “The mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin.”17 The body and the environment—that which surrounds—participates in the perception and representation processes. Psychologist J.J. Gibson’s *Ecological Approach to

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Visual Perception sought to show that percept and environment were not as separate as previously assumed. The environment provides a diversity of surfaces (steep cliffs, water, etc.) which “afford” organisms various behavior. Objects in the environment participate in their valuation and perception (rather than determine it) by what the objects afford. Organism and environment are not separate entities as in a stimulus-response view of landscape experience but a unified whole.\textsuperscript{18}

Anthropologist Tim Ingold specifically negates any sort of textual/semiotic view that we learn to \textit{read} landscapes through a process of cognitive meaning-making projected onto the world. For Ingold meaning is made with and through the landscape, by human organisms that are enfolded into the every emergent process of life. There is no distinction between inner and outer worlds. In other words, stories like those told by the Apache are not symbolic meanings that “cloak” the landscape, they are modes of “relating” to and thus experiencing the landscape.\textsuperscript{19}

Through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we become a part of it...Human beings do not, in their movements, inscribe their life histories upon the surface of nature as do writers upon the page; rather, these histories are woven, along with the life-cycles of plants and animals, into the texture of the surface itself.\textsuperscript{20}

For Ingold, and many geographers such as John Wylie, landscape is not a semiotic resource between percept and object, but a sort of monistic enfoldment, wherein the Cartesian Mind is not a distinct organ of human experience. Wylie writes, “Neither an empirical content nor a cultural construct, landscape belongs to neither object nor subject; in fact, it adheres within processes that subtend and afford these terms.”\textsuperscript{21} Ingold’s dwelling and Wylie’s post-phenomenological perspectives leave little room for the reflecting self which finds symbolism in a passing tree or river. However, as I will now argue, in seeking to move beyond the damage done by a Cartesian view of the subject, they thrown the metaphorical baby out with the symbolic bath water.

\textsuperscript{20} Ingold, Tim, \textit{The Perceptions of the Environment}, 198.
Toward an Embodied Semiotics

It would seem that these two poles are in need of synthesis, and I would paint all of landscape studies, or the entire discipline of anthropology with the same brush, it is clear that some clarification is needed with respect to ideas regarding the role of symbols in religious experience of place and landscape. I am not the first to make the claim that semiotics and meaning making is also embodied, but it seems that this discussion is lacking in clarity and deeper illustration, which I hope the preceding and current chapters have contributed to in some small way.

There are several contemporary theorists spread through several disciplines that have attempted something of a synthetic position. For example, in a recent study philosophers Gary Backhaus and John Murundi, attempt to make sense of symbols within this broader critique of its Cartesian implications and argue that symbols are not in fact separated from embodiment:

Symbols arise in precognitive, embodied experience. Words are first expressive gestures before thought, and expressive gestures already entail a sign system that is inherently spatial. Expressive gestures involve an ambiguous relation, a behavioral field that is constitutive of both the lived-body and its perceptual milieu.\(^{22}\)

Symbols and language they argue, emerge from an embodied, emplaced experience of landscape, not some abstract subjective realm. However, to say that symbols are rooted in pre-cognitive human living, is not the same thing as learning to read the landscape symbolically, a process that is surely not precognitive at all, yet does entail an embodied practice.

Geographers Ron Scollon and Suzy Wong call this dynamic process, “geosemiotics” which they define as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our action in the material world.” In semiotic terms, there is a constant negotiation between signs, objects and interpretants; between the thing itself, a community interpreting the thing, and the meaning they produce. Yet this notion to falls short of emphasizing the embodied nature of that process.

For David Abram’s lengthy treatment of phenomenology in the Spell of Sensuous, he argues that the birthing of written languages and symbolic consciousness as a whole emerged

\(^{22}\) Backhaus, Gary and John Murundi, Symbolic Landscapes, 20.
directly from our relationship to specific landscapes, just as I argued in Chapter 2 regarding the emergence of the biblical motifs. He suggests that for a human being, a pattern-recognition species, symbols are not in fact all that different from reading the signs of a game trail, or recognizing the meaning of a scent, which of course many other species are capable of. Our species’ genius seems to be a gift for interpreting the patterns and design in stars, animals and veins of plants as a means of survival.23 This is why biologist Terrance Deacon calls us the “symbolic species” for we are the only species that makes use of established symbols within organized systems of signs such as letters and alphabets.

However, as Abrams argues, the development of the phonetic alphabet eventually abstracted words and ideas from their land-bases, which could then be transported and used to ‘read’ new ecological contexts. For example he writes that, “Prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like ‘virtue,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘temperance’ were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited,”24 meaning that they were context dependent notions, not abstract universals. Abstracted words increasingly confined their meanings to the realm of the human mind.25 Writing, he argues, gives ideas a kind of independence and autonomy which afforded the universalization of ideas which birthed the appeals to universals and a priori reasoning that has become so important to the Western philosophical tradition.

While this point is well taken, it does not in fact explain how contemporary religious symbols, removed from their original desert ecologies, continue interact with contemporary places and landscapes. As I discussed in Chapter 2, biblical motifs are inseparably rooted in the ecological context of the Levant, but by being recorded in scripture have since became templates for interpreting new landscapes.

In the place and landscape literature, it seems that there has been an assumption that symbolic construction and semiotics as a process of meaning making are one in the same thing. But symbolic construction is in fact an important component of monastic spirituality, as much as the embodied experience of land lends depths to their own sense of place and upholds their sacramental theology. For example, the imagery from the Psalms is not "pre-

cognitive” but learned, internalized and attached to the land through both cognitive and embodied processes, but the memories, stories and affects that attach themselves to the land, are not in fact symbolic but clearly semiotic. For example, as Backhaus and Murundi admit,

The mountain peak qua mountain peak, that is, its “straightforward” apprehension does not seem to be a symbolic landscape. But, if the mountain peak symbolizes for us the pinnacle of achievement or the heights of esoteric knowledge, then the mountain peak carries symbolic meaning, for it translates states of affairs in the medium of mountain peak experience into the media of action and thought, respectively. 26

Perception and experience, affect and encounter are certainly precognitive, but many different people could learn to read the same mountain peak through distinct symbolic systems depending on their preferences, tastes, habits and experience.

Whereas symbolic construction has often been framed as a kind of disembodied cognition, semiotics and representation of the world, are inherently embodied, by which I mean embedded in the day to day processes of living, dwelling, walking and experiencing land. Landscape then, is the emergent property of a semiotic process which includes both habit memories attached through mental association and symbolic readings. Meaning is not determined either by the interpretant or the object of interpretation, but emerges through a dialogue between both.

The fact that representational perspectives have put so much emphasis on the symbolic character of landscape as text, means that other types of sign processes, which are in fact deeply implicated in embodied experience have been lumped together by phenomenological perspectives and in many instances discarded. However, my assertion that semiotics is in fact embodied, extends the textual and symbolic aspects of semiotics to other dimensions of semiotic signs. For example, by enlisting the semiotics of Mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and one of his anthropological interpreters, we can see that embodied experience accounts for a broader spectrum of sign processes. Within a classical definition of symbol, it is important to understand the role of the signifier and signified, i.e. what is doing the pointing, and what is being pointed to, but Pierce also

26 Backhaus, Gary and John Murundi, Symbolic Landscapes, 7.
distinguishes two other types of signs, which are the smallest units of meaning-making, these being Iconic, Indexical in addition to the Symbolic. He defines them thus:

An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for example, is a piece of mold with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.27

The symbolic sign references a thing within an already existing signification system such as letters in an alphabet, or a metaphors in a poem. An iconic sign however resembles in some way the thing it points to such as the line on the piece of paper, or a tree shaped like a cross. An indexical sign necessarily points to its object without any particular resemblance to it. For example, smoke points to fire, a bullet hole points to a gun shot. Within the context of this study, when Brother Berengar had his experience of Christ in the gash on a tree, the tree participated in all three of these signs: icon because it resembled Christ’s wound, symbol because it pointed to the depth of Christ’s suffering, and index because it later became associated with that profound experience within Brother Berengar’s moral landscape in a way that is simply inaccessible to his brother monks.

One of Pierce’s contemporary interpreters is anthologist Eduardo Kohn. His ethnography of the Runa peoples of Peru in his book How Forests Think employs Peirce’s semiotics to argue that all of life, not just human beings re-present the world around them through these various forms of signs. For example, when Kohn goes out to hunt monkeys with Maxi his host and informant, the noise that Maxi makes to imitate the sound of chopping a tree that will scare the monkey out of its hiding place is iconic because it resembles the thing it is pointing to. The sound the tree makes when it falls is indexical to the

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monkey because it points to the unseen danger of a potentially falling tree; and the layered and metaphorical meaning of the words Maxi uses to talk about their successful hunt are *symbolic* because they make use of language and metaphor to describe their actions and the world they dwell in which is filled with nonhuman persons, good and malevolent spirits, Gods, demons and other people. Thus all of life is semiotic in the sense that it re-presents that which surrounds it in terms of its own experiences. Some of this representation is pre-cognitive, but much is also constructed based on existing understandings, templates and dispositions that differ from interpretant to interpretant. In particular, human beings are alone in our use of symbols to read, understand and interpret the world around us.

So, while Basso may have mistranslated Apache ontology through Western epistemology, I am not in fact opposed to solving semiotic problems when they concern semiotic questions. If Basso had been concerned with the symbols of Apache poetry, he would have been looking at a symbolic landscape, however, because he was looking at the memories and affects that emerge from the Apache experience of landscape, and was using the metaphor of the landscape as text, or symbol, he was criticized for missing the essential ontological dimensions of his own analysis. In this case however, my study focuses on a group within the Western ontological umbrella, who hold unique theological territory within it. The land is in fact rich with symbols that are brought to the land through religious and monastic identity and spirituality.

In his book *A Phenomenology of Landscape* Christopher Tilley captures well the balance between cognition and embodiment when he writes that landscape is:

> A ‘natural’ topography perspectivally linked to the existential being of the body in societal space. It is a cultural code for living, an anonymous ‘text’ to be read and interpreted, a writing pad for inscription, a scape of and for human praxis, a mode of dwelling and a mode of experiencing. It is invested with powers, capable of being organized and choreographed in relation to sectional interests, and is always sedimented with human significances. It is story and telling, temporality and remembrance. Landscape is a signifying system through which the social is reproduced and transformed, explored and structured.28

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Unlike Ingold who suggests that there is no difference between inner and outer worlds, Tilley argues that landscape includes the physical features, the embodied experience, and the semiotic understandings of a given group none of which are static or cemented in time. The relationship between group and landscape is thus relational and embodied, but includes cognitive and constructed elements brought to the landscape.

To summarize this theoretical distinction through the monastic lens, and before I get to the body of my own argument, let me draw on the experience of a tree as an example. A tree can be a particularly potent religious symbol in its classical sense. For a Catholic monk the tree points to the faithful person in the Psalms, the tree of life, to the rootedness of the Trinity, or reaching for the light. And, if a tree is particularly cruciform in shape, it is iconic of the cross, which anyone who can recognize the shape might see. However, if a monk has had a particularly potent spiritual experience sitting under a particular tree, that tree is indexed to that experience, without in any way resembling the thing it is pointing to. This is not symbolic in the strict sense, because it is not rooted in an established set of symbolic signs. The symbolic nature of a given tree, rooted in the Christian tradition, can be read as a text, but it is also experienced through the body in ways that will differ from person to person. As Arnesen writes, “there is always a dialectical relation between the symbolic and the non-symbolic, necessarily relating the symbolic dimension or ideal super-structure to the non-symbolic or real landscape conditions, but in a co-constitutive manner.”

For geographer Tor Arnesen sign process is a triadic (Trinitarian?) relationship between sign, physical land and the interpretant, with no fixed or hard boundaries between them.

These semiotic distinctions are important because they both reclaim embodiment as an essentially semiotic process, while showing that in fact cognition and symbolic construction while not the entirety of the meaning-making process are an essential component to it. Embodied experience is essential for registering different aspects of the semiotic experience of landscape, including symbols. One does not need to walk in the woods to understand the symbolism of a tree, but to walk in the woods is to open oneself to the possibilities of the full range of semiotic encounters through which we engage and

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29 Backhaus, Gary, and John Murungi, *Symbolic Landscapes*, 9, my emphasis.
understand the world. This is what I mean by an *embodied semiotics* which incorporates aspects of both religious symbol and phenomenological dwelling. Each of us, as inter-subjectively constituted organisms, bring our own backgrounds and sensibilities *through* landscape, which also acts to inform, shape, add to and evoke our experiences, religious beliefs and values. In the case of monks, a 2,000 year old sacramental ontology acts as a symbolic template through which to understand the world as God’s creation, but each monk reported their own unique encounters, stories, memories and lessons from the same landscape.

Multiple meanings, and symbolic understandings do not preclude embodiment, and the human mind, though infinite in its depth and creativity, is ultimately rooted in the materiality of the world, from which it derives its symbols. Theologian Paul Tillich suggests that religious symbols are not enteral Platonic forms, but themselves live and die and take on or lose meaning with the cultures that birth them. They can be transported and transplanted, cared for and fed by the collective imagination of a people until they change, adapt, morph or die. As Keith Basso writes, “When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind.” This is why philosopher of place Edward Casey believes that places are not in fact things, but events. Biblical motifs and religious symbols shared by the monks render the landscape symbolic; yet each experience the landscape in unique ways which can only be explained through the process of semiotics. Just as the sacred is not a static category of land, symbols too are in motion as the monk develops in the spiritual life.

**Biblical Motifs and Symbols and the Monastic Landscape**

In this section, I will take the reader on a tour of the symbolic monastic landscape as described to me by the monks in this study as I accompanied them on the land. I will focus on the biblical motifs and themes that are also embodied and enriched through living on the land. Christianity is steeped in religious symbolism drawn from the land: doves, lambs, serpents, trees, water, fire, wind, mountains, rivers and lakes, the ocean all communicate classical religious symbolism wherein the signifier points to a spiritual truth as signified.

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32 Tillich, Paul, *Theology of Culture*.
34 Casey, Edward, *Getting Back into Place*, 13.
Mass is filled with symbolic language, gestures and elements such as fire, water, incense, light, darkness, silence and spoken word. The medieval monastic cloister was itself a symbol of both the desert to which the early fathers had fled, and an otherworldly paradise. The monastery stood on the liminal threshold between this world and the next and monastic sacred space served to reinforce at every turn the sacramental ontologies of the monastic world. The Cloister Garden, placed symbolically at the center of the classical Carolingian monastery embodied the agrarian ethos of the cultivated, cared for and well-watered soul. The Medieval monastic community was an axis mundi in a sacred geography of the Christian conviction that this world was not the end.

The stories and themes of the Bible are a constant companion to contemporary monastics. In her study of the monks of the Ardennes region of Belgium, Ellen Arnold shows that monastic communities engaged the landscape as both a source of livelihood and sacred symbol: “A stream could become not only a source of fresh water and a place of labor and industry, but also a place where religious lessons were recalled and retold. A tree or a mountain could serve as both a boundary marker and as a memorial of religious devotion.” The liturgical sense of place reinforced by the rigorous monastic habitus of work and prayer brought biblical and monastic symbols to the landscape. Yet, the unique features of the landscape also served to illustrate and enhance those same biblical motifs. The immersion in the language of scripture and rhythms of the liturgical cycle provide an undeniably important source or meaning for monks when reading the landscape.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the monastic sense of place is anchored through formation, liturgy and manual work, which both situates and attaches memory and allegory to the land. This semiotic process is also evident, and equally embodied with biblical and monastic symbolism. After discussing the importance of the lived experience of chanting the Psalms at distinct hours of the day for example, many of the monks cited the symbolism of light and darkness in the liturgy. Brother Nicolas of New Camaldoli, reflected that the moon not only grounded the passing of liturgical time, and illuminated his daily walk between cell and

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chapel, but it also served as a symbol in the classical sense of the monks’ duty to be a reflector of the light of Christ.

On one of my first walks at New Camaldoli Hermitage, Brother Adso and I headed to the bottom of Limekiln Canyon so he could show me one of his favorite places. We worked our way down a steep trail, down a makeshift rope, and scaled several toppled redwood logs. After a few moments of silence, and seemingly out of the blue, Brother Adso said: “You’re going to quote for me 1 Kings 19 aren’t you?” When I admitted I didn’t know which one that was, he began to paraphrase it, as we scaled another massive downed log that had fallen across the narrow trail:

“Elijah in the cave. The Lord was about to pass by and Elijah sat in this cave and there was a great wind, but God was not in the wind; and there was a firestorm but God was not in the fire, and then there was…” He paused. “What was the third one? Fire, wind, and…There’s an earthquake! God was not in the earthquake! So it’s all the things that happen here [in California].” He laughed, and we stopped a moment to catch our breath. In 2008, two fires had lapped at the edges of the Hermitage. The redwoods in the canyon were black for several meters above the ground, with tiny cracks of fresh bark peering through as they outgrew the sooty charred bark that bore the brunt of the flames. Several years after the fire, a wind storm had jack-strawed a dozen or so of the trees in the narrow canyon, and the previous trail had to be rerouted around massive fallen logs. The chaotic California weather reminded Brother Adso of the story of Elijah, and gave the story a deeper significance.

Brother Adso’s knowledge of the Bible could not be contained to his daily lectio divina, and inevitably spilled out onto the landscape. It would be clear to anyone talking to a monk that their lives are steeped in religious symbolism, and spiritual depth that drew from the physical world to feed an inner world of the soul or spirit.

These more symbolic readings of the elements of the landscape were also evident in other cases, not directly tied to the Psalms, but to the wider understanding of the elements of the landscape acting as symbols. For example, as Brother Michael of New Camaldoli showed me around the cloister garden he said: “I see every tree as uniquely different and each tree has a different message. There’s little ones that are just barely with leaves, and there are exuberant ones, and there are ones that spire straight up.” Each tree was a symbol in the
classical sense, a word from God, but even in his interest for the particularities, the tree itself seemed to be lost in a wash of symbolism. For Brother Jerome of Christ in the Desert:

Those infinitely small little flowers that you see if you’re looking but you don’t see if you’re not looking, that always brings to my mind Jesus speaking about the lilies of the field [Matt. 6:28]. And I always say this to the young brothers I say look, look and you’re marching along there and you’re treading on these small little flowers but look at them and Jesus said of them ‘not even Salomon in all his glory was clothed as one of these,’ so bend down and maybe pick up that flower and look at that flower and see how wonderful that little flower is which we pass by as just an insignificant flower.

The flowers are symbolic not only of the minute details of God’s creation, but icons for the ways in which God promises to sustain his follows as the lilies in the field alluded to in Jesus’s parable in Matthew chapter 6 suggests that the lilies of the field do not work to make a living but are provided for by God. Brother Patrick of New Clairvaux described the powerful symbolism of the liturgical cycle:

Easter is the perfect example. Death and dying and rising, and that’s what happens on the land. The prune trees in the winter time; the prune trees look like they’re dead, I mean there’s no leaves it’s just a bunch of sticks out there [laughs]. All of the sudden you get spring time; spring time is when the buds come out and the buds are gorgeous, I mean a whole orchard of trees with buds just before the leaves first come; so there’s just these flower trees and its really glorious. Then of course the buds will do their thing and they die, and then you get the little tiny fruit and the leaves begin to come and they do their thing. So death and dying and rising, it’s there, I mean Easter is not just some date on the calendar which it is in the city. Its true things are warming up and you know it feels good so on and so forth and you can put a lot of flowers in the church for Easter, but it’s not the same when you’ve got a whole orchard full of flowers [laughs] after knowing how those were a bunch of dead sticks they come back to life.

The symbolism of flowers in a church are supposed to point to the resurrection, but for Brother Patrick, they have lost this connotation because they are disconnected from the cycle of death and life that happens on the land. Symbols can be disrupted or decontextualized, and are not simply cultural universals floating in space. They require the living embodiment of
relationships to continue to carry meaning. Living on an orchard then becomes a natural extension of a Christian and monastic spirituality, because it is visible to the eyes, and the symbolism of death and resurrection seem completely natural, whereas the flowers in the church are simply an aesthetic flourish to a sacred space that has lost is earthly connection.

Brother Venantius of Christ in the Desert, believed that the land was an essential aspect of the formation of biblical symbols. As we spoke, he shared a particular example regarding the Christian interpretation of the Jewish Passover fire wherein grapevine branches were burned to cook the Passover lamb. Quoting the book of John, Brother Venantius said:

‘I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower every branch in me that does not bear fruit he cuts away and every branch that bears fruit he prunes.’ Jesus is at the last supper saying ‘whoever does not abide in me is cut off as a branch and they’re withered and men gather them up and cast them into the fire and they are burned.’

This is not a stretch for these boys. Why? Because there’s a fire of vine branches right there with a lamb over the top of it. That’s a beautiful meditation it’s richer if I put it in a context and there’s a crackling fire of vine branches right there.

As Brother Venantius suggests, biblical symbolism is richer if it is part of the lived daily experience. The vine branches are a textual symbol that many Christians have lost touch with, but for the Jewish person hosting a Passover feast, they became a powerful living parable of what Jesus was ultimately claiming about his person. In this sense, the landscape is very much read as a symbolic text, interpreted through biblical motif and symbol, yet, each maintains a kind of dynamic aliveness when it is carried by embodied experience. Because the Bible teaches in the currency of rural and agricultural metaphors, those who are still tied to the land, have a more powerful experience of these symbols.

*The Desert-wilderness Motif*

The motif of the Desert-wilderness is a powerful and pervasive biblical symbol and a deeply meaningful symbolic inner landscape for contemporary monks. Every monk that I met is familiar with the stories of the desert fathers and mothers seeking refuge in the deserts of Egypt or the forests of Europe, and see themselves as the direct descendants of this early 2,000 year old tradition. The Desert was the original ecology of the monastic vocation, and entering the desert was a marker of authentic seeking. On my first visit to Guadalupe Abbey in 2014, one of the monks gifted me a copy of the Abbey-printed *Sayings of the Desert*
Fathers, which he inscribed, “All is clear, we alone are cloudy” referring to 14th century Cloud of the Unknowing written by an anonymous monk. While my monk friend did not live in anything like a desert, the experiences of the desert fathers meant a great deal to his own monastic practice of silent prayer and daily reading. During my interviews, I would ask the monks to reflect on these pervasive biblical motifs, the Desert-wilderness and the Paradise-garden, and whether they resonated with their experience of their own monastic landscapes.

For some of the monks, the question was too convoluted, or they simply did not feel confident that they had much to contribute, except to say that monasticism has always loved remote locales, because they are quiet and beautiful places to pray. However, for others there was a clear and deep connection between the biblical landscape and what contemporary monks were trying to do. Like many of the monks Brother Ubertino of Christ in the Desert started with the biblical experience of the prophets, and then justified that with the monastic tradition:

In the later prophets you have lines like ‘I called you to the desert to be able to speak to your hearts.’ So upon reflection, people realized that a desert is a place of isolation, no distraction; one has an amazing connection with God in such places. And so monks in the early history of the church fled to the desert to be alone with God, to exist only for God. And so monks in all of our history have sought deserted places, wilderness, as places to commune with God without distraction.

This was the practical and physical allurement of the desert landscape as a place apart. The wilderness was so to speak, the natural habitat of the monk and the soil out of which monastic silence grew. Saint Anthony once said that the monk out of the desert was like a fish out of water. The desert ‘afforded,’ to use Gibson’s terminology, a place to pray in peace and silence, to purify the soul and conquer one’s demons. For the monks of New Camaldoli and Christ in the Desert, their homeplaces still had these advantages and qualities: They were quiet, remote and beautiful locales to carry out the monastic life.

However both New Clairvaux Abbey and Guadalupe Abbey, were not located in or near wilderness areas. For these communities, the Desert-wilderness motif was a symbol of the spiritual life itself. In fact, for many contemporary monastics it is not so much the location that determines a desert or wilderness spirituality, but the practices in which one

38 Cited in Lane, Belden, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes, 160.
participates. If early Cistercian monks could call their secluded outposts a kind of ‘desert’, or ‘wilderness,’ contemporary monks have also followed suit. Sitting in a library office piled with books, Brother Columba explained what he means by ‘desert spirituality:’

    In the old days, in the third or fourth century [we had] the monks in Egypt, the desert monks, but since then there’s been what we call desert spirituality. You can live in a city, in Chicago, [and] still have a desert spirituality. They would go [to the desert] because it’s quiet, to find God, the starkness that’s here. But that’s come to be…an interior desert, where you strip yourself of everything.\(^{39}\)

As biblical scholar George Williams showed in his early work on wilderness and Christianity, the desert is a biblical symbol for purification, wherein the people of Israel wander for forty years. The desert of the heart is a place to purify oneself, a place to empty oneself of the distractions of everyday life, a place to simplify and strip down to the basics as Thoreau sought to do at Walden Pond.\(^{40}\)

    As a symbol, desert spirituality had in some cases become removed from deserts themselves. Interestingly, many of the monks, used to the slow pace of a rural or remote lifestyle in the octave of monastic rhythms, thought the city was a more wild and dangerous place than the actual desert. Brother Berach reflected:

        That doesn’t mean you can’t have a spiritual life in the inner city, that’s the modern desert…Because the desert is the place where you encounter the difficulties of life…Every modern city, everybody avoids people, you can live in the same apartment house and never know anybody, you’re totally isolated.

There are certainly many urban monasteries, whose mottos are something like “Silence in the City,” but in the Benedictine monastic tradition, the majority of foundations have been away from civilization in a remote and rural setting, especially those who have consciously attempted to return to the roots of their monastic founders such as the Trappists in the 12\(^{th}\) century, or Christ in the Desert in the 1960s after Vatican II. Yet for those who cannot make the trip, pursuing a desert spirituality might be done anywhere.

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\(^{39}\) Christ in the Desert maintains strong ties to a Benedictine monastery in Chicago.

The Desert-wilderness is thus a symbol for an inner landscape. New Clairvaux Abbey, which manages some 350 acres of prune and walnut orchards, was the most intensively managed property in this study. My walks with the monks tended to bring us through the orchards to the narrow riparian zones and hedgerows that surrounded the property on the edges, which the monks said were relatively “wild.” There was even a small hermitage in one of these overgrown patches of trees and shrub, which perhaps mimicked the deserted outposts of their monastic forbearers. For the monks of New Clairvaux, the Desert-wilderness was within. In other words, the biblical motif, rooted in a real ecological context, pointed to the restless, wild conditions of the human soul. Sitting on a bench overlooking the Abbey cemetery, Brother Adelmo told me that,

When I think of wilderness I think of wild growth everywhere, and trying to enter into that space and tame that growth. The first couple years here, I was everywhere, around the property, trying to tame my soul in a way.

In the process of formation, the goal of the monk was to transform oneself into a monk. The wilderness was an uncultivated and wild space, much as the monks imagined their own restless souls. The orchards and cloister arboretum were carefully manicured, and held in tension with the long sojourn through the wilderness of the soul. When the monks from Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky purchased the property in the 1950s, the area had already been under cultivation for well over 100 years, owned by vintners and Leland Stanford. So while there was no suggestion that the monks had wrested the property from the desert wilds, as their Cistercian ancestors had, the monks prided their continuing stewardship of the property, the beauty of the campus, and the ongoing work of tending the wilds of their own souls.

Brother Aymaro for example, framed wilderness as the times we are lost, or when we are struggling against something: “We all face our inner wilderness but the idea is that you are not running away from yourself, but you are coming to face yourself and then you really are facing the wilderness.” While the desert fathers and mothers faced real demons in real deserts, in rural California, the wildest places were to be found in the human heart.

At Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, located in a rural but intensely cultivated area of Western Oregon, Brother Daig takes a walk in the woods every day, rain or shine. He mostly takes the same route, and during my first visit to the monastery I ran into him on one of his
walks. As we spoke a great horned owl, annoyed at our chatter took flight a few hundred yards away, and we followed it for a few minutes with eyes fixed to the trees, watching for movement. On another occasion, when I asked him about the relevance of wilderness to his spiritual life, Brother Daig explained the inner dimensions of wildness:

The reality of [wilderness] is peace, but when we come up against it as ourselves, that’s when the wilderness hits. I think there’s a wilderness inside of us that has to engage that space...You go out in our own woods and you see all these blackberries, I mean nasty thorns and whatever else, and in the grand scheme, that’s beautiful, but there’s something wild about it too...I don’t know if you are familiar with John of the Cross’s theology, but when you think about this ‘Dark Night’ reality, its nasty in there from the human perspective, it’s awful; but from God’s side, that’s precisely where he’s making the deepest growth.

The howling wilderness of ages past points not to a fallen earth, but to an inner landscape of sin and vice and fear. The wilderness is peaceful, it is we who are at war with the earth. And like the apophatic classic *Cloud of the Unknowing*, Spanish mystic John of Cross speaks of the darkness, danger and obscurity that can be found there, that may seem dark to us, but from God’s perspective, is where he is purifying the most. The difficulties faced by the Israelites in the desert, was what made them worthy to inherit the Promised Land. The danger of wilderness is not ‘out there,’ in nature ‘red in tooth and claw’, but within.

Perhaps a medieval monk would have seen those blackberry thorns as the physical consequence of humanity’s fall from the Garden of Eden, but for Brother Daig, where nature was a companion to his daily walks, a companion which had never threatened his life, wilderness and danger primarily manifests from within. Fallenness, as discussed in the previous chapter, is primarily our fallenness, and nature is ultimately good because it is God who created it. This notion is also heavily influenced by environmental discourses which have overwhelmingly shifted American notions of wilderness since the 19th century away from more ambivalent roots in agrarian theology, to the Transcendentalist notion that the wilderness is in fact a Paradise.

For the monks of New Camaldoli Hermitage and Christ in the Desert, where they were actually adjacent to federally recognized wilderness areas, this question often took on a deeper, but no less symbolic meaning. Both monasteries had ‘Desert Days,’ where, once a
month the monks were allowed to skip the public worship services and spend it alone in their cell, or as most monks would do, out on the land. The emphasis on apophatic prayer, which arose from the desert hermits, was also a strong emphasis at New Camaldoli Hermitage, where they prided themselves on balancing the communal and hermetic traditions of monasticism.

For example, for Brother Malachi of Christ in the Desert, it was precisely the character of the New Mexico desert itself that drew him to become a monk in the first place. He had discerned with urban and suburban monasteries, but the quality of silence he experienced at Christ in the Desert, incarnated, in his language, the way he wanted to live out his monastic vocation. In fact, before I could even ask him to describe the milestones that led him to the monastic life, he told me very directly that he had been called to “wilderness monasticism.” This was because as he said, “the way in which I experience God in nature is very important for me.” Thus the Desert-wilderness as both symbol of the monastic vocation, and sacrament of God’s presence intermingled in his experience of landscape. What the Chama River Wilderness offered him was different than the silence and solitude he experienced at other monasteries, even remote or rural ones. The wilderness then was not only a setting for the monastic life, but a rich living symbol of it. As one specific example, Brother Malachi related a sermon he had once heard on Trinity Sunday which had stuck with him:

I once heard a priest give a really good Trinity Sunday homily in which he pointed out that the Trinity is like wilderness. We shouldn’t think of the Trinity as this sort of rational object that we can completely understand…to enter into an experience of the Trinity is like entering into a wilderness area. It’s not going to be manmade, it is going to take us out of ourselves, it is going to provoke in us a sense of wonder provided that we’re receptive to that. Going into a wilderness area is exactly like that. The radical wildness of God and the untamed character of the Chama River Wilderness come together for Brother Malachi in a powerful symbolism, wherein both the signified and signifier are intimately bound together in the living of monastic spirituality. The richness of the desert ecosystem, and the depth of his own theology nurtured each other in ways that were not as evident at the communities outside of actual deserts and wilderness areas.
At New Camaldoli Hermitage, where the monks live adjacent to the Ventana Wilderness Area, and the Limekiln Creek State Park overlooking the Pacific Ocean, mountains and the ocean were an important symbol of the spiritual journey. In the earliest human religions, mountains were ‘high places’ where temples and sacred groves were maintained and this was certainly the case in the Bible, where Elijah experienced God, Moses received the Law and Jesus was transfigured. In the classical mystical literature such as the *Cloud of the Unknowing*, or Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, mountains are a symbol of our ascent to God.41

Sitting in the pews at New Camaldoli Hermitage one Sunday, I listened to Brother Michael give a sermon on “mountain spirituality.” He cited both Old and New Testament figures discussed above and events such as Moses on Sinai, and Jesus on Horeb. Brother Michael read from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which states that only by abandoning our desire to know God can we ever truly find Him.42 The anonymous author describes this final stage of mystical union as a cloud, which overcomes the seeker and is both a state of unknowing and perfect knowledge. Brother Michael’s sermon noted the fog that frequently descends on the monastery at New Camaldoli Hermitage. During our interview, he showed me his favorite spots to sit and look out into the Pacific Ocean which he said was itself a kind of wilderness, both in our inability to fully tame it, and in its stark visual emptiness which draws the eye forever outward. As we walked the long driveway overlooking the Pacific Ocean, he said,

We’re liminal here, just on the edge of a huge continent. The edge of a kind of bowing down as it were to the largest body of water in the world, the Pacific Ocean. *There’s* the wilderness, the ocean which can’t be tamed! We can fish from it, we can sail on it, but the ocean is a wilderness!

For Brother Michael, living among the Santa Lucia Mountains, on the edge of the world as he said, overlooking the Pacific Ocean *made real* these familiar mystical symbols which acted as living icons of the spirituality they incarnated. In our interview, he reiterated many aspects of his sermon, but framing symbols as Jungian archetypes, or recurrent images or symbols that appear in human consciousness, stories and myth:

41 See Lane, Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes.*
Mountains and trees and the ocean and water are incredibly archetypical. They are there in all the great religions and you can trace salvation history and scripture through the mountains. It starts out with Abraham going up a mountain with his son to sacrifice, and then Moses going up the sacred mountain, and then Elijah going back to the mountain, and then Jesus’s first sermon is the sermon on the mount—he’s the new Moses—and then the transfiguration on Mount Tabor and mount Calvary and then the ascension etc. etc. So mountains in their strength and their aspiring upward; the mystics, John of the Cross talks about the interior mountain and usually we are on the base in the villages and towns working on this or that, but to ascend to the mountain to get to the summit that’s what the spiritual life is about.

Their archetypal or symbolic value made mountains sacred for Brother Michael, and the unique elements of the Big Sur coast added depth to his understanding of these pervasive biblical and monastic symbols. Mountains and the Desert-wilderness were biblical motif that resonated with Brother Michael’s inner and exterior landscape. For the monks of New Camaldoli, the Desert-wilderness motif was most meaningful in its interplay with the apophatic spirituality of the desert fathers who sought a profound interior silence, but surrounded by mountains, ocean, fog and redwood forest, incarnated that biblical symbolic landscape in ways that deepened its spiritual significance.

*The Paradise-garden Motif*

The Bible begins in a garden planted by God for Adam and Eve, who after disobeying God are forced to leave the garden and work the land. For the Jews, the Paradise-garden motif, was the landscape God promised to bless his people with for their obedience. For the desert monks, the desert paradoxically brought them to the threshold of paradise, because it was there that they encountered God in the depths of the heart, through the purifying and purgative disciplines of the monastic life, and the harsh liminal silence of the desert landscape. In both the monastic tradition, and throughout Western literature, the Paradise-garden was both an ideal agrarian landscape, and an internal state of being.

The garden was also a symbol of heaven, and all of the monks had a strong belief in heaven, the post-mortal paradise that awaits them. When I asked one monk if he had a literal belief in Heaven, he said, “of course, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.” In fact, the monk’s celibate body, acts as a kind of symbol of heaven, pointing to the union with God we might
all anticipate in the next life. Monasteries themselves are sanctuaries from the world, gardens in the wilderness, a kind of paradise where the monks and retreatants seek that original unity with God mythologized in the story of the Garden of Eden. The monks of New Camaldoli seemed to fuse their notions of wilderness and paradise, calling their remote location a paradise and a refuge from the world. The wilderness was, in its contemporary setting its own kind of garden because it was a place where “God could be God.”

For the monks of New Clairvaux Abbey, the garden continued to be a potent biblical symbol, and a symbol for the work the monks sought to do on the land as stewards and as cultivators of an inner landscape. As we stood outside the monastery cloister, Brother Bernardo from New Clairvaux reflected that:

Jesus was buried in a garden and he rose in a garden. His first apparition to Mary Magdalene was in a garden, and that’s one of the reasons we use flowers in church. Although most people have forgotten about it, flowers have become decorative, but they are a symbol of life, of newness, of freshness, of beauty, joy and happiness. The original connotation was a garden. The Song of Songs speaks about the beloved and the two lovers in a garden. So the idea of Christ and the church, Christ and the individual soul, the garden context…that’s what the garden is. That’s why I like the Cistercians being out in the country and so on, for the garden aspect.

The fecund cultivated garden was a classical symbol of life, fecundity, and points directly to biblical themes of the fall and redemption. Flowers in church symbolize this Christian commitment to resurrection and life, but have in many ways become divorced from their garden origins. For Brother Bernardo, dwelling day in and day out in a cultivated landscape, where the seasons continually spoke of birth, life, death and resurrection, reinforced and made vivid these symbolic aspects.

The Paradise-garden was also, unsurprisingly, like the wilderness, something of a symbol for the interior life of the monks. Defining paradise, Brother Kevin of New Camaldoli Hermitage clarified that “I don’t mean that in the sense of this blissed out idea about paradise or this denial of reality, you know, but it’s a return to that original unity and oneness that’s inside each one of us which is what I understand paradise to be.” Paradise became a symbol for an internal state, not a historical locale, or an agrarian project. Brother Aymaro of New Clairvaux Abbey related that “a paradise is a returning to intimacy with
God, which entails letting go, to make room for God and his will. We hold on to a lot of
things that just complicates our lives. Paradise is a return to simplicity.” Just as for the desert
hermits, paradise was a place within. And seeking God is a process of letting one’s own will
be replaced with God’s.

Other monks of New Clairvaux Abbey, saw agricultural work as a kind of human-God
cooperation that both cultivated the soul, and beautified the earth for God’s glory. As
quoted in Chapter 1, Brother Aymaro of New Clairvaux saw working the land as a kind of
cooperation between humans and God that beautified the land and the heart:

Learning to care for living things, cooperating with them, to make them fruitful, its
cooperation. With our help we can make them more fruitful than they could be for
Gods glory. Now I mean obviously that’s not quite the same thing as the natural
beauty of a wild forest but it’s the beauty of the cultivated orchard and that has a
place too. Cooperation between man and nature. I see that as one of the fruits of this
particular way of life, but its real cooperation.

As we walked through a fallow field discussing the Paradise-garden motif, Brother Waldo
taught me what this looked like for him:

The spiritual landscape is tending to the inner realm and purifying it, pruning it,
making it fruitful and attractive to the Lord. That’s what the monastic life is all about;
it’s a main occupation of ours, to discern the passions and prune away those passions
that are disparate and feckless. Cultivating the soul, sowing good seeds and
eliminating those weeds, or not eliminating, but at least keeping them under control.
The passions are never exterminated the dangerous ones or the damaging ones but
being able to see it with that metaphor gives you a sense of personal efficacy like wait
a minute I can participate in the shaping of my life with God I do have the power to
the tools to make good choices and to decide if this particular passion is not in my
best interest to express and after a while you begin to form habits and that’s virtue so
and once you get the mechanics the conceptual mechanics down one is able to live
with a greater sense of peace.

Taming the Desert-wilderness of the soul, inevitably bears fruit, and caring for the land
inevitably makes it beautiful. Brother Waldo was heavily involved with the vineyards of New
Clairvaux’s booming winery, and each winter, before the vines begin to green up, he
manages a small crew of monks who prune out last year’s canes. This mundane agricultural
task reinforced his spiritual task. The symbol of the Paradise-garden within was reinforced by
the agricultural life he lived as a monk through embodied work.

For the monks of Our Lady of Guadalupe, their own experience redeeming the
landscape from its clear cut “moonscape” left to them by the former owner, was embedded in
the Trappist rural vocation of beautifying the land and returning it to a garden. When I asked
about the garden aspect of the monastic vocation, Brother Abo referred directly to his
monastic ancestors in Citeaux, the first Cistercian monastery, which was located in a
mountainous region of France, “if you encounter a place like they did in Citeaux that was not
beautiful then you make it beautiful. If you have a place that is beautiful you maintain and
improve the beauty.” Our Lady of Guadalupe was not in a wilderness, but it was also not as
intensely cultivated as New Clairvaux, in fact, since the 1990s, they were seeking to return
the more than 800 acres of forest to a more ecologically diverse and native state through their
restoration and ecological forestry projects.

For Brother Ronan, the monks were charged with creating a garden in the wilderness
of the world, but that active prayer on the land, maintained one’s connection to the land. “It’s
so easy to get distracted from the mystery of the garden in the wilderness/desert and that’s
why it’s important to pray with and in the land most especially if you’re not working it so
that it doesn’t just become pretty backdrop.” Brother Ronan worked in the book bindery most
of the time, and did not have active manual work assignments on the land. For him, praying
the Rosary on the land interwove his prayers, the biblical symbols of Paradise, and the
forested landscape his predecessors had worked so hard to cultivate.

Just as in the medieval cloisters, cloister gardens were present in each of the
communities in this study. Each was well managed and cared for and featured an array of
horticultural and ornamental plants in an attractive layout.\(^43\)
However, several had been
installed after Vatican II, when the monasteries had been encouraged to return to their roots.
Cloister gardens traditionally symbolized the Garden of Eden, and marked the monastic
cloister’s center as a kind of paradise, the coming together of earth and heaven. The central
fountain symbolized Moses striking the rock to get water for Israel while they were in the
desert, and references to Jesus Christ as the living water of Christian salvation spoke of in the

\(^{43}\) See Figures 2, 6, 10, and 14 for photographs of each.
Bible. They were also reminders of the monastic communities’ own tradition of crafting religious space that was deeply symbolic to the monastic purpose.

Brother Columba suggested that the monastery is supposed to be a kind of Garden of Eden in microcosm and with a thick New Jersey accent, made a list of symbols that the cloister garden was supposed to carry:

You’ve got the fountain that’s the water, the rivers in the Garden of Eden, you have the trees, you had this and you had that, and we’ve got four corners that can represent many things, they could represent the four directions: North, South, East, West, the four seasons, it could be the four evangelists; so they’re trying to make it like a little Garden of Eden you see. So we’re trying to live that and it’s not easy, you know, we fall a lot, but that’s the goal and that’s everyone’s goal but not everybody can have the same environment that we’ve got, we try to make it that little Garden of Eden.

The symbolism out of the way, Brother Columba notes that the place itself is meant to be a kind of Paradise, where retreatants and monks alike can encounter God. Though implicit in this idea of the monastery as Paradise, was the fact that the monastery was located in a breathtaking wilderness canyon.

Speaking with Brother Benno from Guadalupe Abbey, he reflected on the process of restoring their cloister garden during the renovation of the monastery that occurred during the 1990s:

A lot of reflection and prayer went into that garth and a lot of research. Because the early Cistercian footprint, there was always in the center a space, a garden and you have that whole role of the garden, the inward garden in Augustine. So it has always had a special emphasis often with some type of water meditation in the center. We went through a lot of 12th, 13th, and 14th century sketches of garths and the first one that was created here on paper was cute in the sense of a Marriott Hotel know you, but it was all very self-conscious. So we just left it on paper and began again. The very center and heart of it was the six ton stone with the water flowing. From Moses striking the rock at the center of the community, and the rock is Christ. And that rock is from the Columbia Gorge, it is a natural black basalt. It was lifted out and brought here and sat in that particular setting. We knew right away that it was right and so we
had a special blessing of the garth and all around. It is the center of our life and so it is open to nature but it also has a very cultivated and reflected nature at the center. The design of the garth was self-consciously reflective of the Cistercian identity and medieval monasticism, but its elements also incarnated aspects of the central stories of the Bible. All of the communities referenced this same symbolism, yet very few monks ever brought me to the cloister for our conversations, and even fewer shared stories about their experiences there.

So while the cloister garden remained an important maker of monastic identity and history, it was not as deeply rooted in the monks’ experience of the monastic landscape. I attribute this to the shift in American culture away from an agrarian and cultivated aesthetic to one of wild and unmanaged land. As discussed above, during the 19th century, the wilderness, unmodified nature, became the model of Transcendental spirituality not the Puritan’s well-kept farm. Thus while I would certainly not say that the cloister gardens were meaningless or devalued, I would say that based on my experience with the monks, that they do not hold the same semiotic potency that they once did for their medieval counterparts. The symbolism of the garth was still present, but because of a shift in cultural norms that put a stronger value on wild nature, it no longer seemed to resonate as an embodied symbol, but more as a vestigial one. For Medieval monks who found the surrounding landscapes threatening and dangerous, even if sacramental, they appreciated the safety and security offered by the walled in garth, with its well-tended and useful plants and beautiful flowers. For contemporary monks, the wilderness, which as Brother Daig suggested was in fact peaceful and Godly, the ornamental quality of the cloister gardens often felt quaint or even aesthetically undesirable. For example, one monk had a very vocal opinion about the cultivated and manicured aesthetic that several of the monasteries had adopted within the cloisters. He was none too pleased with the aesthetics or cost of maintenance of his community’s cloister garden:

I have some quite critical ideas about landscaping. The Trappists are known for austerity and rough terrain and tough living situations, and I think all this landscaping that we’re doing is all for the birds. I think we give too much time and energy to landscaping. You build these beautiful shrubbery and we get a whole lot of exotic trees and shrubs and you’ve got to water them all the time. I think it’s a waste of
water and a waste of time and a waste of energy. The landscaping and grounds keeping is all no good, I think it’s too much. These leaf blowers they’re making that terrible racket all morning with those leaf blowers. And there’s nothing wrong with having some leaves around! That’s natural and I would be in favor of raking the leaves once in a while, instead of having these people come in with these leaf blowers and that go on all morning and with that racket, it’s noise pollution! That’s why I am completely against all this landscaping even the garth [meaning the cloister garden] we have now with the water coming up through the stone and all those nice plants, to me it’s all nonsense. I don’t get much inspiration from the garth at all, I am from the farm. I am used to trees and shrubs and plants and it doesn’t make much difference to me whether it’s just ordinary grass in there or maybe a few shrubs but they have fish in there and they’ve got water falling and its takes energy to do that.

He was simply not amused by the highly cultivated aesthetic of the cloister garden, and thought a more rugged and wild appearance was more monastic. This contested meaning of the cloister garden both shows how symbols are constructed from past religious symbolism in a new setting, and bridged with contemporary environmental discourses. In addition, it shows how different experiences of landscape can lead to a preference for certain spaces over others. The cloister garden’s biblical symbolism was well known and well established, but it had ceased to be reinforced by the conditions of the material landscape which upheld it as an actual refuge and sanctuary from the dangers of the world, whereas in the contemporary monastic setting, the landscape itself, even the more remote and dangerous landscapes of New Mexico and New Camaldoli seemed to participate in this constructed meaning of nature as a garden, rather than a fallen state in need of redemption. Thus the cloister garden, once a potent reminder of the eventual salvation of the entire world, has drifted into the realm of quaint historical reference, replaced by the wilderness mystique which affirms the goodness of nature free of human intervention.44

For the monks of Christ in the Desert, the garden aspect was about beauty, both interior and exterior. As Brother Ubertino of Christ in the Desert, reflecting on the long

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44 I would be happy to engage the monks further on this point, but this view is where I have landed based on the dialogues carried out in this study.
history of monasticism in the desert, suggests, monastic communities seem to naturally desire to make their surroundings a kind of Paradise-garden.

The a monastery always becomes something of an earthly paradise as the monk grows closer to God and his life becomes more and more loving, more and more affective. It transforms him, and so too as a monastery grows over time it transforms its environment, beautifully, lovingly. It’s just a natural expression of our being made in the image of our creative God.

The inner and outer gardens develop and flourish together. They are cultivated and cared for together and each in turn reflects a desire to find God in that beauty.

In addition, even though they lived in a remote canyon of the New Mexico desert, the monks of Christ in the Desert Abbey had grand plans for putting their burgeoning novice population to work in making the wilderness blossom. Not only did they love the surrounding wilderness and canyons, and strive to protect them from harm, but they were also attempting to ramp up agricultural production to become more self-sufficient. While I was there, I helped weed and plant a newly designed raised bed garden, and there was also a large section of the hops yard that would soon be put to vegetables. Another field was being prepared for cultivation of alfalfa in the next year or two by clearing brush and fertilizing it with horse manure. Ironically, it was the Abbey’s success as a destination for retreatants that had provided the funds it needed to begin to explore subsistence farming.

Biblical motifs and symbols have a definite geographical and textual origin. Yet within the monastic vocation of seeking God in the place these symbols live and dance among the elements of the monastic landscape, which acts to populate, evoke and in some cases overpower their biblical origins.

**The Imagery of the Biblical Psalms and the Land**

As a participant in the monastic life, I was awash in the symbols of Christian scripture, theology and liturgy that shape the monastic life; yet, I was also consistently engaging my senses and body: learning where to stand during Mass, moving from cell to choir at different hours of the day, flipping through choir books, chanting, bowing during the doxology. Taking in the smell of incense used to purify the altar on feast days, taking a new trail through the woods, or the vineyard, or the canyon. Expecting the sound of bells, the sound of the chant, sensing the darkness, the light the candles. In the previous section, I
showed how saturated the landscape is with biblical and monastic symbols and motifs. In this section, I will focus on the ways that the imagery of the Psalms are simultaneously constructed and embodied by the monks in their encounters with the land.

*Breathing the Psalms*

Chanting the Psalms is the central activity of the monastic public ministry. As the Psalmist writes, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” (Psalms 119:164). The Psalms, the core of the Divine Liturgy, are the ancient Hebrew prayers that are often by tradition attributed to King David, however, biblical scholarship is confident that the Book of Psalms has many authors who span over five centuries. There are five genres in the Psalms: hymns of praise, communal laments, Royal Psalms, individual laments, and individual thanksgiving, all of which invoke God as the merciful protector of the Nation of Israel. It is certain that Jesus of Nazareth prayed the Psalms, and much of his life as a prophet was filtered through the imagery of the Psalmists.

During the early days of the Church the Apostles are believed to have participated in the three daily prayers which are still customary for some Jewish sects to this day. As monasticism developed, chanting the Psalms has become the backbone of the monastics’ liturgical life, and as one monk related confidently, “I cannot imagine finding a monk who is not in love with the Psalms. Ask a monk what his favorite Psalm is and he will be thoroughly confused.” However, despite this confidence, I got a mixed reaction to the Psalms from some monks who did not like the violent and tribalistic language of many of the Psalms which call on God to “destroy the enemies of Israel,” or “pile high the bodies.” Chanting the Psalms myself, there is no escaping the sometimes jarring language and imagery clothed in the contemplative melodies of the Gregorian modes. “…O God, break the teeth in their mouths” (Psalm 58:6), or speaking of Babylon after Israel’s captivity, “…How blessed will be the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Psalm 137:9).

One monk agreed, that the tribalism really got to him. In a moment of quavering emotion, he said: “To say it strongly, ya I’ll just be honest, part of me hates it. I continue to have a visceral reaction to it, so it’s hard. It’s a great paradox, and part of the reason I

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continue doing it is because surely Jesus said the Psalms. He must have wrestled with them, he must have.” Another stated, “I find the Psalms very hard. Some of them really speak to me, but some, they make God angry, and there’s no anger in God.” The imagery of the Psalms, which was written during a time of tribal warfare, must now be reinterpreted within the monastic spiritual life.

This difficulty aside, for a majority of monks, chanting the Psalms is a deeply moving spiritual practice Thomas Merton called his “bread in the wilderness.” Again a symbolic allusion to spiritual food in the wilderness of both the traditional setting of the monk, and his wild soul. Thus, most of the monks, often without my prompting them, had a ready explanation and exegesis for the more problematic Psalms. One explanation is that the Psalms are chanted in order to redeem them. Another, is that they span the entire spectrum of human emotions, which the monks chant and then offer up to God for healing. As Brother Sillan of Christ in the Desert put it:

We have to realize that the Psalms retain every single human emotion every single one is right there from the most noble from the most joyful, to the scariest most hateful emotions. Everything that the human soul is capable of is in the Psalms. Having said that really they are an incredible tool for soul searching and for self-help. Because you realize that this thing that I am feeling right now is not unique to me it’s happened before, and it will happen again.

The Psalms express the entire range of emotions available to human beings, even the darkest, and the monk is to put him or herself in the place of those who might be feeling those emotions and offer up to God through the Opus Dei. The Psalms participate in all the sorrow and joy of the human experience, and monks exist to take that spectrum on and offer it up to God. Brother Waldo of New Clairvaux assured me that:

The human heart is totally open to God, and God’s not ashamed of anything that lies in the human heart. I enter into that with the Psalms. I enter into the suffering, the despair, the anger, the vileness that can exist in the human heart. I enter into that willingly, it’s a privilege to be able to do that as a monk.

The range of emotions expressed by the poet, are taken as archetypes for the range of human emotions, even though which cause to wish harm to others. In addition, the Psalms form part of an entire corpus, the Bible, which for Christians must always be interpreted in reference to
the life of Jesus. So, the problematic Psalms, violent or brutal on their own, take on rich allegorical (symbolic, spiritual) meaning. Brother Ubertino interprets those gruesome Psalms this way:

Saint Benedict in his rule says, when you encounter sin in your life dash those sins against the rock which is Christ. The Psalm that says ‘take the babies of Babylon and dash them against the rock,’ that’s how we see this. There’s an allegorical meaning to the Psalms and I have no difficulty expressing every single Psalm and immersing myself in it fully.

Some monastic communities simply skip over the more problematic Psalms, but for the monks of Christ in the Desert: “We say all the gruesome Psalms too. And you know some simply have cut those passages of those Psalms out of their expression of the liturgy, but we haven’t, and wouldn’t.”

The Psalms are read through the lens of the monastic life, and the paschal mystery of Christ. The Psalms contain rich theological poetry and symbolism in their original context, but read through the Christian experience, they inherit another layer, which sees and anticipates Christ. This is the essence of a Christian textual semiotics or hermeneutics employed by biblical scholars to study the Bible. This symbolism, this poetry, and action of chanting the Psalms is as one monk phrased it, “ingredient” to their lives. As Brother Abo suggested:

The Psalms are so ingredient to our whole spirituality…When a monk dies and he’s laid out so there’s at least one monk with him 24 hours a day, we just keep repeating the psalter that’s all. Why? Because the Psalms, they’re food, we were fed here, and so we accompany him on his journey to heaven with the Psalms. The Psalms are so rich and I think a lot of monks have simply taken them in by osmosis. So they don’t even think about it and therefore don’t even refer to it, but they simply are. I feel that the Psalms, as I said, are ingredient to who we are.

The Psalms feed the monks spiritually. For Thomas Merton, they are bread in the wilderness.

Sometimes the imagery of the Psalms are not as important as the fact that the monks are carrying on a long tradition of chanting the Psalms on behalf of the church. Brother Benno of Guadalupe Abbey described a struggle with the Psalms he had early in his

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vocation. The repetitive nature, the gruesome imagery were getting to him. He went to his Abbot and confessed his struggle. The Abbot wisely replied,

“Oh, I see you listen to the words.”
“What do you mean,” asked the monk.

The Abbot replied, “Its breathing. You need to let the Psalms breathe you because it’s the prayer of Jesus, you’re simply allowing it to continue in human flesh.”

This of course changed Brother Benno’s whole perspective on the Psalms, who now feels that the practice of chanting is “like standing in a fountain, it just washes over you and it’s a much bigger breathing than yours.” Feeling bored, or distracted as I found myself feeling even in my short stay with the monks, are calls to return to the present moment, and to reengage with the texts in new ways. It was real work, and sometimes it felt that way. The tradition of chanting the Psalms has its own richly layered symbolic understandings. Each Psalm is interpreted spirituality through the vocation of the monastic life. This symbolism becomes a template through which one interprets, and yes constructs the world.

*The Land-based Imagery of the Psalms*

With that as a foundation for how the Psalms function in the monastic spiritual life, let us now turn to how the Psalms interact, like their biblical motif counterparts, with the monastic landscape, and in turn, how the landscape populates the reading of the Psalms. The Psalms are steeped in both the royal language of war, vengeance and retribution, but also speak of the eternal mercy of God toward his chosen people. The Psalms are also rich with agrarian poetry, and rich praise for God as the creator, expressing the sacramental character of all life. Psalms 65:8-13 expresses the garden imagery of the Jewish yearning for God’s blessing:

The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy.
You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
    you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty,
    and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
    the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks
    and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.

God is the sole creator and provider for the peoples of Israel, and His creation is abundant with beauty and sustenance. Even the wilderness is filled with pleasant grasses. Psalms 148 gives voice to this creation as praising God just by its existence:

Praise the Lord from the earth,
    you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,
kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women,
old men and children.

This is the flavor of the Psalms which populate the monastic imagination with respect to the land. In chanting the Psalms, the monks join with the rest of creation in offering praise to God. Brother Salvatore taught me this profound reading of the act of chanting the Psalms:

There’s also the sense in trying to hallow the hours of the natural day, that we are repenting of our sin of not joining in the rest of creation in praising God, in worshipping God, and honoring God, which as Thomas Merton would point out, everything else does just by being itself. Whereas we with our waywardness often fail
to do so. We’re consciously and deliberately in living our supernatural or spiritual life also living more naturally as human beings fulfilling our function as sort of the priests of creation, giving voice to voiceless creation in praise of God on behalf of the rest of creation, but also joining what sinless creation is already doing in its own fashion.

In Thomas Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*, creation praises God just by its existence, meaning that the sheer fact that it exists means it is created and loved by God. Creation, just by existing thus praises God by living out the measure of its creation. For human beings, who so easily forget God’s goodness, chanting the Psalms is to join that ever-resounding hymn of the universe as it moves toward redemption through Christ.

The Divine Office expresses the range of human emotions, it hallows the hours of the day, it continues the prayers of Jesus chanted for over 2,000 years, and inducts the monk into the stream of praise that emerges from all creation. This act cannot help but affect the monastic view of the world. As Brother Ubertino of Christ in the Desert explained:

Any monk who has spent his life chanting the Divine Office cannot have any experience and not have it reflect, not give utterance in the psalmody. The psalmody is a great *template* to place on the world for understanding it, and its language becomes your own. It’s a regular experience in my own life…In so far as people today still live in touch with the land I think the Psalms will speak to them more deeply.

The saturation of the monks in the language, imagery and spirituality of the Psalms, which originated in the land-based, agrarian tribal context of the Middle East, act as a kind of filter through which one begins to see the world. The Psalmist was part of a land-based society, so the Psalms natural reflect that world. Thus the land based imagery of the Psalms, rooted in an agrarian Jewish society, and were taken up as spiritual mantras by the early desert monks who saw themselves as spiritual warriors. Contemporary monks not only step into this stream of chanting the Psalms, and using them in their own spiritual life, but begin to identify the imagery of the Psalms with the places they have vowed to live in. As Brother Berach put it, “You can’t understand the Psalms unless you begin to understand the land. And you can’t really understand the land as God’s Creation unless you begin with the Psalms.” The land and the Psalms are intimately interconnected for the monk.
In my walks and interviews there were many instances where the imagery of the Psalms were in fact a kind of *template*, in Brother Ubertino’s language. And because the imagery from the Psalms is systematized, it can be used to *read* the landscape. As Brother Berach related:

When I’m out walking, I’m reciting the Psalms and I look at the trees, the images from the Psalms come to mind and I begin to think about it ‘he’s like a tree near running water’ [Psalms 1]. I have it there to look at, and I have the images graven in my mind because I’ve memorized them and I repeat them every day.

The Psalms were learned and memorized and an integral part of the monks’ day, and its imagery and themes inevitably attach themselves and intertwine with the landscape.

Speaking with Brother Abo he related:

I know specifically walking, my two favorite seasons are spring and the autumn and the walking and the absolute beauty of it comes it and therefore so many things from the Psalms especially the *laudate* Psalms 148, 149, 150, those always come to my mind when I walk, you just see the beauty of the landscape.

In these instances, which were often the first reaction of the monks to my questions about the Psalms and their experience of the land, the land is *read through* the imagery of the Psalms. Monks often referred to the land itself praising God as in Psalms 148. In addition, was the imagery from Isaiah 55 and Psalms 98 which anthropomorphize the rivers, trees and mountains who spontaneously burst forth and “clap their hands” in praise of the God. As Brother Aymaro of New Clairvaux put it:

The Psalms talk a lot about creation, they really do, there’s a lot of Psalms that talk about the trees clapping their hands, the rivers and the trees clapping their hands and shouting for joy. For me, obviously that’s a metaphor, I mean they are not literally, but for me I see all out here praising God in its own way. Everything is speaking about God, and to God in its own way.

For Brother Aymaro the imagery of hands clapping was symbolic of the sacramental reality of creation praising God. The landscape as creation of God praises Him just by its very existence. The imagery from the Psalms however acts to give voice to that theology through the learned act of chanting specific Psalms, and the rotation of Psalms through the diurnal and liturgical calendars. The metaphorical imagery of the Psalms was invoked by the
elements of the landscape and vice versa as part of a greater spirituality which emerges from scripture and monastic spiritual practice. A tree near a body of water points to the poetic symbolism of Psalms 1, which compares the faithful person to a tree by a flowing river. In the poem the tree is a symbol of the person, and in the mind of the monks, the tree points both directly to this general spiritual symbolism, and the specific reference in the Psalms which he has learned to cherish.

In addition to the rich symbolic, allegorical richness of the Psalms, there were many instances where rather than the Psalms acting as a “template” projected onto the landscape, the particularities of land itself populated the themes of the Psalms through embodied experience. The particular landscapes of each community thus act to populate the same imagery of the liturgy and the Psalms, which rich in symbolism, accumulate added depth as they are chanted aloud within the seasonal changes of a particular place. For the monks of New Camaldoli, it was the California ecosystem with its fire, earthquakes, mudslides and “mountains that melt like wax” that populated the imagery of the Psalms, for the monks of New Clairvaux, it was the pastoral and agricultural imagery of ‘drenched furrows’ and well-watered land. For the monks of Guadalupe, the beauty of the hills, trees and valleys seemed to give praise to God, just as they did in the Psalms. And for the monks of Christ in the Desert, the desert landscape, its unpredictable weather and its stark beauty spoke of the biblical desert and its biome.

For Brother Adso of New Camaldoli Hermitage, the Psalms are part of what he calls the “psychic ecosystem,” of the place, which is embedded in the wider ecology:

That is one of the reasons I like about our place, because we are just so close to the earth. Even the fact that we have to leave our house to go to church; I am always looking to see what the weather is going to do, or I am always looking for fire, or the hawks are nearby. We are not living in little air conditioned cubicles chanting the Psalms, we are really close to the ecosystem here. And in just a couple minutes, look where we are!

Chanting of the Psalms became a transparent stained glass window through which they looked out onto the land, and onto the ever changing world. When I asked Brother Brendan at New Camaldoli, to recall any instances where the land had invoked the Psalms, he immediately said, “The mountains that melt like wax.” I asked him to elaborate, and he said:
The mountains that melt like wax is one of the Psalms [97] and you know I have been here through a number of El Niños and bad storms and the mountains melt like wax [laughs] literally. Also I remember another time it was raining so hard and just as we sang something about the rain and the showers, this torrent just opened up we were in the chapel, it was on a Sunday morning. Everybody just looked at everybody [laughs]. Just what we were singing, it was happening!

The clay slopes of the Santa Lucia Mountains on the Big Sur Coast are notoriously unstable, and there were frequent mudslides and slippages that closed Hwy 1 or the Hermitage driveway. Thus, an element of the Psalms that was intended as a literary devise has become attached to the actual landscape of the Hermitage.

Brother Berengar of Guadalupe Abbey related to me that a few years back he was permitted to ride a bicycle around the valley on occasion, and loved to watch the various activities of the farming community throughout the year. On one such ride he recalled watching a combine harvest a field of wheat. Later during the short period of silence at the end of Vespers he recalled, “I was just sitting there in that quiet period during Vespers and [recalling the] Psalms that speak of harvest and wheat and chaff. So my experience of life [was brought] into the liturgy, into prayer.”

This notion that the imagery of the Psalms is given a richer meaning precisely by his experiences on the landscape was reiterated by Brother Venantius of Christ in the Desert, who was well versed in scripture, and had a keen understanding and attention to the changes in the river and the wider canyon. Sitting on the banks of the Chama River, he taught me:

When the moon rises over that mesa and you see this glowing light halo. Boom! There she is! It echoes what I read in the Psalms. In the Jewish tradition the Passover takes place at the full moon, their agricultural feasts are linked to the lunar calendar. When they sing their praises, ‘like the sunlight on the top of the temple,’ ‘like the moon at the Passover Feast.’ ‘Like the rising of incense at evening prayer.’ They’re all describing unbelievable beauty. One of them is the moon at the pascal feast, and I look up and I’m like that’s what they were talking about. That right there, that moon coming over the mesa is what these boys five thousand years ago, four thousand years ago, is what they were talking about.
Rather than the moon symbolizing a particular element of spiritual life, Brother Venantius emphasized his own experience of his landscape, connecting it to the experience of the writers of the original Psalms in the biblical landscape which deepened his experience of both. The experience is not devoid of semiotics, the landscape invokes his experience of the Psalms, but rather than a symbolic reading, the moon is indexed to both his experience in the River, and his affection for the biblical world as described in the Psalms. The same deep spiritual praise that the moon invoked for those ancient prophets, poets and priests, was being evoked in him.

Brother Donnon related how a storm changed his view of a particular Psalm:
One time it was in the summer time when we have more thunder showers and everything, we were singing one of these Psalms [77] in a terrible storm and everything and right outside it was going on right around [laughs] that was very vivid and it brought the Psalms and my physical context right close together it’s like I was experiencing the Psalm outside in the darkness of the night.

The Psalm was enriched by the experience of the storm, the memory of which is now invoked by the Psalm. In addition, one of the Psalms had become particularly personal for Brother Donnon who told me that he had a disease which leads inevitably to blindness. And responding to my question regarding his experiences of the Psalms, he said:
But I’m relating to that now because I have this ocular degeneration and I have to get shots in my eyes [laughs] and I’m going to probably lose my sight. It’s slow but inevitable and there’s that last word, the last sentence in Psalm 87, ‘my one companion is darkness.’

To speak of the soul’s blindness is a symbol; to speak of the bodies blindness is embodied experience. Having probably chanted the Psalm a thousand times, now that the imagery of darkness in Psalm 87, referring to the lament of the Psalmist’s feeling of abandonment from God, this particular monk felt a stronger resonance with the theme of darkness as it began to take on a real possibility for his day to day experience of the world.

Brother Bertrand at Christ in the Desert related an episode that was rarely invoked with respect to the land and nature: fear.
Saint Benedict says, and the Psalms say it also, ‘fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ Well I had a very personal and very immediate experience of that one day
here. It was not long after I came here I might have still been a novice or something and we were having a monthly Desert Day as we do. You’re free to walk around and sort of get lost and I was out walking way far out in the canyon and I guess it must have been around November or maybe even December, but anyway the weather changed very suddenly it got very, very dark and very, very cloudy, and it started to snow and it started to snow hard. I was way out, and so you’re whole sense of orientation was disrupted, and I thought oh my God I better get back there because I’ve got to make sure I can find the place [laughs] so I was walking along the trail I thought that I had come on, but a couple of times I got off of it and I was really lost and so I had that very strong sense of fear. Because most of the people buried in our cemetery are not monks, [laughs] many of them are people who died in this canyon for precisely that reason they got lost, they got disoriented they had an accident. So I was very aware of the fact that I could die out here. So again, that fear produced awe in me and the power of nature and the immediacy of how fast it changed and how powerless I was over it. That’s sort of an experience of God, that in the presence of God you’re just reduced to absolutely nothing [laughs] because he’s almighty and all omnipotent. That Psalm took on a whole different meaning for me and a whole different depth and when I say that Psalm now I immediately connect with that experience I had out there in the wilderness.

The visceral experience of fear stayed with him, not as a symbol but as an affective quality that was indexed to the Psalm in question, which itself carried deep symbolic and spiritual meaning. Thus while the Psalms are filled with classical religious symbols that are often invoked by the land, their semiotics relevance is entangled with the embodied habitus of the monastic liturgy and day to day life.

**Conclusion**

As we neared the end of my interview questions, after a bit more chatter and a few jokes, Brother Ubertino and I fell silent in the face of the towering canyons in front and behind us. Underneath every symbolic landscape lays a bedrock of silence. Then, Brother Ubertino broke the silence to speak of silence: “The silence in this particular place is tangible. Silence in a room can exist, but when you encounter silence in a space this grand…it’s different,” he said. As we made our way back to the cloister, we could hear the
bells chiming, calling us back to the seven daily chantings of the Psalms which we had just discussed at length.

In their daily reading of the Bible, and the chanting of the Divine Liturgy, the imagery, metaphors, symbols and motifs act as a template through which the monks are formed and learn to read and interact with the world. Religious symbols, environmental discourses, and monastic spirituality dialogue, and yet their day to day habitus and experience with prayer, work and land influence and shape their understandings of these same sacred texts and liturgies. The motifs of desert, wilderness, garden and paradise are also experienced symbolically as inner landscapes.

The chanting of the Psalms with its rich poetry and imagery often serves as a kind of template through which the world is understood, interpreted and celebrated. Their darker more vengeful themes are interpreted in light of the soul’s struggles and the breadth of the human experience. The Psalms also afford a rich vocabulary of sacramental praise to God for the world, which is inevitably carried into the monks’ everyday experiences with the land.

Symbols as living entities live and die, but each takes on its own significance through community and personal spiritual practices. Whereas a monk might wax poetic regarding the symbolic spiritual meaning of water, mountains, trees, darkness, light, day and night, the memories, stories and moral lessons they shared with me acted as signs that emerged through their own unique embodied and relational experiences on the land. In the monastic setting, the habitus of the daily liturgy and the symbolism of the scriptures speak to each other, and the result is a more meaningful encounter with both land and scripture.

This common monastic history and single sacred text, means that the monks share a symbolic system with which to interpret the world. Their immersion in the Bible means that they continually re-present the landscape through a cognitively and consciously constructed template. However, the themes and motifs of the biblical landscape and the symbols of Catholic monasticism, in addition to being actively bridged with environmental discourses in different ways by different monks as discussed in previous chapters, are also enriched by the particularities and features of each of the communities chosen location, wherein symbol and setting blend through embodied presence, encounter, walking and liturgical concerns. The symbolism of the Cloister Garden, traditionally associated with heaven, has vestigial importance to the monastic organization of space and identity, but no longer speaks to the
authentic experience of nature in the same way it did for medieval monks. Each of the monks were familiar with the symbolism, but each had equally different experiences with those symbols, some positive, some negative, based on their preference for the aesthetic of the garden environment. The monks all chanted the same words, read the same Rule, and studied the same Bible. Yet each community, and in turn each monk ‘incarnated’ the various discourses, themes, motifs and symbols in a variety of ways.
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Chapter 6: Conversatio Morum: Monastic Wisdom for the Anthropocene

“In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air.”

—Thomas Merton (1957)

“I can’t make my peace with people who cannibalize the land in the name of saving it. I can’t speak the language of science without a corresponding poetry. I can’t speak with a straight face about saving the planet when what I really mean is saving myself from what is coming.”

—Paul Kingsnorth (2017)

Introduction

Packing my things, I couldn’t help but worry about the road. It was my last day at Christ in the Desert Abbey, my final stop on my research pilgrimage. I was heading out a little early so I would miss a spring snow storm that was supposed to hit the next day most likely making the 13 mile dirt road that leads to the monastery from the highway impassible. The monk of Christ in the Desert often joked that the road itself is a kind of faith journey for those who make the venture, and on my way in I understood why.

My decision to take on a PhD at the age of 32 was itself a kind of leap of faith, and my personal life had seen its share of bumps along the way. My time with the monks of four distinct monastic communities had been both academically and personally enriching and I was pleased with what I had accomplished. I had travelled through some beautiful country and I looked forward to returning to friends and loved ones in the Pacific Northwest to begin the writing process.

In this work I have examined a set of questions and taken the reader on a journey through the contours and character of the monastic relationship to land at four Catholic monasteries in the American West. I have sought to bring into conversation theological ideas with phenomenological experiences. Each chapter has offered a particular argument, contributing to my overarching thesis that monastic dwelling is informed by ancient values,
beliefs, traditions and religious symbols that serve as a template through which the landscape is interpreted. This *dwelling* is profoundly shaped by pre-cognitive, affective and embodied experiences and encounters emerging from the landscape itself.

Rather than taking a purely social constructionist or phenomenological stance, I have argued for what I call an *embodied semiotics* wherein religious and monastic symbols, motifs, beliefs and values are relationally attached to and molded by embodied contact and experience with land. Through their unique spirituality, monks consciously foster a relational dynamic between inner and outer worlds, between the inscape of the soul and the place. I have shown that the monastic sense of place is both rooted and rootless; that land reveals both God’s immanence and transcendence; that the monastic landscape is both symbolically constructed and vividly embodied.

One of the vows that Benedictine and Trappist monks take is called *Conversatio Morum*, literally, the changing or conversion of ones mores, manners or ways over a lifetime. The monastic enters the monastery to seek God, and in seeking God finds him or herself alone with their own bad habits, fears, anxieties, and those of their companions. *Conversatio* also means conversation, and each of our lives are in fact, moral conversations that draw on the past and hope for a livable future. While monasticism will perhaps never be the social and political force it once was during its medieval golden era, it will continue to quietly offer its wisdom to the cultures that surround it, like grains of yeast in a loaf of bread. Their wisdom often abides in the shadows, and from time to time a light is shined on their remote corner of the world and the monastics generously, and without fanfare, whisper to each of us to slow down, to stop a minute, to pay attention, to listen, to pray, to give thanks, to take a walk in the woods.

In the remainder of this concluding chapter, I will take a more speculative turn, engaging monastic spiritual ecology in questions regarding the emerging era of the ‘Anthropocene’, the continued importance of sense of place, the environmental ethic of ecocentrism, and continued relevance of the individual subject in place and landscape studies.

**The Wilderness and the Garden: Monasticism in the Anthropocene**

Throughout this work there has been a thread tracing the shifts and changes to the biblical motifs of wilderness, desert, paradise and garden. This aspect was one of the most
fascinating for me in writing this dissertation because not only did these biblical motifs influence monastic communities in ancient times, their influence can be seen and traced through present day debates in environmental discourse. The Paradise-garden and the Desert-wilderness are enduring motifs not only of the monastic’s journey to God, but also of the environmentalist’s journey to Nature. From the medieval agrarian vision of restoring the Paradise-garden to earth through human work, to the preservationist’s visions of protecting wilderness as an original ‘Paradise,’ our ideas about nature seem to shift on a pendulum that pivots on the perceived role of human beings in the world.

From models of nature that frame ecosystems as fragile and static ‘bodies’, to models which seem to show that the world is an infinitely dynamic, resilient, non-linear, adaptive and complex system,1 each has implications for the role and purpose of human beings in wider world. Feeling loyalty and sympathy with both the agrarian and wilderness views of environmentalism, the value in keeping wild places protected, and also integrating human beings into the landscape through meaningful work, monasticism provides an unflinchingly humanist approach to land and creation. The dignity of the human person comes before the integrity of the earth’s biosphere, if one were forced to choose. However, especially with the publication of Pope Francis’s Encyclical Letter Laudato Si, a more balanced or as he calls it ‘integral’ approach is being bridged between Deep Ecology’s insistence on intrinsic values of nature and Catholic humanism.

While I will address in greater depth the relationship between Deep Ecology and monasticism below, in this section I want to further sketch out the implications of contemporary monasticism for an age that is increasingly being called the Anthropocene, an era in which human beings have become the dominant species within the planetary system. In this discussion, it appears that contemporary debates about the role of human beings on the planet continue to employ the biblical motifs of the Desert-wilderness and the Paradise-garden, and that the monastic insistence on forging lasting relationships to particular places has something to teach us in regard to the crises we face, even if that lesson is widely applicable to a world bent on technological and economic progress.

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Drawing parallels between the monastic way of life and the “Dark Ecology” of British nature writer Paul Kingsnorth I argue that Kingsnorth’s technological skepticism, apocalyptic tone and politics of withdrawal is an ecocentric recapitulation of an essentially Benedictine approach to ecology, with many parallels to monastic land-based spirituality, and several points of inspiration for monastics themselves.

The planet is in flux, and while change is the only constant in the earth’s history, the evidence is overwhelming that human beings are the primary actors behind many of the destructive changes being witnessed across the globe. In recent years, several scientists have proposed that we have in fact entered a new era of pervasive human impact called the ‘Anthropocene,’ as pervasive as any past geological epoch. Chemist Paul Crutzen defines the Anthropocene as “an informal geologic chronological term for the proposed epoch that began when human activities had a significant global impact on the Earth's ecosystems.” This new era is proposed to be different from the Holocene which presented a stable climate within which human civilization has evolved. Humanity has been on a steady resource intensifying trajectory since our domestication of fire and this trajectory jumped with the invention of agriculture and again during the industrial revolution.

The Anthropocene is not the first attempt to identify a human-dominated era. Catholic priest Antonio Stoppani coined the term “Anthropozoic” in 1873 as a first reference to the human presence on earth with the force of geological epoch, and French Jesuit Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, discussed in several places above, coined the term ‘Noosphere’, for the development of a global human consciousness. Evidence for such a transition are supported by the fact that humans are now dramatically influencing the planetary carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, water and sulfur cycles, species extinctions are well above previously observed thresholds, and human mercury pollution is now found in ice cores in the artic and isolated streams throughout the globe. While human beings are relatively new to the global evolutionary scene, we have entered with a bang.

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3 Steffen, Will et al., The Anthropocene’.
As we approach this brave new world, the environmental movement, charged with protecting our common home, has become divided about just how much human intervention might be necessary. Calls for more areas of wilderness protection are being met with calls to abolish wilderness altogether. Calls to simplify our technology, are being met with calls to intensify it. What is striking in these ongoing moral conversations (Conversatio Morum) is just how faithful proposals have been to the established pendulum between discourses which appeal to the Western motifs of the earth as a domain of wilderness and paradise. What seems to change however, is what we mean by them.

As discussed above, the idea of wilderness was once a pejorative in Western society, which was eventually redeemed by the Romantic and Transcendentalist writers, and later institutionalized by the Wilderness Act of 1968. Pastoral and agricultural models of ‘Paradise’ have given way to the aesthetic of unmanaged landscapes as God’s original garden. Deep Ecologists advocate a return to simpler times; wilderness advocates suggest doubling our efforts to set aside even more protected areas.

Modernism of course had its own spin on Paradise, believing that technology could enlist the earth in solving humanity’s perennial problems with disease, hunger and warfare. As the excesses of modernism, and the environmental crisis deepens, the project of modernity has also come into crisis. Yet, apologists for modernism, tech savvy ‘Eco-modernists’ suggest that simply setting aside more land will not work. We need new ideas, and we might need to sacrifice some old ideas as well. For example, some have suggested that to save the planet, the West must get rid of one of its most cherished concepts: Nature.

In 1995 Environmental Historian William Cronon wrote a controversial essay expressing his concern that the wilderness ethic was obfuscating our obligation to protect places closer to home. In “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Cronon lays out his main problems with the idea of wilderness as advocated by the American preservationist movement of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It is not wildlands that are the problem per se, but the environmental movement’s obsession with ecological purity, argues Cronon, that has led to an undervaluation of places that do not present themselves within a narrow aesthetic. He writes, “Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely
nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.”

Setting aside wilderness had left us without much to say about land outside of these places. He advocates for a revaluing of the wildness close to home, in suburbs and cities, and within the human heart. His notion that wilderness was simply a social construction enraged wilderness advocates who presumed that this meant Yosemite could be just as meaningful as a Walmart parking lot if we wanted it to be.

Others have taken Cronon’s critique to heart. For example, journalist Emma Marris has suggested that environmentalism embrace rather than fight the Anthropocene. Marris sees conservation not as a crusade to beat back culture from an innocent and pure nature, but as a suite of tools that vary depending on human goals which are embedded in a global ecology that is dynamic, resilient and in constant flux. Marris admonishes us to take conservation out of the wilderness areas and protected areas and onto the city streets and community gardens. She acknowledges that certain areas of no human influence might be desirable, but that we should not fret about for example keeping invasive species out, as an act of ritual purity for the sake of serving the idol of an authentic ‘Nature.’ For Marris, ‘Garden,’ a place of human-nature cooperation is a much better metaphor than ‘Nature’ as a domain set up in opposition to culture. How we protect other species, slow rates of extinction, protect genetic diversity, defend biodiversity, maximize ecosystem services, and honor our aesthetic and spiritual preferences will always be based on compromises between competing human values, ideas and objectives. She writes,

Society must decide what its goals are on multiple scales, then allocate the best-suited land to these various goals and get going, not shying away from the occasional bold experiment. Here, land for soulful contemplation, plus water filtration. There, land for the tiger and for ten endangered plant species. Over there, a mixed-bag refuge for island species that have winked out on their home atolls. And there, farms with wide boundaries left to go wild and highway medians covered in flowers.

Marris is not necessarily against wild places, but is pushing environmentalism to clarify and in some cases redefine our ideas about the natural world in an era of global change that

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acknowledges that it comes down to human choice and values. The wilderness is not the authentic domain of pure nature, but the instinct rooted at the heart of all life.

Marris joins a chorus of “New Environmentalists” some of whom have recently published a document entitled the *Ecomodernist Manifesto*, wherein the authors align themselves with this overall position and criticism of a dualistic romanticized ‘Nature.’ These neo-environmentalists are confident that once we give up policing the boundaries between culture and nature, we can begin managing the planet effectively for both humans and nonhumans alike. They are confident that the Anthropocene will be a step *forward* not backward:

As scholars, scientists, campaigners, and citizens, we write with the conviction that knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, Anthropocene. A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world.7

Human genius will save us, and we can expect, with the proper adjustments to institutions, economies and technologies, a Tony the Tiger®-styled “grrrrreat!” Anthropocene.

These self-titled New Conservationists, Eco-modernists or Eco-Pragmatists, have more confidence in human genius than human heart, and for many of them, solving the ecological crisis is not a moral imperative but a practical necessity. For the writers of the Ecomodernist Manifest, environmentalism’s sacred cow, Nature has got to go, and we need to embrace technology, state-centered decision making, and a human-values approach to ecological sustainability. Human beings have reached the status of gods8 who have substantial control over the earth and her lifeforms. It is in our hands now. It is what we make it, what we value, what we desire. If we want wilderness we need to justify it through human values and priorities, not *sui generis* valuations such as intrinsic value, reverence and awe. The Eco-modernist’s could be said to see the earth as a large garden which must be managed and stewarded by human beings, the ones who like it or not have the knowledge and power to do so effectively.

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8 This is in fact precisely what Yuval Harari argues in his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. 
Cronon’s essay and the recent Manifesto have been met with fury by wilderness advocates, who balk at the idea that wilderness is just a social or cognitive construction. If everything is a social construction, then Nature can in fact be “reinvented” as Cronon proposes. If wilderness is just in our heads, or a symbol of the human heart, then we deny the reality of the world around us, and the very real damage that human beings are doing to the ecosphere at an alarming rate, and the very real species that are going extinct because of it. We are in fact living through what many are calling the Sixth Extinction of life on earth, caused by human expansion. Rather than seeing the earth as an agrarian project, or a human techno-Paradise-garden, wilderness advocates continue to push for the protection and minimal human intervention in the earth’s remaining intact ecosystems, excluding human enterprise, controlling invasive species, and restoring damages done in the past. Not because they are untouched virgin wilderness, but because there are still a great deal of intact ecosystems in the world that house a great many nonhuman communities that have worth in and of themselves, worth that is worthy of protection for its own sake, not only for what it might contribute as carbon sink, ecosystem service or aesthetic enjoyment. For wilderness advocates, the primordial earth is Paradise, and it is human civilization which must be kept from spoiling it or destroying it all together. The earth and its ecosystems are the real, and human intellection is but a thin veneer which could be wiped out with the flick of Mother Earth’s wrist. Wilderness advocates argue that they are simply trying to protect the earth from the ravages of the modernist agrarian project of converting the earth into a human techno-Paradise. Though there are various shades of these ‘deep’ ecologies, most advocate an Ecocentric ethic, which suggests that there are in fact values outside of human cognition and perception. That while humans are integral to the earth, we are not its apex. George Sessions, in fiery defiance to post-modern critiques of Deep Ecology and its goals of protecting the earth ecological heritage writes,

The great debate that now has to be confronted, that will decide the fate of the Earth in the near future, is between a Disneyland theme park megatechnological consumer future with transnational corporations in control, or one in which human societies

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have been scaled back, humans live sane biophilic lives, and huge sections of wild
Nature and biodiversity have been protected and restored.10
This debate should of course should sound familiar. When John Muir and Gifford Pinchot
went head to head over the Hetch Hetchy dam in late 1880s, these exact kinds of arguments
were used. Should we protect the valley for its God-given beauty? Its value as a spiritual
refuge? Or, should it be sacrificed on the altar of economic and nationalist growth? Is the
world intrinsically sacred? Or is it only as sacred as we believe it to be? Each side, whether
Conservationist vs. Preservationist, Eco-modernist vs. Ecocentrist continues to be immersed
in the narratives and motifs of Western Christianity, but each has their sights set on a very
different Paradise. As we enter the Anthropocene, and apocalyptic language intensifies, there
is no consensus about how to move forward.

One emerging writer who is critical of the Ecomodernist approach and calls himself a
“recovering environmentalist” because of environmentalism’s its obsession with carbon,
renewable energy schemes and market based solutions, is British novelist and essayist Paul
Kingsnorth. Kingsnorth’s Dark Mountain Project11 suggests that we embrace what he calls a
“Dark Ecology,” one without illusions about technology as savior, or grand Ecomodernist
projects to transition to renewables or geoengineer the planet to avoid global temperature
rise. For Kingsnorth, carbon accounting, and sustainability™ have become coopted
buzzwords of the ongoing modernist project to convert the earth into a human-centered
Paradise-garden.

For Kingsnorth, much of contemporary environmentalism has simply traded one
technological solutions for another:

Now it seemed that environmentalism was not about wildness or ecocentrism or the
other-than-human world and our relationship to it. Instead it was about (human)
social justice and (human) equality and (human) progress and ensuring that all these
things could be realized without degrading the (human) resource base that we used to
call nature back when we were being naïve and problematic.12

Ground.’ Trumpeter 13, no. 1. Website:
As long as environmentalism is an ally in the project of saving the techno-capitalist way of life, Kingsnorth argues, it has admitted defeat. Rather than insisting on a constant string of actions and reactions, Kingsnorth has personally decided to withdraw. He has opted for the contemplative over the active life, in order to focus himself on developing a deep emotional and spiritual connection with actual organisms and actual places. Environmentalism has lost its way within the ever alluring human project of progress, and he wants none of it. In the venerable footsteps of white men such as Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, Kingsnorth writes:

I withdraw, you see. I withdraw from the campaigning and the marching, I withdraw from the arguing and the talked-up necessity and all of the false assumptions. I withdraw from the words. I am leaving. I am going to go out walking.13

Having spent many years as a front lines activist, Kingsnorth has decided to pour his energy into his relationship to a two and a half acre property in the Irish countryside where he recently relocated with his small family.

As a civilization, we are passing through a ‘dark night of the soul,’ and Kingsnorth’s Dark Ecology seeks to embrace the real possibility and for him inevitability, of collapse. We must regroup, gather in small tribes, and begin to truly live again, to tell each other stories about our relationship to the world, and to boldly care for what previous life is left. While he is apocalyptic in tone, his hope lies in returning to living in authentic, affective relationship with the earth as soon as possible.

Kingsnorth has of course been dismissed as a romantic, naïve Luddite, getting in the way of (eco) progress. Certainly his approach is defeatist. Yet Kingsnorth responds by repeating something the artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, who was also accused of escapism when he too moved to small rural property, who said “certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks…you can change a bit of the actual world by taking out a spade.”14

Reading Kingsnorth, even with his deeply ecocentric and mostly non-Christian perspective, I could not help but notice familiar threads to Benedictine monasticism. Kingsnorth advocates a kind of withdrawal from the world under the assumption that it cannot in fact be evangelized or affected without fundamentally jeopardizing one’s ability to

13 Kingsnorth, Paul, Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist, 81.
14 Kingsnorth, Paul, Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist, 102-103.
live an authentic human life. Saint Benedict left Rome in disgust, and founded his monasteries as self-sufficient communities during the collapse of the Roman Empire. Yet, while monastic communities seek to live apart from the world, they do not see themselves as separate or closed off from it. They provide refuge and sanctuary, and invite the world to them. The Rule of Benedict counsels monasteries to welcome the stranger as if they were Christ himself. For Kingsnorth, environmentalism has made a deal with the devil and in the process has lost its soul. In pursuit of Paradise they are unwittingly participating in creating a hell on earth. For Kingsnorth and many monks alike, dwelling in and forging a relationship to place is not an escape from the world, but an essential ingredient of what it means to be alive in a world at all. And it could certainly be argued that the accumulated relationships of the thousands of people who visit monasteries each year and then return to the world, makes a real difference.

In addition, Kingsnorth’s disdain for technology was often shared by the monks, who while not Primitivists, nevertheless remain reflexive of its use and scope within their own lives. The monks have restricted access to the internet, do not generally use cell phones, and seldom watch television. The monks are critical of overconsumption, pollution and the excessive use of pesticides. They refuse to use genetically modified seeds in their gardens. Certainly there were ongoing debates within the monastic communities regarding the use of technology, from leaf blowers to computers, but each community seeks to balance the needs of the community with the contemplative life they have all committed to living. Any piece of technology that interferes with the monastic vocation of prayer is suspect, and subject to rejection.

Monasticism as I understand it, insists on living a life of authenticity first. Technology, money and economic progress are all placed in *right order* as the monks might say, to that overarching value. Kingsnorth, in refusing to play the carbon game, or join the chorus of renewable energy boosters taps into this insistence that our lives are not about ourselves; that maintaining a standard of living that is both materially and spiritually unsustainable is ultimately a fool’s errand.

To the extent that human institutions rally to the pursuit of a fleeting human progress or technological solutions to moral problems, both Dark Ecology and contemplative monastics will remain skeptical. Land-based monasticism is not necessarily a model of
ecological sustainability that can be scaled up as many would perhaps hope, but it is in fact a model of how each of us might learn to scale down, sink roots into places and learn from them, and to care for them as partners and stewards, not as saviors or engineers.

**Can Sense of Place be Polyamorous?**

In addition to accusing Kingsnorth of romanticism, others have called into question the desirability of place-based approaches all together. In this section, I will reflect on the trajectory of place in contemporary environmental thought, arguing that place and sense of place continue to be important loci for human ecological ethics into the future. Modernism it seems was characterized with a general sense of placelessness. Since at least the 1970s however, there has been a strong return to the idea of place, and research concerned with the process of place attachment. However, in recent years the concept of place and dwelling has come under criticism. Eco-Feminist scholar Val Plumwood questions the sincerity of contemporary musings on place and dwelling in an era of massive global upheaval and economic homogenization: “The very concept of a singular homeplace or ‘our place’ is problematized by the dissociation and dematerialization that permeate the global economy and culture.” 15 By this she means, that in an era of increasing globalization attachment to place often comes at the expense of other places sacrificed on the altar of global markets to support Western post-industrial lifestyles that have sought to rediscover or reclaim a sense of belonging but relegated the hardware of the economic engines to far flung locales. She is skeptical of environmental discourses such as ‘Bioregionalism’ for example which seek to carve out a single place-based narrative of self-sufficiency at the expense of wider global realities. Rather, Plumwood suggests, communities must always be understood as in relation to other communities, and in an era of economic globalization, a justice perspective is crucial.

Agreeing with Plumwood, philosopher of Religion and Ecology Whitney Bauman suggests that the romantic drive in Western culture to “go back to” authentic places loses its meaning in an economy that is quickly stripping the planet’s places of their resources. He writes,

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Much of ecological and religious thinking is tied up in securing home, community, place, identity, value, and meaning. This is juxtaposed with the globalized, postworlds in which we live, where such stability, arrival, and homecoming is not possible, nor perhaps even desirable.\footnote{16}{Bauman, Whitney (2014). \textit{Religion and Ecology Developing a Planetary Ethic} (New York: Columbia University Press), 127.}

Bauman seems to think that misguided and romantic notions of place (upheld by the monks in this study), are in fact perpetuating and exacerbating the ecological crisis. Like Plumwood, he sees an infatuation in the West with place, especially wild places, as risking ignorance of the cost of our local ecological footprint on the wider planetary socio-ecological system. He thus proposes by analogy that rather than a ‘monogamous’ approach to place, which performs the Western commitment to a reified Nature through the metaphor of monogamy, we must move toward a ‘nomadic polyamory’ of place which decenters ideas of a stable nature, and an authentic homeplace that centers human meaning. Because the world is more and more interconnected, and that patriarchy has fostered a dominating ethos toward both people and planet, monogamous relationship to place is increasingly problematic. He writes,

The more culturally, intellectually, environmentally, politically and economically globalized our worlds become, the less effective will be place-based politics, whether that place is a state, a bioregion, a township, a neighborhood, or a nation.\footnote{17}{Bauman, Whitney, \textit{Religion and Ecology}, 143.}

Place-based approaches are simply not aligned with an ever changing world, and romantic notions of authentic place get in the way of building a global ethic that will bring some measure of justice and equity to those marginalized, displaced and exploited by the tastes of the Western developed nations.

Eco-critic Timothy Morton argues that this romantic notion of place may for example take issue with a proposed wind farm because it would spoil a favored view. However, this illusory aesthetical authenticity hides the damages done by coal power plants out of site and out of mind, and the processes that went into extracting the coal that was burned yet retains the unobstructed view. The wind farm may be visually disruptive, but they are arguably better for the global climate crisis than continuing to burn fossil fuels. Morton laments that we tend to prefer “secret pipes, running under an apparently undisturbed landscape” to the
more obvious wind turbines. Contra Kingsnorth, Morton has no problem with the aesthetic implications of vast solar and wind farms.

Each of these theorists critique sense of place as a kind of parochial romanticism which takes for granted a stable authentic ‘Nature’ to which we can return. The monks in this study however, certainly adhere to both a deep sense of loyalty to place, and a blatantly romantic (in some cases literally) notion of the world as a sacramental reality which reveals the peace and goodness at the heart of God. In addition, their celibate bodies are in a very real sense married to the community and the land that models its own sacramental monogamy to the wider world.

First, as suggested above, monastics do not seek out a misanthropic or escapist isolation. A monastery is meant to be a sanctuary for the world from the world, albeit on its own terms. While monks are called to pray, they are not praying just for themselves, but for the world as a whole. As Thomas Merton writes, “In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air.” There has been and always will be in monastic spirituality, a wider awareness to the world, and deep commitment to hospitality, to welcoming the world, to the place they call home. Their rootedness gives them the awareness and freedom to love outward from a single place. But their rootedness is not afraid of change and loss, though they are certainly thoughtful in their decisions to make such changes.

A monk has in a sense died to the world, and his body acts as an icon and place marker at the threshold of the hoped for world to come. Their love of place, and rootedness in a particular corner of the world is mirrored by a simultaneously paradoxical placelessness which stands in solidarity with the increasingly uprooted circumstances of the world’s poor and refugee. They do not try to intervene in the world, but hold out an infinite hope for its redemption. In theologian Douglas Christie’s estimation, the monastic commitment to place is the commitment “to struggle with the way both place and loss of place shape and form us.”

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With respect to the analogy of monogamy versus polygamy, monastics exhibit a kind of liminal position between the two. The vow of stability marries the monk not only to his community but to his place. This commitment to a single community and a single place is precisely what gives one the energy, resolve and perseverance to face the darker realities of self and other, rather than drifting from place to place as an experience-hungry traveler, which is referred to in the Rule of Benedict as the Gyrovague, the least reputable kind of monk.

Monastics are not married to a single person, but to a community and to the land, arguably a strand of polyamory. Yet, this ‘marriage’ is a temporary placeholder and icon for monogamous love they seek with God. There is nothing particularly naïve or simplistic about the day in and day out commitment to a place that is mirrored in many successful monogamous relationships. Commitment to a person or place requires work, vigilance and dedication, and can sometimes be frustrating, heartbreaking and painful. It is in fact the contemporary notion of polyamory with its imagined freedom to move between any number of relationships of varying levels of intimacy in the pursuit of fulfilling any number of personal desires that seems ethically problematic in light of the greater impact global crises are having on actual places.

For example, while I have been writing this work, I have been kept informed to the situation at New Camaldoli Hermitage, which during the winter of 2016-2017 received record amounts of rains, resulting in mudslides that closed Pacific Coast Highway 1 at two locations, one north and the other just south of the Hermitage. In addition, the floods have causes several hundred thousand dollars’ worth of damage to the Hermitage’s driveway, which remained impassible for several months. Because the Hermitage relies on retreatants as a main source of income, this forced isolation has caused significant hardship to the monastery, forcing them to ration food, and raise funds from outside just to stay afloat. However, in email correspondence with the monks, they remain optimistic, and honored by the outpouring of support. Needless to say, they remain committed to their liminal place between the ‘mountains that melt like wax,’ and the Pacific Ocean despite the difficulties, hardship and uncertainty of what climate change will do to their fragile location.

Sense of place is not just a kind of modern escapism concerned with aesthetic beauty or leisure at the expense of the surrounding world. Monastic sense of place is wedded to
place and its difficulties, with eyes fixed on God, and hearts open to the needs and intentions of the world. Monasticism seeks authentic place only in service to, on behalf of, and in dialogue with a world that seems bent on change, movement and progress.

**Can a Sacramental Ontology be Ecocentric?**

Continuing the legacy of the Romantics, are a growing number of environmentalists who claim to be either Ecocentrist, or spiritual Ecologists. Rooted in the intuitions of the Deep Ecology movement of the 1970s and 80s, which called for an ontological shift in Western views of nature, these writers insist that the totality of the earth-system, biotic and abiotic, carry *intrinsic* worth beyond human usefulness (even spiritual usefulness), and are therefore worthy of ethical concern and imperative on their own terms. In this section I will explore further the implications of the monastic sacramental ontology in light of propositions for an Ecocentric ethic, assessing whether some version of a sacramental ontology might be considered Ecocentric, despite its embeddedness in Catholic humanism. I argue that while sacramental ontology may provide the space for an intrinsic valuing of nonhuman life within what Pope Francis calls an Integral Ecology, and that this certainly has overlap with calls to re-enchant the world as sacred, human worth and dignity will always remain at the center of a Catholic ethical anthropology.

As I have already discussed, scholars in the fields of Religion and Ecology and Ecotheology are attempting to engage the traditional world religions in ‘retrieving’ their ecologically friendly teachings and practices. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, following Thomas Berry’s lead, suggest that the religions each present a unique ‘religious ecology’ or ‘functional cosmology’ which puts forth a moral grounding that may contribute to a broad response to current ecological crises. They write:

> Religious ecologies are ways of orienting and grounding whereby humans, acknowledging the limitations of phenomenal reality and the suffering inherent in life, undertake specific practices of nurturing and transforming self and community in a particular cosmological context that regards nature as inherently valuable²¹

Religions connect people to ultimate questions, each other and the world we live in. By engaging people of faith on their own terms in their own faith languages, the discoveries of

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science and ecology will be more palatable and implementable.\textsuperscript{22} This process of negotiation which I have highlighted throughout this work, is dubbed bridging by Stephen Ellingson wherein Religious Environmental Movement Organizations (REMS) reinforce and maintain their identities and priorities. For various Christian denominations, environmental initiatives are as much about “renewing faith” as they are about “saving the environment.”\textsuperscript{23}

Many advocates of ecocentrism however, are impatient with the conservative nature of religious institutions, and their often human-centered theologies.\textsuperscript{24} For forester and philosopher J. Stan Rowe in his essay ‘Ecocentrism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge’, the world’s religions as they exist are simply not enough to get us where he thinks we need to go, suggesting that we need “a new and compelling belief-system to redirect our way-of-living” and that it must be “a vital outgrowth from our science-based culture.”\textsuperscript{25} Rather than reclaiming Christian teachings on environmental, and bridging them with environmental discourses, ecocentrists should draw from both traditional strands of ecocentric worldviews (such as certain indigenous ontologies) and scientific understandings of the world to create new stories and approaches to the world. Again, Ellingson and Taylor call this approach bricolage, because it seeks to create new institutional and ethical systems, rather than reconcile two existing ones.

Ecocentrists stress the importance of going beyond anthropocentrism, which puts human values, needs and desires at the center of ethical concern. Their critique is of modern excesses, but also ‘eco-pragmatic’ approaches which seek to embed management decisions solely within constructed human values. Ecocentrists however, see human values and economies as \textit{subordinate} to the greater ecological whole, a reality independent of human values. For example, a recently posted online statement drafted by scholars and practitioners states that: “We maintain that the ecosphere, including the life it contains, is an inherent

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\item \textsuperscript{23} Ellingson, Stephen, \textit{To Care for the Earth}, 2.
\end{itemize}
good, irrespective of whether humans are the ones valuing it.”26 The matrix of organism and environment is inherently valuable, with humans as an integral but not supremacist position in the greater whole. Thus, unlike more constructivist, or pragmatic approaches, wherein human values are the center of decision making with respect to environmental management, ecocentrists would argue that human ethics must recognize and respect value where it inherently exists. Human beings are worthy of moral regard insofar as meeting their needs does not compromise the integrity of the ecological whole out of which they emerged, and are an integral part. As ethicist Michael Northcott summarizes, ecocentrism means that “value…is not located in the individual parts but in the good of the whole, in the flourishing of the biotic community and in the balance of all its parts.”27

Ecocentric approaches, rather than reclaiming traditional religious approaches are proposing ‘Pantheist’, ‘Religious Naturalist’ and ‘Atheist’ perspectives calling for a spirituality that is rooted in the earth itself. For cell biologist Ursula Goodenough in her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* a religious naturalist perspective does not affirm traditional metaphysical or supernatural realities, but seeks to honor and hold sacred life itself in all its complexity, beauty and mystery. In their film *Journey of the Universe*, producers John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker and host Brian Swimme seek to embed the enormous gains in cosmology and natural history by science into a narrative that affirms the possibility of a meaningful role for human beings in the direction of cosmic evolution.28

This general sense of reclaiming religious earth teachings and establishing new approaches rooted in science have been expressed through calls to “reenchant” the world; meaning, a turn ‘back’ to a world that is wholly sacred, vital and interconnected. As Paul Kingsnorth suggests, environmental problems are not simply technical problems in need of technical solutions, they are moral problems in need of a moral response. For example, in the introduction to his edited volume *Spiritual Ecology*, the editor, Sufi teacher Llewellyn Vaughn Lee, writes that “The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to

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which we belong.” Lee’s book features a chorus of voices from the world’s religious and spiritual traditions, each singing in a different octave the song that the earth is sacred, and thus intrinsically valuable; and that if we are going to effectively respond to the environmental crisis we must return to a meaningful commitment to this reality.

Yet the question remains whether established traditions are capable or willing to engage ecocentrism as a meaningful way forward. Fully assessing the merits of a Christian environmental ethic is beyond the scope of this work, and has been attempted by many already. However, it should be clear by now that there is no single ‘Christian’ environmental ethics, and as I have attempted to argue, facets of Christian theology are in continuous dialogue with diverse ecological approaches.

On the one hand, laying the blame at the feet of Christianity for the ecological crisis has become something of a hobby for environmentalists and ecocentrists since Lynn White published his now infamous essay ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’ in 1967. Christianity is framed as anthropocentric, viewing the world as a stage upon which the human drama plays out on its way to heaven. Certainly many strains of ‘imperial’ or ‘nationalist’ Christianities have indeed shaped and sided with the modernist project at the heart of our ecological crisis, whose thinking emerged from the Enlightenment. However, to conflate the diverse Christianities that exist today and their relationship to the earth with the modernist anthropocentric approach to economic progress misses the nuances and depth of an authentically sacramental approach to the world, especially the kind of ‘deep’ sacramentalism which emphasizes God’s immanence in the world through the Incarnation and the Holy Spirit. Lynn White (a Presbyterian) even acknowledges that the tradition of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), the Patron Saint of Ecology is a perfectly legitimate tradition within Christianity, though a far less useful one to the captains of industry.

As theologian Paul Santmire writes, Christianity has certainly inherited an “ambiguous” legacy with respect to the earth, which contemporary ecotheologians are attempting to recover, reclaim and in some cases redefine. However, with respect to whether or not these efforts might place Christianity within the emerging push for a specifically ecocentric approach, I do not believe Christianity will ever fully arrive. For example, for the monks in this study, much like their broader Christian peers, the worth of a human soul will

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always hold a privileged place in the assemblage of organic and inorganic life on earth no matter how interconnected and interdependent on the rest of creation we admit to be. To place the primacy of the ethical at the level of the *ecosystem*, or the earth, is to flip an ontological arrangement that is fused to Christian moral concern, especially when that moral concern is frames the earth as a kind of divine being or pantheist sacred entity.

Human beings hold a special vocation as creatures created in God’s image and likeness (See Genesis 1:27). This emphasis on the special relationship between humans and God, means that environmental issues are most often framed as being about caretakership and stewardship, an idea that has been heavily criticized by ecocentrists for its hubris which presumes that human beings are capable of knowing how to care for such a complex web of life, a web human beings emerged from fairly late in the game. But just because Christians insist on a role for human beings in the care and management of the earth, does not automatically mean we have permission to strip mine, deforest, geoengineer or develop however we see fit.

With the release of Pope Francis’s Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, a document that was taken very seriously by each of the communities in this study, many Catholic circles have become energized by a dialogue between religion and ecology which has been unfolding within more academic circles for the last 30 years. An ‘Integral Ecology’ as Pope Francis calls it, which, like the ecocentrists, affirms intrinsic value in the world independent of human wants and needs, must be rooted in the reality of God as source and creator. God is the author of value, not humans. *Anthropocentrism* then is a corruption rather than continuation of Christianity, wherein Creation’s status as gift for our use as stewards, in modernism is taken as a no strings attached resource that is up for grabs to highest bidder. Rooted in Catholic social teachings, Pope Francis affirms the essential insights of ecology, that the world is deeply, even mysteriously interconnected, and that the particularities of this world matter in the grand scheme of eternity:

Ongoing research should also give us a better understanding of how different creatures relate to one another in making up the larger units which today we term “ecosystems.” We take these systems into account not only to determine how best to use them, but also because they have an *intrinsic* value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the
same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system.\textsuperscript{30}

Using the language of interconnection, intrinsic value and usefulness, parallels ecocentric concerns with the value of the world, yet remains rooted in an essentially sacramental understanding of that world. While it is true that a sacramental theology/ontology puts humans at the center of the God’s purposes, creation is not simply a temporary stage upon which the human drama unfolds. Nonhuman creation too is bound up in this cosmic dance that is moving closer and closer to union with God through Christ. As Saint Paul writes, creation is “groaning in labor pains” in anticipation of its liberation (Romans 8). Captured in the Mass, the Eucharist is the sign that points to this realized eschatology, wherein a small morsel of bread and a cup of wine are lifted up to become the body and blood of Christ.

Religion and Ecology Scholar Sam Mickey suggests that Christianity occupies what he calls an Anthropocosmic ethical space, which is neither exclusively anthropocentric nor ecocentric. Rather, in an Anthropocosmic ethic, the “values of humanity and of the environment are not spoken of in terms of an opposition between center and periphery, but in terms of an intimate intertwining of humans (anthropoi) with the world (cosmos).”\textsuperscript{31} A Catholic Integral Ecology will always privilege the dignity of human persons before nonhuman persons, but this is not seen as putting two domains in opposition, but rather a single domain in right order. As Pope Francis writes, “There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.”\textsuperscript{32} Yet, even within Catholic orthodoxy, and especially before the Enlightenment, while human beings are ontologically higher up the ladder of consciousness or soul than other forms of life, we are still on the same ladder. This notion underscores the belief that human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the earth are and should be inextricably linked.

A sacramental ontology is also capable of joining calls for a reenchanted earth, one that is considered sacred, albeit within its own vocabulary. If Ecomodernism sees human beings as god, and ecocentrist tend toward seeing ‘Nature’ or ‘Life’ itself as pantheistically

\textsuperscript{30} Francis, Pope, \textit{Laudato Si} #140.
\textsuperscript{32} Francis, Pope, \textit{Laudato Si}, #118.
divine and thus worthy of reverence, for the broad spectrum of orthodox Christianities *God is God*, the mysterious and transcendent source of all life which lays behind all that is. God is most certainly experienced as imminent to his creations, but not wholly captured by them. Sacramental theology, in dialogue with environmental discourse emphatically values creation as good, and even intrinsically good, but it does so in constant recognition that creation comes from God and is returning to God. To drift too closely to seeing the earth itself as *divine*, as a sort of Gaian deity, falls into the heresy of pantheism, and its own kind of romanticism or reification.

Ecocentrism is not without its own problems with respect to questions of the divine. For ethicist Michael Northcott, pantheism with its aversion to moral evil and sin, could in fact be said to undermine a commitment to environmental protections. In addition, if the world is God, it is difficult to rationalize the existence of natural evils such as predation, parasitism, and disasters. Some ontological distance from God not only provides a sense of moral accountability, but also a more suitable theodicy, or explanation for the existence of evil as both evidence of God’s transcendence, creation’s status as ‘unfinished’ but also of his ultimate purposes. If God and creation are one in the same, it is difficult to explain the existence of natural evils such as parasitism, predators and suffering.

Thus in my assessment, because it insists on the centrality of human subjects, and is averse to divinizing creation, sacramentalism, even in its deeper aspects is not broadly speaking ecocentric. Emphasis on God’s immanence in creation, and valuing of creation as rooted in God rather than human utility however, is a strong position for engaging the range of essential ecological issues being faced on both global and local scales. However, it is also true that Catholic orthodoxy will continue to have friction with the environmental community over abortion and debates over human population. Official Catholic social teachings, including *Laudato Si*, have made very few concessions to advocates for birth control, legal and safe abortion, and discussions of global human population. This is not to admit however, that a deep sacramentalism, or an Anthropocosmic integral ecology is inherently weaker in its ethical potency to shepherd Christians toward a more ecologically conscious relationship to the earth.

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The Future of Monastic Spiritual Ecology

The monastic communities in this study have demonstrated not only a commitment to sacramental theology, but a commitment to exploring it through their land. In focusing on the monastic relationship to land, I did not expect them to check every sustainability box from recycling to renewable energy, to composting or water consumption. Rather, it was clear that monks maintain their primary commitment to human hearts through the 2,000 year old monastic spiritual lineage. This lineage is not static or immovable, and has seen, as I have shown, fertile cross pollination with contemporary environmental discourses. The “environment” as an ideological domain is however, a secondary concern to their primary focus of seeking God through the land. Secondary however, does not mean that it is framed as exploitable, expendable or irrelevant, but again, put in right order. Monastics care deeply for their land, and try as best they can with the resources which they can raise through their enterprises to steward that land as a partnership between the community and the place, ensuring that the monastery remains a refuge for human and nonhuman life alike.

As the monks in this study would readily admit, there is always room for improvement when it comes to each communities’ land management practices, and even their own relationships to their wider regional ecologies. When I asked questions regarding land management or practices, food acquisition or energy consumption, for example, many of the monks admitted that they still have a lot to learn, and plenty of areas of improvement when it comes to ecological sustainability: New Camaldoli wants to convert their diesel generator to an off grid solar system, New Clairvaux wants to manage their orchards organically; Our Lady of Guadalupe would like to see their new hazel nut orchards managed organically, and to restore more Oregon White Oak savannah; and Christ in the Desert is trying to expand their food production to become more self-sufficient.

In discussing these areas of potential improvement, several monks pointed to communities of Sisters such as those at Redwoods Monastery in Northern California, who have implemented a more rigorous focus on sustainability practices. The monks of New Camaldoli pointed to their partner organizations in the Four Winds Council for their efforts at sustainability and permaculture.

In addition to these more practical concerns, one finding that I found consistently fascinating and personally troubling was the refusal on the part of many of the monks to learn
the names of local flora and fauna, opting rather for a more symbolic and affective encounter with nonhuman life. During my walk with Brother Michael at New Camaldoli, after he bent down to look at a small flower and talked about how it reminded him of Therese of Lisieux, I asked what it was. He stated unequivocally, that he didn’t know names, he just enjoyed noticing and thinking with the shapes, colors, beauty and symbolism of each particular thing. Similarly, Brother Jerome of Christ in the Desert told me that he cultivated an intimate attention to the particularities of the land and would even council younger monks to really look at the land when they were out walking. He would sit on the benches and contemplate tiny flowers for hours, but again was unfamiliar and apparently uninterested in their common or scientific names. Both of these monks paid attention to the flowers and reverenced their existence, but had little interest in what might be known regarding their origins, habits, genus, or medicinal properties.

Sitting with Brother Malachi on the Chama River, he was in the middle of explaining the nuances of the medieval cosmology with respect to the enchanted, sacramental nature of the world, and refuting the Cartesians dualism of subject and object for his own favored Thomistic approach, when he enlisted a nearby bush as an illustration:

We look at this bush in front of us that’s in the very, very sort of early stages of spring, and it’s got these bright, bright green leaves. But if you come back and you look at this in a month, the leaves are going to be darker there are going to be more of them and it’s going to be much more fully in bloom. This is changing from moment to moment from day to day from week to week and the complicated natural processes that make that possible. Everything from the river and the nutrients and minerals that are in it, to the sunlight, only God is possibly capable of ordering something like that. The particularities and complexity of the world speak of God’s existence and power, but I was curious, so I asked, “What is this plant that you were pointing out, do you know what it is?” He replied,

I don’t, I’m sorry. You are talking to the worst person. I’m such a sort of, um, what’s the word? I could just sit in this spot and I could just watch the water, like the way the wind creates these cool little shapes on the water right now... I could do that forever, but in terms of memorizing the names that we call things, I have no idea. I’ve just never been drawn to that. I feel like one of the ways in which divine providence is
active in my life is I don’t go out of my way to memorize things. I figure if I’m supposed to memorize something then I’m going to know it. I think for whatever reason I’m just not called to that kind of knowledge; I’m not a scientist, I’m not a botanist or anything like that.

His stunning intellect and grasp of complex theology was deeply committed to the canyon, to experiencing God in the world, and yet his understanding of even the most basic common names eluded his memory and interest. He seemed willing to spend much of his time immersed in scripture, memorizing ideas, theories, names and dates, but not apparently the names of plants, animals and geological features.

While this habit was not universal, it often felt that many of the monks were almost too immersed in their own religious symbolism to acknowledge and engage the land in itself. The monks were very much aware of their purpose, and that purpose was to seek God, thus venturing into the domain of scientific knowledge was perhaps peripheral to their core concern. For Brother Ubertino of Christ in the Desert Abbey, theological knowledge was essential to monastic formation, and scientific knowledge was a personal preference:

Over time we’re all exposed to theology with its precise terminology as it helps to find faith but to encounter a flower such as this is a very individual thing... You have to take the time to see these things and its nothing unless you’re studying botany that you’d encounter in a book; but you encounter it alone. The important [thing] I guess for the monk, you might ask, ‘what’s more important to know and spend time with a flower and to know its origin which is God or to know what we’ve named it’.

The assumption of course being that one activity detracts or takes time away from the other. Being a good humored man, Brother Ubertino then began to make up the names of plants and wildflowers as we walked along: “That’s the Fred Oak” he said; or, “The Lusitania trumpet.” As if knowing the name were in fact a trivial part of the flowers source and unique particularity. The important thing was to be present to it in all its mystery, changes and seasons; but most of all to know that its very existence pointed to someone greater.

As I have shown, biblical and monastic symbols are powerful shapers of the monastic relationship to land. Creation is rooted in a sacramental theology, but it seems to me that all too often the land had become simply another kind of resource for human use, even if that use was spiritual.
Perhaps my readers will not see this as a central concern, and perhaps the monks in this study have an additional response. But I raise this point because of a caution that scholar Belden Lane raises in his own discussion of the meanings we bring to landscapes and the sacred:

The challenge is to honor the thing itself, as well as the thing as metaphor. When [Ralph Waldo] Emerson declared in 1836 that ‘every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact,’ he sent people racing to the woods, anticipating the voice of God in the call of every thrush. But too often they paid scant attention to the songbird in their anxiousness to hear some transcendent message. They returned home full of nothing but themselves, their pockets stuffed with metaphors. As the imagination reaches relentlessly for a timeless, interior soulscape, it is easy to sail over the specificity of particular landscapes.\textsuperscript{34}

When I read this quotation sitting in my guest house cell at Christ in the Desert Abbey, where Lane had penned those very words, I was jolted by its implications for my own findings. Do the monks in fact honor the land \textit{in itself}? Is that even possible? Or is the land merely a spiritual resource as exploitable as any other? Were the monks simply going out on the land, only to return with nothing but themselves? Was biblical symbolism so primary that the monks looked past the thing itself for the precious theological \textit{symbol} that surely lay waiting to be grasped?

These are questions that need further exploration for my own spirituality, and merit responses from the monks themselves. But from where I stand, this seems to be another reason to characterize sacramental theology and Christian ethics as something other than ecocentric. If monasticism is interested in experiencing the world ‘as it is’ then perhaps it stands to benefit from a deeper conversation with ecocentric writers, who insist on the intrinsic value and worth of each living thing embedded in the broader interdependent whole. Ironically, it is the ecocentrists who insist on valuing the whole over the parts, but whose very insistence appears to have something to teach a contemporary monastic spiritual ecology about valuing and appreciating the intrinsic value of those parts.

In addition, there are still vestiges of an anti-world bias among some of the monks who tended to dualize the world along spiritual and material lines. The land is an integral

\textsuperscript{34} Lane, Belden, \textit{Solace of Fierce Landscapes}, 17.
component to the monastic life, but ultimately the landscape that is was primary importance to some was the inner landscape. For example, Brother Brendan reflected,

I feel like perhaps the most beautiful thing God created is humanity because God took on humanity and humanity is supposed to reflect everything of God and everything God created. So even though all that is so beautiful and it is, yet it can’t compare to the beauty that I’m called to discover within myself, where God and I are one and the environment helps that to happen.

From an ethical point of view, I could not help but find these words personally disappointing. While they are certainly traditionally representative of a wing of Christian approaches to the world, they do not reflect the spirit of Laudato Si, wherein Pope Francis writes,

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.\(^{35}\)

Looking to the nonhuman world is not only a symbol of God’s beauty, or a sacramental resource for exploitation by the inner landscape. In my experience, discovering God in all things is not the same as seeing everything as an icon of God, but rather, the careful, meticulous work of listening and watching the things themselves in order to discover what they say by their very existence about God and Her love for the world. To dwell in the wilderness then, might mean both exploring the infinite depths of the human heart and the unfathomable breadth of mystery at the heart of the world itself.

**Should Place and Landscape Studies Abandon the ‘Self’?**

With the rise of the so-called ‘Post-humanities,’ philosophical schools such as ‘New Materialism’, ‘Actor Network Theory’, ‘Object Oriented Ontology’ and a slew of Post-phenomenological explorations are calling into question the role of the individual subject as an entity that relates to or perceives the landscape. In Chapter 5 I discussed the role of symbols in monastic phenomenology of landscape, a theoretical commitment that in fact assumes that ‘someone’ is relating to and making meaning with the world around them. In this final speculative section, I will outline the implications of my research for those theories seeking to articulate a “flat” ontology which seeks to transcend or do away with all together

\(^{35}\) Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si*, #233.
the existence of autonomous subjects that construct or re-represent meaning with material objects. These approaches rather are attempting to move toward a kind of interconnected, evolving, “mesh”, “assemblage” or “collective” ontological model rooted in the philosophical insights of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri among others which takes Western dualism into the realm of a cosmological monism. Again enlisting the ethnographic work of Eduardo Kohn, however, I argue that a definition of life compatible with an embodied semiotics implies a center of experience which re-represents the world through semiotic processes, maintaining the percept as a valid category of inquiry within landscape and place studies.

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, philosopher Jane Bennet follows an increasingly popular line of argument which seeks to dismantle the hard boundary Western civilization has imagined exists between human subjects and material objects, between culture and nature. Human beings are of course biological organisms, made of the same stuff as all life whose existence is inextricably linked to the lives of other lives, not to mention the trillions of microorganisms that inhabit our bodies. In addition, what is imagined as the ‘environment,’ that which surrounds us, is in fact inexorably linked to our humanness: air, water, light, the ground, animals, plants other people, all make being human possible. There is, it is argued, no bounded ‘self’ that exists independent of the social-ecological worlds we inhabit, no disembodied mind experiencing the world as observer. Thus within what is being dubbed ‘object oriented ontology,’ all of matter, every-thing, becomes “vibrant” with potentiality and activity:

If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief.\(^\text{36}\)

Just as J.J. Gibson asserted that the physical world ‘affords’ certain activities to organisms who interact with it, so do things ‘act’ through the sheer ‘factualness’ of their existence. Human beings thus take their humble place among a “federation of actants” which decentralizes the human will, intentionality and any meaningful distinction between human consciousness, mind and the world. It is in this way a “new” materialism, because it is not so

much interested in determining *what* has will, but in tracing the relationships between things as actors. Bruno Latour refers to the breakdown between subject and object and as a “collective” which must be governed through a parliamentary process of negotiating.\(^{38}\)

Eco-critic Timothy Morton also suggests that an aesthetic of nature as a domain outside the social, and of nonhumans as objects is partly to blame for our current ecological crisis, a general malaise that has many feeling isolated from the world, and appears increasingly undesirable in the face of climate change. Through two works Morton fleshes out a philosophical ontology of the “Mesh” wherein human beings are implicated with the rest of the material world in a way that does not separate subjects from objects, culture from nature. In fact Morton proposes an ‘ecology without nature.’ This ecologically integrated world that he and others seek to realize is a “vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge.”\(^{39}\) There is no “lifeworld” as authentic place within which the subject can authentically orient themselves, only a single entangled reality which expands in all directions, and ultimately leaves no distance between perceiver and perceived. What Morton dreams of as the coming “Ecological Thought” envisions a world where the material world is inextricably entangled:

All life forms are the mesh, and so are all the dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings. We know even more now about how life forms have shaped Earth (think of oil, of oxygen—the first climate change cataclysm). We drive around using crushed dinosaur parts. Iron is mostly a by-product of bacterial metabolism. So is oxygen. Mountains can be made of shells and fossilized bacteria. Death and the mesh go together in another sense, too, because natural selection implies extinction.\(^{40}\)

Life and death are interconnected, just as the bodies of the living and the dead are connected. There is no authentic world to return to, no ‘homplace’ to restore, only a continuously evolving and interrelated mesh.

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While most orthodox Christian theologians have resisted these developments as so much nonsense, on the cutting edge of speculative theology, some radical theologians are willing to consider the implications of these ideas for a future Christian theology. For example, John D. Caputo, philosopher turned theologian, beautifully articulates the ultimate earthly-ness of cosmolgy, ecology and theology itself:

The cosmos opened up by Copernicus collapse the distinction between ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’, one of the most cherished distinctions religion knows. The earth is itself a heavenly body, one more heavenly body made up of stardust, as are our own bodies. We are already heavenly bodies, which means that ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ must report back at once to headquarters for reassignment, where they turn out to be ways of describing our terrestrial lives here ‘below’. Every body—everybody, everything—is a heavenly body. Heaven is overtaken by the heavens. Dust to dust, indeed, but it is all stellar dust. Our bodily flesh is woven of the flesh of the earth, even as the earth itself is the debris of stars, the outcome of innumerable cyclings and recyclings of stellar stuff, all so many rolls of the cosmic dice. We are not ‘subjects’ over and against ‘objects’, but bits and pieces of the universe itself, ways the world is wound up into little intensities producing special effects of a particular sort in our bodies in our little corner of the universe.41

This monistic pantheism, wherein all things are in a state of change and flux, which precludes any reference to transcendent beings or gods, is also the intuition of the Spiritual Ecology movement, which seeks to dethrone the human subject as something alien from this earth, and re-root humanity in the materiality and randomness of earth-processes. As anthropologist Richard Nelson writes, after realizing how connected he was to the small island he had learned to call home,

There is nothing in me that is not of earth, no split instant of separateness, no particle that disunites me from the surroundings. I am no less than the earth itself. The rivers run through my veins, the winds blow in and out with my breath, the soil makes my flesh, the sun’s heat smolders inside me. A sickness or injury that befalls the earth befalls me. A fouled molecule that runs through the earth runs through me. Where the

earth is cleansed and nourished, its purity infuses me. The life of the earth is my life. My eyes are the earth gazing at itself...I am the island and the island is me.  

The ecological self is implicated in the world, and the world is implicated in the self. We are not spiritual beings having an earthly experience, but earthlings through and through, the very conscious earth gazing back at itself. Cultural historian Thomas Berry and others take this one step further by suggesting that in fact human beings are the universe made self-aware.

Within the broader place and landscape studies literature, the ecological self has been taken up by phenomenologist approaches to show that human beings are inter-subjectively connected to all life on earth and not simply observing minds constructing meaning. David Abrams, Tim Ingold, David Seamon, and Yi Fu Tuan, geographers and anthropologists and geographers discussed in this study have all asserted this kind of phenomenological approach which seeks to embed human dwelling in the lifeworld and authentic place. However, following the lines of inquiry just mentioned, writers calling for a ‘post-phenomenology’ of landscape are moving away from anything that resembles a ‘gazing subject’ that reflects on his or her inner experiences to re-present the world.

Rather, ‘nonrepresentational’ and post-phenomenological theorists seek to get away from the subject intentionally representing something toward a more direct pre-cognitive experience of the world that entwines materialities with sensibilities. Rather than seeking to uncover meaning, or interpret land as text, nonrepresentational approaches see the world as performance and process which is continually being made. From critical and Marxist perspectives phenomenological approaches “stand condemned as non-critical celebrations of human individuality,” which fail to both reflect on the historical and material drivers of historical change, and the possibilities of radical societal transformation of the political system. Phenomenological approaches to landscape have also been criticized for focusing too much on reified emotion and perception that favors the “individualistic and universalizing

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46 Wylie, John, Landscape, 180.
sovereign subject” which downplays the importance of feminist and post-structuralist approaches to social theory.\(^47\)

For example, Tim Ingold’s dwelling perspective, seeks to remedy the Cartesian emphasis on the subject and a symbolically constructed landscape by embedding the body within the wider temporality and relationality of the world. For geographer John Wylie, however, Ingold does not go far enough in deconstructing the Cartesian subject and argues that Ingold “continues to assume that experience is given to a pregiven subject.”\(^48\) Rather for Wylie, “perception involves the unfolding of the world as landscape”\(^49\) wherein the material and sensible are contained by the depth of world, which enfolds seer and seen. The gazing subject whose values, meanings and emotions exist a priori is problematized and rejected for a more readily embodied, experience-oriented, pre-cognitive and sensible percept that is continuous with, not gazing upon, the world.

In this study, I have attempted to show that in fact representation is not the enemy of phenomenological perspectives, but one more component of the array of lived experience that human beings bring to and derive from landscape. Our memories, affects, experiences and senses are in relation to the world, but our cognitive equipment and past experience is also an important factor in the process of place-making and perception, especially for monks who are immersed in the language and symbolism of the Bible.

In addition, for Catholic monks, the self remains an important component of a monastic theological anthropology which both recognizes the fictive ‘reality’ of the ego, while attempting to transcend its vices and proclivities for the deeper sense of self with exists in God as the “True Self.” The human soul is as unique as a finger print, but finds in ultimate identity in intimate relationship to God, and as such subsists and persists because of God’s necessary being.

It would seem then that perhaps Christian anthropology and contemporary post-structuralism are irreconcilable. However, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, who joins theorists


\(^{49}\) Wylie, John, ‘Depths and Folds,’ 531.
In pushing for an anthropology ‘beyond the human,’ simultaneously sees nonrepresentational tendencies that depart from the individual self as perhaps going too far. He writes,

In attempting to address some of the difficulties these assumptions about representation create, they tend to arrive at reductionistic solutions that flatten important distinctions between humans and other kinds of beings, as well as those between selves and objects.\(^{50}\)

Employing the Semiotics of Charles Pierce discussed above, Kohn maintains that every organism is a center of experience, a self that in fact necessarily re-presents the world through basic modes of semiotic and sign processes. As stated above, trees, monkeys, indeed the forest itself can be said to ‘think’ because to be alive is to engage with semiotic processes of representing the world to a center of experience that is essential for biological survival and reproduction. He writes,

Life is constitutively semiotic. That is, life is, through and through, the product of sign processes. What differentiates life from the inanimate physical world is that life-forms represent the world in some way or another, and these representations are intrinsic to their being. What we share with nonhuman living creatures, then, is not our embodiment, as certain strains of phenomenological approaches would hold, but the fact that we all live with and through signs…signs make us what we are.\(^{51}\)

If we take Kohn’s argument as foundational, then all life represents the world around it. This means there are no nonrepresentational landscapes for any being, including humans.

However, rather than conflate this universal representation into a fuzzy mesh, assemblage or enfoldment, Kohn, affirming the work of biologist Terrance Deacon, argues that human beings are unique to nonhumans in our use of symbolic signs. Kohn and Deacon argue that symbols are in fact a unique and emergent property of a specifically human consciousness and cognition with its origins in the adaptive pattern recognition of our primal ancestors. This being said, as I have argued, symbolic semiotics does not automatically confine perception to a strictly cognitive affair, but is one more aspect of an emerging spectrum of lived, embodied, sensorial experiences of place and landscape. While a monk walking along a path


\(^{51}\) Kohn, Eduardo, How Forests Think, 9.
may project and read symbol from the tree, a squirrel may take the sound of a twig to mean that danger is approaching, and the tree itself responds and adjusts to deposits of mineral, pockets of water and the boring on insects. Each in turn re-presents the world through its own center of experience.

As an example drawing from the monastic world, during my walk with Brother Ubertino at Christ in the Desert, he related a story about a time when he was living at a University in the United States. During his time there, there was also a Dominican Friar on campus who wore a religious habit as he did. The Dominican would often feed the birds with a bag of seed he kept in his pocket. On several occasions while walking, birds would land on Brother Ubertino’s shoulder, expecting to be fed. The bird was in fact re-presenting the world by engaging with signs, in this case an indexical sign wherein a vaguely recognized religious habit pointed to the possibility of food. Whereas Brother Ubertino, whose human evolution has evolved symbolic semiotics, may have represented the bird as a creature of God, or symbol of heaven and earth.

While nonrepresentational and post-phenomenological positions would do away with symbolic and cognitive approaches as a reaction against the excesses of Cartesianism; Kohn’s more subtle anthropology of life in fact affirms the notion that the self is the center of experience which represents the landscape. Thus symbolic and embodied experiences of landscape are intertwined through semiotic processes around a single, albeit inter-subjective self. Certainly human beings are enmeshed and integrated within the broader earth ecology. And as the monks continue to dialogue with environmental discourses there is room to broaden and deepen the place of the human soul in the wider order of creation. However, any attempt to eliminate the human subject as a beloved creation of God, or erase the differences between human and nonhuman will meet with Catholic theological resistance.

While I would certainly like to see the human person humbled from its modernist pedestal, to completely blur the lines between human and nonhuman seems reckless and ethically untenable. Certainly we are animal, but we are also as far as we know, uniquely conscious beings in the cosmos. We have acquired immense powers over the planet with our technological innovations. We have achieved remarkable advances in technology, medicine, art and science. Kohn’s anthropology thus affirms a central tenant of Christian anthropology,
which states that human beings as the ‘priests’ of creation, priests being those who mediate and interpret symbols on behalf of creation and lift up praise to God through the liturgy.

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

A monastery is a refuge and a sanctuary, not only for the seeking souls who come to call it home, but for those of us who need to take a break from the chaotic busy lives that swirl and carry us away with their urgent concerns. The future of monasticism is uncertain, however. With their nearly 2,000 years of cultural memory, they will almost certainly persist in some form, but the steady decline in vocations is a worrying trend. We live amidst a time of deep uncertainty about the fate of our common home, the earth; and even from their lush sanctuaries, monastic communities are not immune to the pressures and upheavals of the age.

Throughout this final chapter I have interwoven contemporary conversations about environment, place, environmental ethics and the human person with my own limited understandings and experiences of what I call monastic spiritual ecology. Each of these meditations have been but speculative starting points for much fruitful writing, conversation and dialogue. I would of course, welcome responses from the monks themselves, if they could be persuaded to write or present on these topics through academic, theological or spiritual venues. Or, perhaps if they would simply like to go for another walk. I certainly plan on returning to each of the communities in this study many more times over my lifetime. Ultimately, however, while I do not currently think that my vocation lies within the cloister of a monastery, but rather as a teacher and writer, my life has been incalculably enriched by my experiences among the men of these humble communities. It is therefore my hope that this work will be of some benefit to the communities gracious enough to invite me into their sacred confines, and that we might all strive to engage in a deeper *conversatio morum* to hold space for each other through the dark nights ahead.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Biome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santa Rita Abbey</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Trinity Monastery</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Trappist</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redwoods Monastery</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Redwood forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>Benedictine Camaldolese</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Coastal Scrub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince of Peace Abbey</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Coastal Scrub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery of the Risen</td>
<td>Benedictine Camaldoli</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Coastal Scrub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ Monastery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Andrew’s Abbey</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Mojave Desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Benedict's Abbey</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Intermountain valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rocky Mountain foothills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey of Saint</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Eastern Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walburga</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benet Hill Monastery</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey of Saint</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walburga</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Gertrude</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>Intermountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermitage</td>
<td>Sisters of Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marymount Hermitage</td>
<td>Hermit</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>Intermountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters of Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery</td>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery of the Ascension</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of the Holy Trinity</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity (Recently closed)</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of the Rock</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Placid Priory</td>
<td>Benedictine</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist</td>
<td>Trappist</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in the American West

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Acreage (Founding/2016)</th>
<th>Biome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>Camaldolese</td>
<td>Big Sur, CA</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>550/880</td>
<td>Coastal chaparral in the Santa Lucia mountains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Acreage (Founding/2016)</th>
<th>Biome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>Trappist(OCSO); Gethsemani Lineage</td>
<td>Vina, CA</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>and Ventana Wilderness area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>Trappist (OCSO); Spencer Lineage</td>
<td>Carlton, OR</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>1,343</td>
<td>Central Valley, rural, Sacramento River riparian zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert</td>
<td>Benedictine; Subiaco-Cassinese Congregation</td>
<td>Abiquiu, NM</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>115/275</td>
<td>High desert, Chama River Canyon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Monastic communities in this study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastic Community</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage (CA)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Trappist Abbey (CA)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey (OR)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert Abbey (NM)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Interviews per community*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office (Weekday)</th>
<th>New Camaldoli Hermitage</th>
<th>New Clairvaux Abbey</th>
<th>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</th>
<th>Christ in the Desert Abbey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matins (Vigils)</td>
<td>5:00 am</td>
<td>3:30 am</td>
<td>4:15 am</td>
<td>4:00 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauds</td>
<td>7:00 am</td>
<td>6:30 am (followed by Mass)</td>
<td>6:30 am (followed by Mass)</td>
<td>5:45 am (followed by Mass)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terce</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>9:05</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>8:45 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sext</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>12:15 pm</td>
<td>12:30 pm</td>
<td>1:00 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1:55 pm</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>3:30 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vespers</td>
<td>6:00 pm</td>
<td>5:45 pm</td>
<td>5:30 pm</td>
<td>5:50 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compline</td>
<td>NA (except during Advent)</td>
<td>7:35 pm</td>
<td>7:30 pm</td>
<td>7:30 pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Liturgical schedules*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Vowed Monks at Founding</th>
<th>Vowed Monks 2016</th>
<th>In Formation 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: Vowed monastics at each community*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Paid Staff at Founding</th>
<th>Paid Staff in 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6: Paid staff*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Top Three Sources of Livelihood at Founding</th>
<th>Top Three Sources of Livelihood in 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>Hospitality and donations</td>
<td>Hospitality, bookstore, fruitcake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>Prunes, walnuts and winery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>Broad acre farm, book bindery, carpentry shop</td>
<td>Fruitcake bakery, wine storage warehouse, book bindery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert</td>
<td>Guesthouse, gift shop, charitable donations</td>
<td>Guesthouse, gift shop, charitable donations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7: Livelihood activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>The Four Winds Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>Local Watershed Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>Forest Stewardship Council Certification; Conservation Easement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert Abbey</td>
<td>Watershed Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8: Organization memberships*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Food Production Efforts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>Fruit trees, inactive garden area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>Large fruit orchard, small tomato garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>Large vegetable garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert Abbey</td>
<td>Two vegetable gardens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 9: Gardening and food production efforts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Retreatants in 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Camaldoli Hermitage</td>
<td>~1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Clairvaux Abbey</td>
<td>~600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey</td>
<td>~500-700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in the Desert Abbey</td>
<td>~1,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 10: Approximate annual retreatants*
Photographic Illustrations

New Camaldoli Hermitage

Figure 1: New Camaldoli Hermitage, Google Maps image
Figure 2: New Camaldoli Hermitage’s cloister garden with church in background
Figure 3: View from the top of New Camaldoli Hermitage’s property in the Santa Lucia Mountains
New Clairvaux Abbey

Figure 4: New Clairvaux Abbey, Google Maps image
Figure 5: Irrigation ditches with original New Clairvaux Abbey church in background
Figure 6: Cloister garden near refectory amid 'Rancho' style building layout at New Clairvaux Abbey
Figure 7: February scene near New Clairvaux Abbey vineyards and guest house with 12th Century Cistercian church under construction in top left
Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey

Figure 8: Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, Google Maps image
Figure 9: Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey church from guesthouse courtyard
Figure 10: Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey cloister garden with central fountain
Figure 11: Retreatant pond at the base of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey’s steep hill
Christ in the Desert Abbey

Figure 12: Christ in the Desert Abbey, Google Maps image
Figure 13: Christ in the Desert Abbey’s adobe church built by architect George Nakashima in 1968
Figure 14: Christ in the Desert’s cloister garden (Image from Christ in the Desert website)
Figure 15: Christ in the Desert Abbey monks in new vegetable garden in front of Chama River canyon with solar panels
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Appendix: Research Consent and Interview Materials

Initial Contact Email

Dear Brothers or Sisters of ____,

Greetings! I am a graduate student at the University of British Columbia’s Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability (IRES). I am currently conducting research and field work for my PhD dissertation in the field of Resource Management and Environmental Studies. As my chosen topic, I will be researching the spirituality and landscape management practices of monastic communities in Western North America. I am interested in better understanding the extent of land-based monastic communities, their land uses, landscape management techniques, and the spiritual relationships you have forged with these landscapes. In the coming months, I will be visiting between 10 and 15 monastic communities all over the west, with an aim to complete my field work before September of 2016. My results and writings will be made available to you as soon as possible!

I am writing to invite you to collaborate in my research. This would mean allowing me to visit your community sometime between February and September of 2016 for approximately 1-3 weeks. During my stay, I would act as a ‘participant observer’, participating as fully as possible in monastic life, and taking notes throughout each day. I would also hope to conduct both seated and walking interviews with monastics willing to participate in my research. I will be asking questions regarding the history of land uses at the monastery, and the types of relationship the monastics have forged with the landscape.

If the superior approves of this collaboration, please have him or her respond to this email so that I can send them the ‘Superior Consent Form’ outlining the terms of the proposed research, and we can schedule the dates of the visit.

Thank you so much for your time!

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

If you have any other concerns whatsoever, do not hesitate to contact me and/or my Research Supervisor.

Principal Investigators
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Jason M. Brown
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia
Interview Consent Form

Study Team

Principal Investigator
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator
Jason Minton Brown
The Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Invitation to Participate

As a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Resources, Environment, and Sustainability (IRES) at the University of British Columbia, Jason Brown is working on a substantial research project that will result in a dissertation under the supervision of Terre Satterfield. Only he and his supervisory committee (consisting of two other UBC professors) will have access to the data collected. This research will investigate the spirituality and landscape management practices of monastic communities in Western North America. In this interview, the researcher is interested in better understanding the extent of land-based monastic communities, the land uses associated with them, and how these landscapes are managed. The researcher would thus like to invite you to participate in a one-on-one interview to discuss aspects of this topic.

Procedure

During this seated or walking interview, the researcher will ask you a series of questions about monastic life, spirituality, the environment and the monastery landscape. After signing this form the researcher will ask you a series of questions and we will simply discuss these topics for approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews will also be recorded for convenience of analysis. If you do not want this interview to be recorded, please say so. The researcher may ask for a follow up interview to clarify points or ask additional questions. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You may withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason. If you have any questions regarding the procedure, my background or this research please feel free to ask at any time, or contact me through the information provided below in full confidentiality.

Results

The results of this interview will make up part of the researcher’s PhD dissertation, and will most likely be published in academic journals or as a book. Digital copies of the dissertation will be disseminated to all study participants upon completion.
**Risks, Benefits and Confidentiality**

There are no anticipated risks to your monastic community for participating in this study. Study results may contribute to a better understanding of trends in monastic landscape management. However, you do not have to participate in this interview. You can stop at any time for any reason. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the topics or questions, you do not have to answer them. Your name will be kept confidential unless you specify otherwise below. Data associated with this interview will be kept in password protected digital documents. Upon publication, the name of the monastery may be used in discussing data and findings.

**Contact for possible complaints:**

*If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.*

**Principal Investigator**

Terre Satterfield

Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability

University of British Columbia

**Co-Investigator**

Jason M. Brown

Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability

University of British Columbia

**Signature**

*Taking part in this interview is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this interview. If you decide to take part, you may choose stop the interview at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impacts. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.*

The researcher may use my name in research documents: YES  NO

Date: ____________________

Signature: ____________________________________________
Superior Consent Form

Study Team

*Principal Investigator*
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

*Co-Investigator*
Jason M. Brown
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Invitation to Participate in this Study

As a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Resources, Environment, and Sustainability (IRES) at the University of British Columbia, Jason Brown is working on a substantial research project that will result in a dissertation under the supervision of Terre Satterfield. Only he and his supervisory committee (consisting of two other UBC professors) will have access to the data collected. The researcher is investigating the spirituality and landscape management practices of monastic communities in Western North America. The research involved in this project would mean allowing the researcher to visit your community sometime between February and September of 2016 for approximately 1-3 weeks. During the stay, the researcher would act as a ‘participant observer’, participating as fully as possible in monastic life, and taking notes throughout each day. The researcher would also conduct both seated and walking interviews with monastics willing to participate.

Research Activities

- Participant Observation (Participation in daily liturgy, meals, and work duties and taking notes on my observations).
- In depth one-on-one interviews with willing monastics lasting 2-3 hours in total over the length of the stay (spread out over 2 interviews). This would include short “walking interviews” with able monks or nuns within the grounds of the monastery.
- Archival research with monastery documents and/or local histories.

Results

The results of this survey will make up part of the researcher’s PhD dissertation, and will most likely be published in academic journals or as a book at a later date. Digital copies of the dissertation will be disseminated to all study participants upon completion.
Compensation
The researcher is not able to offer monetary compensation for participating in this research.

Risks, Benefits and Confidentiality
There are no anticipated risks to your monastic community for participating in this study. Study results may contribute to a better understanding of trends in monastic landscape management. However, you do not have to participate in this study. The names of interview participants will be kept confidential, unless otherwise specified, and data collected for this study will be kept in password protected digital documents. Upon publication, the name of the monastery may be used in discussing the findings and analysis of this research. However, you may request that the name of your monastic community be kept confidential.

Contact for Complaints
If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Principal Investigators
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator
Jason M. Brown
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Signature
Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Date: ____________________

Monastic Community: _______________________________________

Signature: ___________________________________________________
Interview Schedule

How do traditional theological motifs interact with contemporary environmental discourse in shaping monastic understandings of place and landscape?

How does this place contribute to the purpose monastic life?

What do the terms wilderness and desert mean to you with respect to monasticism? …garden and paradise?

Do any of these terms resonate with you in your experience of this particular place?

In your view, is the monastery attempting to change or transform the landscape?

Do you see any particular connections between the Psalms and liturgy and this particular landscape? Have they ever been connected for you?

Do you have any particular favorite creatures at the monastery? You believe they have spirits?

Is the land sacred in the same way as the Eucharist?

Does the work of monasticism have anything to do with making the landscape sacred?

How do traditional theological motifs and contemporary environmental discourse influence land use, management practices and decision-making?

What is the history of occupation of this particular place?

How has your particular community influenced the landscape?

What are the most pressing environmental or management issues at the monastery?

Why is it important that the monastery manage (or not) the landscape as _____?

Tell me more about the change in land use.

Can you please describe the process of decision making process?

Do you have any favorite places or paths on the monastery landscape?

How often do you go on walks or hikes?

What is your favorite time to go out?

How often do you come here?

What do you enjoy about it?

Do you have any stories? Spiritual Experiences? Memories?
Monastic Landscapes Survey

Study Team
Principal Investigator
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator
Jason Minton Brown
The Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Survey Consent Form

Please read this in full before filling out the survey.

Invitation to Participate

As a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Resources, Environment, and Sustainability (IRES) at the University of British Columbia, Jason Brown is working on a substantial research project that will result in a dissertation under the supervision of Terre Satterfield. Only he and his supervisory committee (consisting of two other UBC professors) will have access to the data collected. This research will investigate the spirituality and landscape management practices of monastic communities in Western North America. In this survey, the researcher is interested in better understanding the extent of land-based monastic communities, the land uses associated with them, and how these landscapes are managed. The researcher would thus like to invite you to participate in this survey.

Procedure

Once the Superior has signed the Superior Consent Form, one sufficiently knowledgeable member of the community may fill out this survey either digitally or on printed paper. The finished survey can either be emailed back to the researcher, or retained until the in person visit of the researcher.

The survey will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour, depending on the level of detail provided. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you have any questions regarding the procedure, my background or this research please feel free to ask at any time, or contact me through the information provided below in full confidentiality.

Results

The results of this survey will make up part of the researcher’s PhD dissertation, and will most likely be published in academic journals or as a book. Digital copies of the dissertation will be disseminated to all study participants upon completion.
Risks, Benefits and Confidentiality

There are no anticipated risks to your monastic community for participating in this study. Study results may contribute to a better understanding of trends in monastic landscape management. However, you do not have to participate in this survey. If you feel uncomfortable with any of the topics or questions, you do not have to answer them. Your name will be kept confidential. Data associated with this survey will be kept in password protected digital documents. Upon publication, the name of the monastery may be used in discussing data and findings.

Contact for possible complaints:

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Principal Investigator
Terre Satterfield
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator
Jason M. Brown
Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability
University of British Columbia

Signature

Taking part in this interview is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this interview. If you decide to take part, you may choose stop the interview at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impacts. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Date: ____________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Print Name: ____________________________________________
Monastic Community Survey

Section 1: Monastery and Residents

1. List the number of each type of monastic living full time at the monastery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date of Establishment in current location:</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vowed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In formation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-monastics living on site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Please select from the following:
   Between the year of establishment and today, the number of vowed monastics
   o Has remained pretty much the same.
   o Has fluctuated drastically.
   o Has surged in number and then a gradually declined.
   o Has slowly declined.
   o Has slowly increased.

Section 2: Monastery Livelihood

1. List the top 3-5 sources of income to the monastery for each of the following decades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Establishment</th>
<th>Top 3-5 sources of income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 3: The Monastery Property

1. What were the total acres of the monastery:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At time of establishment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Does the monastery own any other properties besides that surrounding the monastery proper? (If so, where, and how many acres?)

3. How would you describe the dominant ‘land use’ of the monastery’s primary property?
   - Unmanaged, wild
   - Range or pasture land
   - Broad acre crop land
   - Production forest
   - Mixture of some or all of the above
   - Some other arrangement (please explain):

4. Describe the density of development (industrial, commercial, housing, etc.) immediately surrounding the monastery grounds at the time of founding and today by checking the box the best describes the situation. (You can mark more than one.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protected area</th>
<th>Year of founding</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private, undeveloped</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm or ranch land with sparse housing density (1 per 100 acres)</td>
<td>Year of founding</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small farms or ranchettes (5-50 acres)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low density housing (1 per 5 acres)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdivision (1/4 acre lots)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing with commercial (strip malls, businesses, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial (mining, logging, factory, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Please list prominent religious shrines, icons or decorations located on the property.

Section 4: Forestland Management

(If the monastery does not have any substantial forestlands, please proceed to Section 5.)

1. Does the monastery have a forest management plan written within the last 5 years?

1a. If yes, who was responsible for writing it?

2. Select the option that best describes the types of tree harvests that occur on your commercial forest areas:
   - Clear cut harvests (harvests over 5 acres with all trees removed)
   - Shelter wood harvests (harvests with large dominant trees left in the canopy)
   - Seed tree harvests (harvests with a few trees per acre left in the canopy for reseeding)
   - Selective harvesting (individual trees harvested with majority of canopy left intact)
   - Other:

3. Please estimate the volume of timber harvest from monastery lands for the following years:
4. Do you or have you in the past, used any of the monastery’s wood for the following purposes?
   - Handicrafts for sale
   - Monastery pews, furniture or adornments
   - Monastery structures
   - Religious item such as crosses, prayer beads or rosaries
   - Other:

5. Does the monastery participate in any of the following forest certification schemes? Check all that apply:
   - Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)
   - Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)
   - Tree Farm
   - Other:

5a. If yes, how many acres (or what per cent) of the monastery are included in this scheme and for how long have they been certified?

Section 5: Monastery Landscape Management
1. Have there been any major shifts or changes in the dominant land use described in question 3.3 between the founding of the monastery and today? Please explain.

2. How are decisions that affect the monastery property made?
3. Does the monastery participate in any of the following programs? Check all that apply.
   - Conservation easement
   - Carbon offsets
   - Biodiversity protection
   - Watershed protection
   - Public or Private Land Trust
   - Hunting cooperative land agreement
   - Watershed council
   - Other: Coastal Commission

3a. If any, how many acres, or, what percent of the monastery grounds are included?

4. Do the monastics or other residents maintain any of the following non-commercial activities:
   - Vegetable garden
   - Herb garden
   - Cloister garden
   - Flower garden
   - Beehives
   - Fruit trees or orchards
   - Other:

5. What if any funding, expert knowledge or workshops have you received from local, state, federal, nonprofit organizations or individuals related to landscape or ecology?

Section 7: Monastery Programs

1. Please estimate the number of retreatants the monastery receives in a given year. Has that number drastically changed over time?

2. Please select from the following options for programs run by the monastery and write the number of participants in each on the right:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Year program began</th>
<th>Number of participants last year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skill or land-based working internship (Non-monastic)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastic living internship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oblate program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonal Volunteers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Does the monastery participate in any organizations or run any programs that could be described as promoting “Sustainability”, “Ecology”, “Eco-Spirituality”, “Conservation” that have not been mentioned above? Please Describe.