

The Role of Embodied Imagination, Magic, and Complex Subjectivity in Decolonial Meaning-Making

This paper is exploring a topic with direct practical application. I am currently writing an opera, called *The Wilderness*, that is attempting to give people an experience of the *complex subjectivity* (a term coined by Anthony Pinn) of nonhuman beings, which is what I will be discussing in this paper. Therefore, this is an explanation of the religious and spiritual theories underlying the larger dramaturgy of the performance. With the aid and support of other thinkers such as Loyal Rue, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Silvia Federici, and Bron Taylor, I will explore how artistic/imaginative embodiments of animist/nature-based religious practices have great liberatory potential from the oppressive confines of colonialism when directed with the intention of expanding complex subjectivity beyond the human context. I will conclude this paper by reflecting on, as a theatre artist with over two decades of professional experience, what I believe theatre has to offer this conversation and how I propose to put this theory into action in my upcoming performance, *The Wilderness*, produced by my company Open Flame Theatre and set to premiere at Philadelphia Community Farm in Osceola, WI in 2026.

Let us begin by defining “complex subjectivity”. First discussed in his book *What is African American Religion?* Pinn created the term to identify and describe the religious experiences of Black people in the United States. It is a response to the intense and explicit dehumanization of Black people as a result of enslavement and centuries of white supremacist imperialism. “While there are various layers to the slave trade—it’s longevity, deep destruction,

and lingering consequences—slavery’s power lies in the attempt to eradicate systematically the subjectivity of Africans and recreate them as objects. As such, enslaved Africans occupied a strange space in that they existed outside the recognized boundaries of human community while also being a necessary part of that same community...”¹ Later on in this paper I will argue that that same hammer of objectification fell on non-human life in the same swing. For now, let us turn to the antidote that is both supplied by and fuels religious experiences which have the potential to heal this wound of white supremacy and colonization. Pinn describes it as “an underlying impulse (a deeply human impulse) – a yearning for more life meaning – that informs, defines and shapes religious institutions, doctrines, and practices. I label this underlying impulse *the quest for complex subjectivity*.”²

He goes on to say, “In short, by ‘quest’ I intend to suggest a desired movement from being a corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces to a complex conveyer of cultural meaning with a creative identity expressed in the world of thought and activity.”³ I love Pinn’s framing of this as a quest, which implies an active voice. This is a notion that arises out of desire. The work, therefore, of complex subjectivity is that of *self-directed*, *self-willed*, and *self-determined meaning-making*. Going forward, let us understand these three elements as inherent in the concept.

We must not ignore at this point the false dichotomy of subject and object, and possible ways of breaking that dichotomy. Some have suggested the word “projective” as a third option, meaning a being that makes projects, an active creator, which includes nonhuman entities as well.⁴ The way Pinn resolves this question is thus: “In arguing for complex subjectivity as the

¹ Anthony Pinn, *What is African American Religion?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 13.

² Pinn, 62.

³ Pinn, 63.

⁴ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Astrotopia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 141.

center of African American religion, I am aware of thinkers such as philosopher Lewis Gordon, who argue humans should not be understood as subject or object, or even a combination of the two. Rather, humanity is best defined by ‘ambiguity’, a complexity and multidimensionality.”⁵ He goes on to say, “My sense of complex subjectivity is meant to maintain this multidimensional notion of being...it involves an unfolding, a continuous yearning and pushing for *More*, an expanding range of life options and movements.” Pinn then makes a very crucial addendum to this robust exploration of this concept: that of the collective. “It must be understood that this does not entail a turn toward strict individualism. This subjectivity means individual fulfillment within the context of concern and responsibility for others. In this sense, it is the struggle to obtain meaning through a process of ‘becoming’.”⁶

Our aim now is to take this notion of “complex subjectivity” and see if it can apply to other beings who have had their subjectivity removed, hidden, or obscured by the culture of Christo-Capitalism which had its nascence in Europe just after the Middle Ages. I argue that the term can apply, because this same process of dehumanization occurred to nonhuman life as well. It also occurred (to different extents) to women and queer people, as we can see very clearly demonstrated in the Medieval witch hunts of Europe, well-documented in the research of Silvia Federici. Women, queer and trans/gender-nonconforming people, Black and brown people, and people with disabilities were all considered to be animalistic, basic, savage.⁷ Individuals as well as whole communities and cultures of mostly Black and brown peoples were relegated to what White Europeans saw as the inferior position of nature in which there was no question of men’s purpose to dominate and subjugate the beings therein.

⁵ Pinn, 64.

⁶ Pinn, 65.

⁷ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*. (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

Similarly to Federici, in her book *Astrotopia*, Mary-Jane Rubenstein looks back to the time of the Middle Ages in Europe (at the origins of capitalism), as the period in history when the objectification of nature and some persons began. Or rather, that we can trace the influence of those threads from that point in time through history all the way to the treatment of non-human life of today. “I’m talking about this imperial Christianity, or ‘Christendom,’ that teamed up with early capitalism, European expansion, and a particularly racist form of science to colonize the earth.”⁸ This is what I refer to as Christo-Capitalism. “We can draw an eerily straight line from the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ that ‘gave’ Africa to Portugal and the New World to Spain, through the ‘manifest destiny’ that carried white settlers across the American continent to the NewSpace claim to the whole solar system and eventually, the galaxy.”⁹

The horrific oppression brought to most corners of the world through industrial, capitalist, imperialist expansion has been thoroughly discussed in many places and I will not reiterate those arguments here. I refer to this force/worldview as Christo-Capitalism in order to recognize the roles of both the church and state in the multi-layered oppression, domination, and subjugation of human and nonhuman life all over the globe.

At this point, I urge you to pause your reading. Let us take a moment to recognize and acknowledge the devastation wrought in these many wars and campaigns of terror.



⁸ Rubenstein, x.

⁹ Ibid.

Now we can turn to the crucial question posed next by Rubenstein. “Is there a way to see land as important in its own right rather than a mere container for ‘resources’?”¹⁰ If we could decolonize/rewild our minds, our culture, ourselves, I think we could. So what does that mean? ¹¹

Later in the book, Rubenstein tells a story where in 1985 Jeff Bezos gave a presentation about how to melt out the core of an asteroid to make it habitable for human beings.¹² Someone at the presentation referred to this as “rape”, which Bezos seemed to think was ridiculous. Rubenstein breaks his thought process down for us. “It seems so self-evident. It seems such a grammatically straight-forward, fundamental, even universal truth that a rock is just a rock. After all, unlike animals and vegetables, rocks have no life, no dignity, no value – apart from whatever they might be worth on the market. Clearly they have *that* kind of value... As raw materials, rocks are ours to use as we see fit and turn into profitable products. Rocks, in short, are *resources*.”¹³

Before the Enlightenment and the rise of Christianity, many peoples in Europe and other parts of the world practiced spiritualities that recognized the agency and beingness of more than just human life. This looks/ed very different in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Asia, but there were/are common threads. This has sometimes been labeled as *animism*. “From the Latin word for ‘spirit’ or ‘soul,’ , animism names a way of relating to the ‘things’ of the natural world –like forests, rivers, rocks, and trees– as living, sentient, personal beings, some of

¹⁰ Rubenstein, xi.

¹¹ This is beyond the scope of the paper, but before going farther I want to uplift the work of Eve Tuck from the State University of New York at New Paltz and K. Wayne Yang University of California, San Diego in the form of their seminal work “Decolonization is Not A Metaphor”. <https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf> In this paper I am discussing the spiritual aspects of decolonization but it should not go without saying that that cannot be ultimately successful outside of redistribution of land and other material resources. As they say, decolonization is not a metaphor.

¹² Rubenstein, 120.

¹³ Rubenstein, 120-121.

whom are sacred and even divine.”¹⁴ In a desire to turn away from the often highly negative, diminutive, degrading, and racist connotations that accompanied the origins of the term animism, I am intrigued by the use of the term “New Materialism” to describe these groups/peoples/cultures moving forward, though I also find the term to be clunky and not colloquially or generally helpful outside of the academy. The term “paganism” I also find to be very fraught, and agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Michelle Mueller’s analysis that the term has been so whitewashed as to hardly be useful.¹⁵ Rubenstein generally agrees, forthrightly stating that for a whole host of other reasons, “*paganism* is a particularly unhelpful word.”¹⁶

It is telling, I think, that we are at a loss for sufficient vocabulary to describe what all these varied spiritualities have in common. If we had more inclusive, and less alienating and problematic terms, perhaps it would be easier to find the common threads of solidarity necessary to unite these diverse communities against the domination of the imperial, billionaire elite that is destroying the planet by keeping us dependent on fossil fuels. But I digress. Suffice to say, for the purposes of this paper, I will draw some inspiration from the research and theory of New Materialism¹⁷, and use the term NMS to mean *New Materialist Spiritualities*. This is an umbrella term which includes pagan, heathen, and what we would perhaps call “animist” or “earth-based” spiritualities as practiced by Indigenous groups and cultures on every continent except Antarctica, (that we know of).¹⁸

¹⁴ Rubenstein, 37.

¹⁵ This was discussed in an unpublished paper of Dr. Mueller’s I was fortunate enough to be able to read in 2022.

¹⁶ Rubenstein, 36.

¹⁷ Kameron Sanzo, “New Materialism(s),” *Genealogy of the Posthuman*, Critical Posthumanism, April 25th, 2018, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/>.

¹⁸ Please do not confuse the word “New” here to imply temporally current in a Gregorian calendar context; many of the spiritualities included in this (admittedly) clunky umbrella term existed long before such tools for measuring and concepts regarding linear time.

Of the transition from NMS to Christo-Capitalism as the dominant form of religion, Federici sums it up succinctly when she says “The world needed to be disenchanted in order to be dominated.”¹⁹ Rubenstein sums it up a little differently by quoting Lynn White. “In the Christian worldview, there *were* no tree people or river spirits, so there was no need to appeal to or appease them before changing, using, or abusing them. ‘By destroying pagan animism,’ White explains, ‘Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.’”²⁰ She goes on to explain: “What he’s [Lynn White] arguing is that the Christian victory over paganism turned a world full of people into a world full of things, and it’s here that we can finally see the connection to the ecological crisis. Given its equation of *knowledge of nature with power over nature*, Western technoscience needs to view the natural world as composed of objects rather than subjects...If the stones were persons, we couldn’t frack them.”²¹

I am in complete agreement with this. In an artist statement many years ago I wrote “Experiences are what shape our beliefs. What we believe in is what we love. What we love is what we fight for.”²² If we lived in a society that truly regarded rocks as people, I do not think we would be able to frack them. The cognitive dissonance would be overwhelming.

So what is our course for moving forward? What is our course for living in a world of relationships and life, teeming with beings to learn from, grow with, relate to, vs a world of objects there to be exploited and extracted for profit? We cannot go back to what was. We cannot purge the Americas of Europeans as a reasonable solution. Nor can those of us who are White and of European ancestry just reconstruct the spiritual beliefs of our pre-Christian ancestors; not

¹⁹ Federici, 174.

²⁰ Rubenstein, 37.

²¹ Rubenstein, 37-38.

²² Walken Schweigert, “Towards A Queer Theatre”, Bard of the Night, Self-Published 2017 www.walkenschweigert.com.

only are there many problematic aspects of those religions (I'm thinking particularly of the ritual sexual violence and the slavery which undergirded the Viking world of Scandinavia²³), but there is not enough cultural material left over after the witch hunts to reliably do so. Many of those traditions and practices were oral and they died with the last people who remembered them.

The answer Rubenstein puts forward is “to make them up. Not discover them, like an explorer or scientist or pilgrim would try to do, but to *create* them.”²⁴ Returning to Pinn for a moment, let us recall his notion of “complex subjectivity”. If we apply that idea to all beings, “animate” or not, we can see the beginning of a decolonial spirituality (NMS), as well as the possibility of a clear function for art and the imagination to have in this movement for liberation from Christo-Capitalism: as a force for transformation to living in a post Christo-Capitalist world, by virtue of imagining it into being through creating art.

Let us dig into this a little more. Here we arrive at the crux of Decolonization (liberation from the Christo-Capitalist project), Imagination (as manifested by Art), and Magic (as manifested by the spiritual nature immanent in all life, [NMS], thereby expanding who complex subjectivity applies to). Pinn gets us there: “[I]nspiring recognition and expressing of this elemental feeling or impulse [that of complex subjectivity] is a purpose inherent in religious structures and doctrines. And this is the same purpose one finds in the work of artists who challenge viewers to think beyond the concrete presence of particular colors and shapes, to see *inner reality* as a sphere for meaning lurking behind what is existentially obvious.”²⁵ As much as art exists materially, it is symbolic as well. “Questioning art, so to speak, requires attention to both the visual dimensions of all art as well as the manner in which it signifies non-material

²³ Neil Price, *Children of Ash and Elm* (New York: Hachette Book Group 2022).

²⁴ Rubenstein, 165.

²⁵ Pinn, 85.

realities...It provides a means by which to wrap one's mind about this idea of religion as more than meets the eye."²⁶

Pinn is speaking specifically here about visual art. In Rubenstein's discussions of the function of art to act as a fulcrum or praxis of change towards NMS, she discusses mostly literature and some film. So at this point we need to bring in another thinker that can help us understand what other art forms could have to do with this. This will be followed by my own thoughts on the subject of what theatre specifically has to offer as an art form, but for now let us turn to Loyal Rue to help us flesh out how other art forms relate to religion and religious practices broadly.

We will begin with his notion of an "Integrated Narrative Core"²⁷. "...[H]umans are narrative beings. Our lives unfold as a series of connected events that acquire meaning as we integrate information about objects, events, properties, and relations in the outside world with information about how things are going inside our bodies. That is, an individual's narrative meanings are constructed as the brain negotiates mergers between facts and values, between reality operators and valence operators."²⁸ This is not just true for individual humans, Rue goes on to say. It is true for cultures and communities of people as well. "At the core of every cultural tradition there is a story, a myth, a narrative integration of ideas about reality and value."²⁹ This is the Integrated Narrative Core. "[It] is the most fundamental expression of wisdom in a cultural tradition—it tells us about the kind of world we live in, what sorts of things are real and unreal, where we came from, what our true nature is, and how we fit into the larger scheme of things."³⁰ I would add, it includes who is able to have complex subjectivity and who is not. It includes,

²⁶ Pinn, 87.

²⁷ Loyal Rue, *Religion is Not About God* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 126.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

usually subconsciously, who we think of as people, subjects who have agency, and who are objects there simply for us to utilize.

The narrative core is largely what determines our perspective, which shapes what we perceive of the world. And it is largely these perceptions (experiences) that shape our beliefs. How does this relate to NMS? “To substantiate this idea of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship and communion between human and nonhuman entities, [David] Abram drew on his experiences with indigenous shamanism and understandings of their ecological roles... According to Abram, they viewed the ‘surrounding physical world as an *active* participant in our perceptual experience.’ Abram argued that their research into perception undermined ‘the traditional mind-body’ dualism that prevents us from recognizing...that everything is alive.”³¹ This is at least part of the narrative core of NMS.

Rue argues that the narrative core is supported, structured, and perpetuated by five ancillary strategies: Intellectual, Institutional, Experiential, Ritual, and Aesthetic. While all five strategies are worthy of investigation, for our purposes we will limit our explorations to the latter two. We will begin with Ritual, then turn to the Aesthetic.

“I will use the term ‘ritual’ in the broadest sense to be roughly synonymous with ‘practice’. Rituals therefore include formal officiated ceremonies as well as various information and routine activities having explicit mythic associations. In the broad sense, a ritual might be construed as any repeatable unit of behavior, the performance of which engages individuals or groups in the meanings of a religious myth or is conducive to a religious experience.”³² So how does this praxis of ritual uniquely function to the manifestation of a narrative core? Rue goes on to explain many ways of answering this question, but I am particularly interested in one. “We

³¹ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*. (California: University of California Press, 2010), 88.

³² Rue, 134.

come close to the mark if we view ritual as some sort of performance that will effectively harmonize, synchronize, align, reconcile, or in some fashion attune humans to what is ultimately real.”³³

I want to pause at this point and state something that is obvious to me, but might not be obvious to everyone. I do not think it is possible to participate in a group ritual that is entirely devoid of theatrical elements. Whether we are talking costumes, lighting, sound, blocking (a theatrical term denoting people’s positions in space), the elements are there. Whether these elements are engaged with *aesthetically* or not (as in, whether they are thought of as art) is a different question. I simply want to invite you, reader, to view this understanding of ritual from the perspective of an expansive theatricality, for in the theatrical traditions of which I am in the lineage of, what we call “theatre” now was certainly at one point “ritual.”

Back to Rue: “I am suggesting that ritual may be understood as practical wisdom, that is, *doing something*, performing some act that is believed to bring us into closer step with the ultimately real. A rite is for setting things aright. And what better way is there for us to achieve harmony with ultimate reality than to participate directly in the ultimate story of reality, the myth? Performing the myth, re-enacting the narrative of ultimate reality, is a way to get back on track, to hit the reset button, to get our proper bearings, to become wise.”³⁴

Ritual therefore offers us a way to create a new reality by participating in the performance of it. We can shape our very notion of what reality is through the power of ritual which creates the reality as we perform it.

There is another point that Rue raises that is particularly relevant for our investigations here of the interweavings of imagination, NMS, and complex subjectivity. “Much of what we see

³³ Rue, 135.

³⁴ Ibid.

of ritual falls under descriptions for magic or worship. These are similar in the sense that they both attempt to achieve a state of harmony with reality.”³⁵ This indicates a connection between magic (the possibility of collaboration/relationship with spirits) and ritual (the creation of new realities) through the doorway of creativity/imagination (the process by which the ritual is created).

The other roles that he attributes to ritual regarding their contribution to the “viability of religious myth”³⁶ though do make sense to me. He goes on to discuss how rituals are “a primary strategy for transmitting the myth to the next generation...”; how ritual performances themselves “can have a validating effect for the myth”; and finally how ritual performances “promote the viability of the myth by exploiting the working memory bias for retrieving information that has been recently or repeatedly stored in memory systems.”³⁷

So how does the aesthetic strategy function to support the narrative core? Rue himself begins this section by noting the overlaps in the two categories. But, “...despite the overlap, there remains a fundamental difference between ritual and art that should not be lost... A religio-aesthetic experience refers to one’s apprehension of ultimate meaning through the natural forms of perceived objects. In such experiences ordinary sight becomes mythic insight.”³⁸ I do not disagree with this, but I bristle at the exclusion of auditory aesthetics. Once again, “Art” is encapsulated or essentialized just in its visual form, which as a musician and an actor, I can only sigh and roll my eyes at.

Nevertheless, Rue adds some interesting and worthy dimensions to our present investigation. He first discusses the emotional aspects of the artist. “...creating a work of art may

³⁵ Rue, 135.

³⁶ Rue, 136.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rue, 136-137.

enable the artist to express emotional feelings in uniquely satisfying ways, and encountering a work of art may engage viewers [or hearers] in uniquely transforming emotional responses.”³⁹ Hopefully most if not all of us can relate to this aspect of the power of art/the imagination: it can be emotionally moving, for creator and witness.

So aesthetic strategies have the power to motivate us emotionally. They also have symbolic power: “...the marvel of powerful images and metaphors is that they mingle several meanings within the constraints of singular forms. Theology expresses one thing in many layers, but art expresses many layers in one thing.”⁴⁰ Rue connects these two powers thusly: “Emotional predispositions are open to manipulation by symbolic means, and thus may also be viewed as *aesthetic* predispositions.”⁴¹ The imagination functions as the bridge between the two, emotional and symbolic.

So how does theatre fit into this? What is theatre’s unique contribution to the effort of shifting culture away from Christo-capitalism and towards a wide diversity of NMS which expand complex subjectivity to nonhuman (material and immaterial) beings? I will be answering this question from the specific vantage point of the opera I am writing now, *The Wilderness*, giving examples of how I am experimenting directly with this very question.

Firstly, by seeding the concept of agency in nonhuman life by making those entities characters in the performance with their own wants and desires. Give them roles with their own motivations which have *consequence*⁴² in the world of the performance. This does two things:

- 1) It helps to normalize the concept consciously that nonhumans have wants and desires.

³⁹ Rue, 137.

⁴⁰ Rue, 140.

⁴¹ Rue, 139.

⁴² In a theatrical context, the word “consequence” means actions by characters and/or events in the performance that drive the action of the performance forward. In other words, integral to the development of the plot/story/overall narrative.

- 2) Subconsciously it embeds the notion of agency and personhood of nonhuman entities by the driving of the action forward coming from these characters as opposed to them just being aesthetic figures or symbols, inconsequential to the narrative plot.

Another aspect of theatre's contribution is the power of collective experience. Live theatre gives people something to process and unpack together. It provides multiple forms of feedback and also reinforces multiple ways in which collective experience helps create shared maps of consciousness. To this point, we can look to Loyal Rue and the above section on the power of ritual as an ancillary strategy.

Thirdly, let us look at theatrical impact on an audience more generally. Theatrical impact usually occurs in one of two ways: 1) by meeting the expectations of an audience or 2) by breaking the expectations of an audience. Either of these can produce a feeling of great satisfaction in an audience, and cause a change in breathing (always a sure sign that one has touched an audience, whether it be laughing, crying, gasping, etc). By this token, we can build off of the long narrative histories and traditions of the presence of spirits and the aliveness of the world around us, finding the moments where we fulfill expectations and the moments to break and expand beyond them.

This brings us to a fourth point. Different from many other stories that have the presence of ghosts, *The Wilderness* will not end by the spirits disappearing and the life of our protagonist returning to "normal". Far from it; when the spirits of this story arrive, they are there to stay!

Speaking of the protagonist: in *The Wilderness*, our story begins by encountering two clowns on a journey. Much and more has been written about the sacred place of the clown, the trickster archetype in human societies the world over and I will not go into that in depth here.

Suffice to say, the clown has great power. That power has been lost and/or underestimated in most western mainstream religious contexts, in my opinion, but it remains alive in the theatre. By working with characters that are developed from notions of the “profound clown” and “character clown” (as opposed to circus clowns who often do no more than juggle and set their pants on fire⁴³), we open up for the audience a perspective on the world that is humble, open, generous, and curious. We see the nihilistic expanses before us as well as the simple joy innate in the experience of being alive. The clown is the embodiment of existential desire, and therefore hope. Through the eyes of Violet, our central protagonist (one of the two clowns mentioned above), we walk the paths of the unknown with her, acquainting ourselves with the spirits in the forest as she does, journeying with her in real time.

This brings us to another tactic. The spirits Violet encounters are of the specific place where the performance occurs. One of the characters in the opera is the spirit of a literal tree that actually, currently, exists at the farm in Osceola, WI where we are developing the performance and where it will premiere.

Therefore, on the side of the performers as well, within the performing ensemble, (of which I am a part), we are engaging in processes together to interact with spirits (I spent a lot of time in that corner of the farm this past summer, and even more in my imagination!) We need to be rigorous in our own processes of decolonizing/rewilding. In order for the performance to live authentically, we will become vessels ourselves for these spirits. In order for us to be believed by the audience we need to believe ourselves.

Yet another crux here is a desire to consciously and directly refute the idea that the wilderness is empty and lonely because it connotes a lack of human life. This also resolves what I determine to be one of the greatest harms of neoliberal Christo-Capitalism: through the focus

⁴³ I mean no offense here to circus clowns, they play a necessary and noble role in the circus!

on the individual and objectification of the material world we get a deep underlying anxiety which stems from an existential loneliness. But when the whole world is teeming with life around you, you are never alone.

Beyond their vibrant cityscapes, to outside eyes the Nordic countries today are still a region of untrammelled peace, a vast canvas of forests, mountains, and waterways that is seemingly one of the last places in Europe to offer the true solitude of the wild. To a person in the Viking Age, such a view would be incomprehensible. Anyone moving through the landscapes of trees and rock, snow and ice, wind and water, would have understood themselves to be in the midst of teeming life— not just of animals and insects, but of something far more— that other population of beings with whom humans shared their world... In modern Swedish they are called *väsen*, a general term that cannot readily be translated but encompasses the whole variety of “supernatural beings”...⁴⁴

So, actually, within the project and scope of this performance is an intention to redefine the word “wilderness” itself.

One last element I will mention briefly is the power of theatrical design. Puppetry, lighting, masks, sets, all of these aspects have the power to bring whole worlds of spirit to life when paired with the human imagination (here we can recall Rue’s aesthetic ancillary strategy). We always see more than what is literally on the stage itself; design crafted with a keen eye can deftly bring a sense of vibrant life to what was previously thought inert. And such experiences have a tendency to linger with an audience so moved.

I will leave this here for now. This is, after all, just the beginning. The performance is only half written, the music half composed. The actors are still developing their characters. Recognizing the complex subjectivity of all beings, all life, anyone who makes “projects”, is part of what my theatre company, Open Flame Theatre, refers to as *rewilding*. Can an actor give an audience an experience of the complex subjectivity of the world around them? Can it inspire a

⁴⁴ Price, 55-56.

community to see the world around them as “teeming with life” as in the Neil Price quote above?
Can the performance itself be an active process of rewilding? A rewilding ritual for all involved?

We live in precarious times. Bron Taylor would most certainly classify the spiritual undertones of the dramaturgy I am proposing in *The Wilderness* as what he calls “dark green religion”, and according to him, the cards are stacked against us.

It might seem that dark green religion, with its stress on ecological interdependence and kinship, and its deep sense of the value of biological and cultural diversity, could provide a counterweight to the current ominous trends. It is difficult to be optimistic, however, even if one believes such religion is salutary and has the potential to foster positive trends toward sustainability. The weight of evidence seems to be that the decline of ecosystems and the global competition for resources is intensifying, precipitating new conflicts and exacerbating others. It seems clear that these destructive trends have *much* more momentum than the movements around the world that have arisen to resist them.⁴⁵

Only time will tell, but my instincts tell me that more people than is immediately apparent are ready to be in the world in a different way. We are tired of the nihilistic consumerism, the relentless lonely anxiety of neoliberal capitalism. Many of us, so many of us, want to live in a different way. We have so many gifts and tools and technologies (including the incredible powers of curiosity, collectivism, and imagination!) to make them. While humbly honoring the many many peoples and cultures all over the world who have continued treating the beings and spirits of the world as kin, despite suffering brutally at the hands of Christo-capitalism, let us remember that we can. And then let us do it.

⁴⁵ Taylor, 219.

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