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### The Temple of Athena and the Return of the Salmon: Orientations Toward Nature and Meaning in Salishan/Sahaptin/Wakashan (Northwest American Indigenous) and Heideggerian Philosophy

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# The Iranian Yearbook of Phenomenology

Editors:

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**The Temple of Athena and the Return of the Salmon:  
Orientations toward Nature and Meaning in Salishan/  
Sahaptin/Wakashan (Northwest American Indigenous)  
and Heideggerian Philosophy.**

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**Abstract**

In *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger presents an evocative claim about the way the Temple to Athena on the Acropolis, opens a world rich with meaning and resonant with significance that orients the Athenian people within reality thus allowing their relations to others and to nature to appear as meaningful and ultimately nourishing. In other words, the Temple, like all great works of art, opens a world that is also a home. This article reviews the import of Heidegger’s reflection on monumental art, but we quickly turn to the principal objection to Heidegger’s thought, which is that the entire venture by which an artistic, religious, or poetic event organizes a world for “a people” is fundamentally illegitimate because of the way it binds individuals to an identity that outgroups the “foreigners” that do not belong to this identity and thus marginalizes them.

This objection is a central motivating force for liberalism, and since World War II, and particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, has been almost hegemonic in many strands of philosophical thought and the globalized culture more widely. Thus, we see that the objection against Heidegger is primarily ethical and political and concerns not only his philosophy but the central and inter-related phenomenological ideas of the horizon, *lebenswelt*, and the world—and thus the very relation of phenomenology itself—to contemporary ethico-political thinking. But because the objections are so strongly rooted in motivations, our phenomenological inquiry into ‘world’ will have to be supplemented by recourse to hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, Nature, Meaning.



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In *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger presents an evocative claim about the way the Temple to Athena on the Acropolis, opens a world rich with meaning and resonant with significance that orients the Athenian people within reality thus allowing their relations to others and to nature to appear as meaningful and ultimately nourishing. In other words, the Temple, like all great works of art, opens a world that is also a home. This article reviews the import of Heidegger's reflection on monumental art, but we quickly turn to the principle objection to Heidegger's thought, which is that the entire venture by which an artistic, religious, or poetic event organizes a world for "a people" is fundamentally illegitimate because of the way it binds individuals to an identity that outgroups the "foreigners" that do not belong to this identity and thus marginalizes them. This objection is a central motivating force for liberalism, and since World War II, and particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, has been almost hegemonic in many strands of philosophical thought and the globalized culture more widely. Thus, we see that the objection against Heidegger is primarily ethical and political and concerns not only his philosophy but the central and inter-related phenomenological ideas of the horizon, *Lebenswelt*, and the world—and thus the very relation of phenomenology itself—to contemporary ethical-political thinking. But because the objections are so strongly rooted in motivations, our phenomenological inquiry into the 'world' will have to be supplemented by recourse to hermeneutics.

In doing so, we take the concern of tribalism seriously. We argue, however, that the solution to the problem of "blood and soil" is not to sever all connection to "soil", but rather to uncover a phenomenological connection to a place that is more originary than ethnic or cultural identity. As a rootedness in place, this gives the inhabitants of a bioregion, marked by significant geographic and ecological features, a relation within a natural environment that is not yet a fully-formed cultural world, but is already a meaningful relation to space and time and is thus at least minimally already a world in which things can appear and to which one can belong. However, because it is pre-cultural it can bind together all residents of a bio-region, regardless of language, religion, literature, citizenship status, etc.

In the second half of this article, we develop an example of this eco-geographical belonging in the relation to salmon that lies at the heart of the lives of the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest



and Interior Plateau of North America, including the major cultural groups we will examine Salishan (Salish Sea, Fraser, and Columbia Rivers), Sahaptin (Snake and Palouse Rivers), and Wakashan (Vancouver Island). The bounty of the salmon harvest is itself a preliminary worlding that orients the inhabitants of this region in richly meaningful ways. These relations are underdetermined and must still be taken up in different cultural contexts in a multicultural political arena, while still allowing for an already meaningful relation to a natural site—that is a home—for all.

### **I. The Temple to Athena: Dwelling in a Meaningful Spatial/Temporal World Opened by Great Art**

In a forthcoming companion article to this one, we show how much in common Heidegger shares with his Modern critics, in particular with regard to the desire to overcome the estrangement that separates us from things and the illusions that cloud our ability to know them. With this common heritage in mind, we turn here to Heidegger's solution to these problems, namely his reflections on the dwelling. If Heidegger's motivations are typically modern, his solution diverges from the main wellsprings of modernity in fundamental ways. For Descartes and Locke and their followers, to avoid seeing things in an alien light requires that one adopt a theoretical stance, such that we are able to know them in a purely detached and objective manner. However, as Heidegger shows in his most philosophically significant work, conscious intentional stances are themselves rooted in an even deeper layer of intentionality, that of mood. We can thereby see that the theoretical attitude is not the neutral zero-point of consciousness, but is rather an abstraction from a more primordial relatedness. Thus, we can see the tragic irony of Modern European/ American thought: a culture so explicitly dedicated to recognizing the hard facts about how things are has also been among the blindest to the true natures of things and peoples as it so often violently and imperialistically fails to see all but their instrumental value. Heidegger's solution to this imperialism reveals that in abstracting from all "values" in our attempt to understand things—in the attempt to see things as they are—we also inadvertently occluded the very qualities that make things worthy of respect and care and thus, in the end, get a distorted view of their nature. This is why Heidegger claims (2008, p. 224) that true humanism is not anthropocentrism, "for this is humanism: meditating

and caring,” we can add that true empiricism is not fact-uncovering instrumentalism, for this is empiricism: “caring and meditating.”

Heidegger shares the modern desire to avoid seeing things in a distorted way, and he agrees that this means refusing to view them in a foreign light. But he also eschews the attempt to see things purely in the light of their own intelligibility, for this clarity ultimately always becomes indistinguishable from the light of the intellect that shines its gaze upon it. This is Heidegger’s characteristic contribution. To be faithful to things, to avoid imposing on them, means to encounter them at a deeper level than the relation between subject and object. As he puts it (2001, p. 179), “things do not appear by means of human making, but not apart from our vigilance either;” thus in order to truly know them, we must “step back from representing, explaining, to a thinking that responds and recalls.” Ultimately this means encountering things most primordially not in the light of subjective illumination or objective clarity, but in the enlightening of their coming into being. For example (2008, 162), “in the work of art the truth of beings has set itself to work. ‘To set’ means here ‘to bring to a stand.’ Some particular being, a pair of peasant shoes comes in the work to stand in the light of its Being. The Being of beings comes into the steadiness of its shining.”

Art plays a privileged role in this way of relating to things in their own most being, and we will look more closely at this role of art in the Temple to Athena. Art, however, is only one way of encountering things at this fundamental level. What is crucial is the claim that listening to things as they are required not objective distance (nor a subjective sympathetic unity of consciousness) but *dwelling in nearness with them*. This is a primary motif that runs through all of Heidegger’s work. Very early in his career, in *Phenomenology of the Religious Life* (1922), he writes (2004, p. 250), “the ‘having-been-affected-from somewhere’ [which is the deep desire of both Modernity and Post-modernity] is only possible on the basis of an essential openness to values and primary love of meaning of the personally existing being.” In other words (2004, p. 247), “the immediate experience of being-sheltered (as a mode of comportment) is primary both to conceptual knowledge [in this case] of God and to the comportment of gratefulness and love.” As we all know, Heidegger moves both of them away from this type of language, which he judges to remain overly subjective, and his religious



interests, but the basic point remains operative, namely the intuitive and compelling exhortation that to know things, to encounter others, we must dwell near them in a shared world. As he will say later (2008, p. 349), “man *is* insofar as he dwells,” which “means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and to care for.”

This care, however, is not primordial; it, itself, is not the basis of the intelligibility of beings, as if our willing and choosing were the ground of their reality. Rather, our caring relies on a prior opening of space and time into a horizon in which things can appear at all, one that is not eternal but not instantaneous either; neither flashing by nor permanent, it is reliable. In speaking of Van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes*, and of what lies deeper than the distinction between form and matter, Heidegger says (2008, p. 160), “the equipmental being of the equipment consists indeed in its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential Being of the equipment. We call it reliability. By virtue of this reliability, the peasant woman is made privy to the silent call of the earth; by virtue of the reliability of the equipment she is sure of her world.” This reliability of a trusty tool opens a temporal dimension for it means that tomorrow will be like today; the constancy of the saw, planer, lathe, and drill allows the carpenter to continue functioning in similar ways over time. There is also a spatial dimension opened in the way things become connected together or contiguous through their reliability. This is emphasized in English, in which *reliable* comes from and still resonates with the Latin *religare*: to bind together, and Farsi, **کایه**: with its connotations of support, something we are able to lean upon. In all cultural contexts, however, it seems that what we rely upon opens a spatio-temporal horizon by creating a context in which relation becomes possible. The cowboy’s trusty horse, the Samurai’s sword, the medicine woman’s pestle, and mortar, symbolize only because they first make possible the world in which its practitioners live.

Heidegger’s German-language highlights one more connection that is crucial to his thinking. In linking the Greek *mōrphe* with the German *Verlässlichkeit*, Heidegger suggests that what a thing is, its essence, is made possible by a Spatio-temporal context rooted in the trust of reliability but also calling on its relation to *verlassen* (to allow, let occur), Heidegger suggests an element of gratuity or graciousness that is prior to all particular relations. Prior to Aristotle’s notion of the substantial form (hylomorphism) is an ongoing reliability that can

only exist within a world, and indeed contributes to allowing or making possible that world and this opening of a world is something for which to be appreciative (2008, p. 425).

Thus, Heidegger is able to take up the Aristotelian legacy of hylomorphism but through his reflection on reliability to root it in a deeper understanding of temporal perdurance. In “Question Concerning Technology” Heidegger does something similar with the Platonic *eidos*, the other great legacy bequeathed to us by the Greeks for thinking the nature of a thing. Here Heidegger writes (2008, p. 335), “if we speak of the ‘essence of a house’ and the ‘essence of a state’ we do not mean a generic type; rather we mean the way in which house and state hold sway, administer themselves, develop, and decay—the way they ‘essentially unfold’ [*wesen*]... *Wesen* understood as a verb is the same as *währen* [to last or endure].” This involves a gathering together, and Heidegger notes the etymological connection with an old word favored by Hebel and Goethe, *die Weserei*, which “means the city hall, inasmuch as there the life of the community gathers and village existence is constantly in play, i.e. essentially unfolds.” For Heidegger, this image of the civic and cultural life of a village gathered together at the city hall, and made possible by this gathering, balances the temporal and spatial aspects of Being, both of which are finite. For the cultural center opens a space, but one that is bounded by the extent to which a person could walk or ride for an event, and it opens a temporal horizon, but one that is limited to the cultural epoch in which these cultural practices continue to structure the lives of this village. Thus, he explicitly offers this account of what it means to be as an alternative to Plato’s *ideas*, based as they are on geometric truths, such as that of the circle, which are equally valid in all times and places. The recompense for the discipline of this finitude, however, is again appreciation for the fact of being and its reliable ongoing gathering, or perdurance. Calling on one last linguistic connection, that between *währen* [to endure] and *gewähren* [to grant], Heidegger (2008, p. 336) comes to the conclusion, “only what is granted endures.”

This granting is a coming into being, and to be aware of this is to realize the preciousness of things in their existence. In “Poetically Man Dwells,” Heidegger writes (2008, pg. 425), “every thinking that is on the trail of something is a poetizing, and all poetry a thinking. Each coheres with the other on the basis of the saying that has already

pledged itself to the unsaid, the saying whose thinking is a thanking.” Heidegger thinks of this gracious emergence into being in several overlapping ways: worldhood of the world, the strife of world and earth, *Ereignis* (the appropriating event), the four-fold (earth, sky, mortals, and divinities), and Presencing within the Clearing of Being. For this article, we focus on the interplay of the world and earth. In this interplay, ‘world’ has resonances with Husserl’s *Lebenswelt* and Heidegger’s earlier discussion in *Being and Time* of the totality of involvements that lie ready-to-hand for pre-reflective engagement, but it now highlights the way this context of relations emerges out of and remains in tension with the aspects of materiality that are dark and unintelligible, but which nonetheless offer always new possibilities from which beings may emerge, possibilities that remain unactualizable without a context of meaning in which to appear and be encountered.

This context of meaning is not a subjective projection, nor is it, in the Kantian sense, a transcendental a priori condition; thus, we will avoid this language and instead talk about ‘the opening of a world.’ In order for there to be a world, it cannot be infinitely contracted, neither an instantaneous present nor a point-like space, for then nothing can happen and relation becomes impossible. But neither can it be infinitely expansive, for then things never come into contact and again relation becomes impossible. Rather a world requires both an opening-up and a bringing together—a bringing about of nearness. This is a nearness whose loss would be annihilation (a bringing to nothing), either by eradicating things (*ērādicāre*: to uproot), separating them by unbridgeable distances, or by obliterating them (*oblinere*: to smear), collapsing all into undifferentiated oneness.[1] Heidegger calls this bringing together into nearness that allows for the possibility of being, gathering.

This gathering is accomplished in various ways, including by things themselves. The activity the thing accomplishes is its fundamental essence, and so Heidegger calls it ‘thinging.’ He tells us (2001, p. 179), “thinging is the nearing of world. Nearing is the nature of nearness. As we preserve the thing *qua* thing, we inhabit nearness. The nearing nearness is the true and sole dimension of the mirror-play of the world.” In another place, we hear (2001, p. 197), “gathering, assembling, letting-stay is the thinging of things.... Thinging they unfold world, in which things abide and so are the abiding ones. By thinging, things carry out the world.” This gathering/carrying/bearing

is ontological, and Heidegger links it to carrying a child in the womb, or childbearing, but he also links it to gesture and thus intelligible relation (L. *gerere*: to bear a child, bear oneself, act).

This begins to sound like an overly precious virtuosity with language, but his concrete examples are quite clear. The bridge is a thing because it gathers together a little area or opens a neighborhood of being in which relation becomes possible. The river had cut through the earth separating the now distinct earthen banks from each other and anything that grows from or lives on that earth. For any terrestrial being that cannot swim those waters or fly over them, these different regions have been carried so far apart that they are now ruled by indifference; they cannot come into contact. The bridge, however, gathers them back together, ferrying them back and forth, and in doing so makes the site of the bridge a special place. Anything that can walk or run or crawl can cross just here bringing with them, from one bank to the other, bits of soil on boots of farmers, burs hitchhiking in fur or clothing, grasses, and other seeds in the intestines of animals to be deposited in rich manure in the newly accessible sites nearby on the other side, etc. Space has been opened through connection, but it has also opened through the creation of a new orientation. What has been introduced is not an abstract and indifferent Cartesian coordinate system but a meaningful spatial orientation in which following the river *that way means* going upstream from the crossing made possible by the bridge, and going *the other way means* downstream from the bridge; cutting across the forests or fields or neighborhoods besides the river now means going at this or that angle away from the bridge. These relations are made meaningful for any being for whom crossing could be significant, explicitly so for the beings with the consciousness to remember where this crossing is, such as raccoons, coyotes, wolves, bears, skunks, weasels, deer, elk, etc. and appreciatively so for the self-consciously reflective and embodied beings, such as humans, who can be grateful for them.

A poetic soul with an appreciative mind can also see how a town square, a minaret, an amusement park or sports arena, a spring in an oasis, a mountain peak or pass, a lowland valley or surf break, Google's headquarters, or an art museum, could all also be a thing in this sense—for the way they gather together and open a world. Heidegger (2001, p. 180) explicitly includes both the products of human labor and the more-than-human in his list of things: “the jug

and the bench, the footbridge and the plow. But tree and pond, too, brook and hill, are things; each in its own way is heron and roe deer, horse and bull. Things, each thinging and each staying in its own way are mirror and clasp, book and picture, crown and cross.”

Things, though, however beautifully they open worlds and however important they are to Heidegger have significant limitations, particularly in the late modern era. Heidegger (2001, p. 111) quotes from a 1925 letter written by Rilke,

To our grandparents, a ‘house’, a ‘well’, a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak, still meant infinitely more, were still infinitely more intimate; almost everything was a vessel in which they found something human and added something human to its store. Now, over here, there are encroaching from America empty, trivial things, sham-things, dummies of life... A house, in the American understanding of the word, an American apple or a vine from over there, have nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and reflection of our forefathers had entered... The life-infused, genuinely lived things, the things known to us, are waning.

Certainly, Heidegger shares this sentiment, but he points out (2008, p. 244) that this ‘Americanism’ is really only the full development of the European exaltation of the will above all else in high Modernity. More importantly, though, he suggests that this is not merely a result of some particular cultural epoch, either American or modern European; rather there is something in the nature of things that are created to serve a human need that makes them forever susceptible to being obliterated, and the world they hold open thus lost. For this reason, Heidegger argues (2008, p. 188) that the work of art has a unique role in the opening of worlds. Art and things created by human beings for use, such as the bridge, have many similarities. Both are works and both are created out of ‘materiality,’ the self-secluding element with which the maker works, e.g. “the gravity of stone, the mute hardness of the wood, the dark glow of colors.” However, Heidegger believes there is such a difference in the way that craft-making and artwork-making deal with this materiality that Heidegger (2008, p. 189) uses a different word for each context: “matter” for that out of which we make tools and commodities, and “earth” out of which we make art.

This use of the earth [in artwork] is a working with it that, to be sure, looks like the employment of matter in handicraft. Hence the illusion that artistic creation is also an activity of handicraft. It never is. But it is at all times a use of the earth in the fixing in place of truth in the figure. In contrast, the making of equipment never directly effects the happening of truth. The production of equipment is finished when a material has been so formed as to be ready for use. *For equipment to be ready means that it is released beyond itself, to be used up in usefulness. Not so when a work is created.*

In the context of Heidegger's work on Nietzsche, David Farrell Krell (1991, p. 255) articulates the difference this way; in handicraft and technology, "such openness quickly narrows when the thing produced is absorbed in sheer serviceability or usefulness as a piece of equipment. In the artwork, however, the fate of openness is different. Here openness itself achieves what Heidegger calls *Ständigkeit* [perdurance]." In Heidegger's words (2008, p. 190), "the '*that* it is' of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work [of art]. To be sure, 'that' it is made is a property also of all equipment that is available and in use. But this 'that' does not become prominent in the equipment; it disappears in usefulness." What is at stake is the relation to being (2008, p. 190-1):

In general, of everything present to use, we can note that it *is*, but this also, if it is noted at all, is noted only soon to fall into oblivion, as is the wont of everything commonplace. And what is more commonplace than this, that a being is? In a work [of art] by contrast, this fact that it *is* as a work, is just what is unusual. The more purely the work is itself transported into the openness of beings—an openness opened by itself—the more simply does it transport us into this openness and thus at the same time transport us out of the realm of the ordinary.

This importance of transcending the ordinary influences Heidegger to widen the gap between 'arts' and 'crafts' and, indeed, to privilege the highest forms of artistic expression, 'great art.' As Lally (2018, p. 28) explains in *Eidos*, 'great art' can function not only as the manipulation of objects present-to-hand but as the very "worlding" or cultural opening that allows for any experience, thus "in great art, the contemplative and poetic fuse into a unity of efficacious presencing; a moment of insight into the nature of being." In fact, it is only on the basis of extraordinary works of art that we are able to transcend our average everyday fallenness amongst the objects of our care, a status

to which Heidegger had a tendency to relegate all forms of *technē* in his earlier work (Taminiaux, 1993. P. 993).

This does not mean that even the greatest artwork of a generation is fail-proof and immune from the kind of collapse into the status of an object standing before a subject or even a dissolution into a mere resource to which tools are also susceptible. In fact, ‘great art’ is particularly vulnerable to becoming an aesthetic object. As Heidegger notes in his Nietzsche lectures, Hegel had pronounced that art could no longer be a prominent human activity. But as Heidegger (1991, p. 85) explains, “Hegel never wished to deny the possibility that also in the future individual works of art would originate and be esteemed. The fact of such individual works, which exist as works only for the enjoyment of *a few sectors of the population* [as a resource for aesthetic enjoyment], does not speak against Hegel but for him. It is proof that art had lost its power to be the absolute, had lost its absolute power.”

So “great” cannot mean merely the product of unusually rare inspiration, the work of a genius that only comes along once in a century, or, relatedly, artworks of extraordinary monetary value. It cannot mean merely the unusually interesting collections in the greatest museums in the world that only the very elite have the resources to go to visit—but that the middle classes get to see once as college students on their ‘year-abroad.’ A great work of art, rather, is one that is able to open a world that one can inhabit, *in which one can live*. It can do so in two ways. The first, which is more in concert with late modernity, is to help us see anew a *thing* that already had world-opening power even before it was depicted in art but, as is the wont of things, had fallen into oblivion. This is the case with Van Gogh’s peasant shoes. While the woman who wears the shoes experiences her world through their reliability, their nature as equipment is to “waste away, sink into mere stuff” and “in such wasting reliability vanishes.” On the other hand, “the equipmentality of equipment first expressly comes *to the fore* through the work [of art].” Both the shoes and Van Gogh’s painting of the shoes come to a stand as they open a world. The shoes themselves, however, cannot hold open her world for long, for they soon narrow into pure serviceability. The artwork, on the other hand, to the extent that it cannot be used for anything, is able to avoid the collapse into serviceability and thus continue to hold open a world, but only by referring to the shoes which themselves can exist only because they are already part of a world, if only pre-reflectively.

Because a framed painting is amenable to hanging in one's private home or viewing in a gallery with a few friends, Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* are more suitable to the ethical-political context of late modernity; Heidegger, however, points to an even more monumental role for art, one in which its ability to open a world is both more efficacious and more primordial because prior to worlds already opened by things. This role is one that seems to be most suited to non-representational art and to sculptural architecture above all. Heidegger's famous example is the Temple to Athena. "A Greek temple portrays nothing. It simply stands there." But in doing so (2008, p. 167) "the temple-work first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for the human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people." The "standing-out" of the temple both unifies and opens space and time around it in a similar but much more expansive and richer way than the bridge. People are gathered together for special occasions in which ordinary everyday concerns are left behind to become explicitly aware of the rhythms of the day and the changing seasons of the year. A space for a city with a sacred topography is opened in which the contour lines of the city map are not indifferent coordinates, but rise in an ascent towards the temple and descend with the blessings from the city's patron flowing down into the valley below—and the possibility of a city worth working to develop and defend first becomes apparent. Into this world-context, within this space for possible relations, all manner of diverse things can now appear in meaningful relations.

The *beliefs* of the Greek religion and the characteristics attributed to Athena in its theology are involved with the opening of this world, but do not precede it ontologically, nor do they determine it. In standing there, the temple *stands* out from, and thus opens a coherent world, but it does so just *there*, rooted in the earth and thereby in constant relation with the materiality of all that appears in this world. This means that while sharing a similar worlding function with other monumental sculptural architecture such as Shinto Shrines, Tibetan Monasteries, Persian Mosques, Gothic Cathedrals, Sky-Scrappers, etc., the Greek temple will open a different kind of world, and indeed will open a different kind of world in different places, which is why



living near the Temple to Hera at Olympia is only similar, but never the same, as living near the Temple to Hera at Paestum.

Thus, Heidegger does not spend very much time giving details for the way the Temple to Athena worlds, for it is not his world that it opens. This multiplicity of worlds is, for Heidegger's Modern and Post-modern critics, both too diverse and not diverse enough. On the one hand, the modern thinker is oriented towards a *universe*. In fact, as Heidegger points out in "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," one way to date the rise of Modernity is Galileo's discovery that the universe is uniform, that the supra-lunar world is not different from but *the same* as the sub-lunar realm, along with the increasingly pervasive propensity to translate of the differences of bodies into the uniformity of mass, the particularities of place into the indifference of position, the variety of motions into the sameness of inertia, the diversity of tendencies into the homogeneity of forces and in ethics the corresponding transition from a diversity of virtues to a uniformity of moral law that are valid for all rational beings in all times and places. From this point of view, to speak of multiple worlds is to slide into the relativism of subjective whim or even worse to retreat to the cultural illusions and superstitions of a pre-modern period.

Since the 1960s however, both inside the academy and in post-modern culture more widely, Heidegger's critique of modernity has carried the day. A uniform world has come to be seen as drab and dull, and both the professional academic and the layperson yearn for diversity and difference. Thus, while there are still modern critics of Heidegger motivated by the desire for the unity of the scientific project, the multiplicity of worlds in his philosophy is generally seen as a merit rather than a liability. Nonetheless, this desire for a rich, colorful world of diverse and meaningful realities has come to be seen more and more as the province of individual preference or choice, such that any participation in a world beyond one's own individual "outlook" has become increasingly suspect. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that within the strictures of Euro-American economic and cultural imperialism this is the only kind of diversity that is possible. Regardless of questions of power, however, there are significant hermeneutic concerns with Heidegger's philosophy that need to be assuaged before the particularities of his arguments can be addressed; in other words, there is significant ground that has to be cleared for his ideas even to receive a hearing. Most significant is the

problem of diversity at the individual level. Heidegger's notion of the opening of a world in creative tension with the earth by way of which we become gathered in a Spatio-temporal horizon where all kinds of rich and meaningful relations can emerge is very appealing; however, his examples of ways that these worlds are opened tend to focus on culturally founding monumental works of art and simple things as they come to resonate over time with meaning in a specific linguistic/cultural tradition. On a planet in which transportation technologies have made immigration commonplace—and in a time when the global warming largely caused by those transportation technologies is making vast swaths uninhabitable that immigration will necessarily increase—we cannot count on conditions in which the inhabitants of a region will share an ethnolinguistic world. Further, in a modern European-inspired culture where dissent and personal conscience are so highly valued, we have no reason to think that the inhabitants of a region will all share allegiance to any great works in common.

Put simply: Will not some people always be left out of the worlds proposed by Heidegger? This is even more worrisome for Heidegger can seem to make culture more fundamental than politics and to make the latter fully subordinate to the former. Won't the culturally excluded other always also be politically excluded? In fact, these worries are so real and are felt so intensely that many contemporary thinkers believe all attachment of a world of meaning to a particular place is a necessarily illegitimate project. Heideggerian thinking has resources to answer these questions, but it is not always easy to see from the examples Heidegger uses. This is further complicated by his inexcusable ethical failures to condemn Nazism and his own participation in it. Thus, to help answer these hermeneutic concerns, the difficulties of a cross-cultural approach will be balanced by the clarity gained by a break from Heidegger's own cultural context. To that end, we turn to a very different set of traditions, those of the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest.

## **II. The Return of the Salmon: A Natural Basis for a Shared World Prior to Cultural Difference**

To reverse the rhetorical force of the objection and thereby open the possibility of a compelling response to our hermeneutic challenge, we will reformulate the question and ask: What could possibly unite

people in a common world when they belong to different cultures and languages? For the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the return of the salmon throughout summer and early fall did just that, it opened a world that was prior to the personal commitment to any artistic or cultural tradition and prior to linguistic affiliation. The pre-colonial range of the salmon extended from what is now Northern Alaska to the Baja Peninsula of Mexico, but we will focus on the Wakashan, Salishan, and Sahaptian cultures that lived around the Salish Sea and along the river valleys of the Columbia, Snake, and Fraser River basins. The principal foods of these peoples were the roots of *Camus*, *Wapato*, and *Lomatium* species (including Biscuitroot and Snowdrops), and salmon. Indeed, the Salish and Sahaptian peoples of the Interior Plateau were known by this food source to the bison hunting Shoshone of Southern Montana and Wyoming. Shoshone contacts of Lewis and Clark disparagingly told the expedition they were unlikely to find anything good to eat once they crossed the Rocky Mountains, for they would be entering the land of fish and root eaters. This neighborly prejudice, however, is quite beside the mark, for abundant *Camus* fields cultivated through the use of controlled burns and accessed by way of carefully monitored hereditary rights provided high degrees of consistent food security, fulfilling one of humanity's greatest desires.[2]

Salmon provided a lavish supply of protein that, in conjunction with the carbohydrate-rich *Camus*, allowed for population densities higher than almost anywhere else in the world without more intensive forms of agriculture. But the salmon was not just a material substrate for existence, its return from the ocean to the rivers of its birth opened a world for the peoples that relied upon it. As always this means an opening and gathering of space and time. Grasslands can support large herds of grazing animals and the predators that follow them, but the conifer forests and deserts of western North America do not generally allow very high animal densities or elaborate congregations. A sagebrush desert can be quite beautiful and host a wonderful array of eagle, hawk, crow, deer, coyote, mountain lion, jackrabbit, grouse, badger, ground squirrel, sparrows, mice, rattlesnakes, sagebrush lizards, etc., but these are very dispersed and the landscapes are generally open and quiet. The pine and fir forests of the mountains and the cedar, hemlock, and spruce forests on the coastal side of the Cascades are a riot of vegetative life and are home to bald eagles,

spotted owls, tree frogs, deer, elk, and moose, black bear, grizzly bear, raccoon, and badger. But the vast majority of the forest biomass resides in cellulose, and it does not produce a very high percentage of carbon chains that are edible for animals. So, these conifer forests tend to be as quiet as the sagebrush desert, its variety of life as dispersed.

The salmon is an unusual exception to this dispersed way of life in the Northwest. Salmon are born from eggs laid in the relative safety and quiet of freshwater streams, but the young fry is swept by surging spring creeks and rivers, rushing with snowmelt, to the saltwater ocean. Northern oceans are much more abundant with life than northern freshwater rivers, and the salmon that survive to adulthood spend 2-5 years growing large and accumulating great stores of fat and protein in this rich saltwater environment. Then, in one of nature's great festivals of life, they return to the freshwater from which they were born to have their own offspring. Already this brings the abundance of the sea far inland, but as freshwater only runs in narrow riverbeds, this return from the sea also concentrates this incredible biomass of animal life into small ribbons of life. Finally, because these fish can only be caught by terrestrial and volant animals at rare shallow spots in the river, these spots become the gathering places for an exuberant gathering of animal life. Large numbers of bears congregate at these spots at densities that they would otherwise never tolerate, but there is so much to eat that the bears often only feast on the belly of the salmon, the tastiest part, before discarding the rest which may be eaten by ravens, eagles, seagulls, osprey, badgers, mountain lions, coyotes, and wolves.

These are often the best places for humans to fish as well, so we, too, are gathered to these places of abundance. Thus, the return of the salmon does not merely provide these cultures with calories, it opens up a world with its own meaningful topography. Again and again, from among the Salish, Wakashan, and Sahaptian peoples, we hear the ways in which their identity is tied to the salmon. As a Nimiipuu member puts it simply (Columbi, 2012, p. 90), "without salmon returning to our rivers and streams, we would cease to be Indian people," and as a scholar and close associate of the Nimiipuu, Benedict Columbi reports (2012 p. 83), "families with enough fish to eat as a normal part of their diets are regarded as traditional. Such families are considered strong spiritually and as authorities on Nez Perce Indian life and history." This sense of identity is fundamentally

tied to a sense of space opened out from the availability of salmon in the river. For example (Trosper 1995, p. 21):

Indians from southeastern Puget Sound derived their major concept of social unity from the geographical concept of the drainage system. Often names of a village site and the area that fed its river were the same. For example, the Puyallup River above its fork with the Carbon River was called 'ts'uwa' as was the village at that spot. The Indians living there called themselves 'the people of ts'uwa': 'ts'uwadiabc.'"

In this way, the world that I inhabit is intimately tied to space. Put more precisely, the world that is opened by the abundance of the salmon is always spatially oriented in meaningful ways as we are gathered around the river.

In this type of world, space does not exist as an originally neutral Cartesian coordinate system that then gets overlaid with meaningful relations. Space is meaningfully oriented from its most primordial opening. This leads the dominant Western culture that came to colonize the Pacific Northwest to misunderstand the indigenous inhabitants even when its representatives acted with goodwill. This is particularly true with regard to space and its relation to religious practices, which are widely recognized as worthy of protection. Thus, even when the colonizing powers were willing to grant special status to the religious sites of the indigenous peoples already living there, they were blinded as to what this might mean. As the University of Manitoba Professor and member of the Nuu-chah-nulth branch of the Wakashan/Ahousaht First Nation, Marlene Atleo, writes (2006, p. 2), "Nuu-chah-nulth intimacy with the landscape and its sacred sites are in stark contrast to concepts of sacred sites proclaimed by the White House in the United States of America and the Heritage Conservation Act of British Columbia Canada," for these understand as sacred only a designated place of worship set aside from daily activities and economic bustle. But this is to miss what is seen by a people whose world is from the beginning some sort of participation in a sacred topography gathered around orienting centers of meaning. For the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, "food harvesting sites, material harvesting sites," etc. are "natural sacred sites" that open a world around them in a richly variegated way (Atleo, 2006, p. 2).

Because of the seasonal nature of the salmon's migration, this connection to place also necessarily carries with it a temporal

component so that space and time are opened together in interrelatedly meaningful ways. Interior Salish thinker and professor Jeannette Armstrong (2007, p. 2) objects to the idea that her people are “semi-nomadic;” rather she says,

of course, we are not migratory at all. We simply move around on the territory at different seasons, and at different times of the year, but we always return to our villages in the winter months after all the harvesting is done. So, it’s like harvesting a huge garden and taking care of that huge garden. Think of the garden as being vertical, rather than flat; then you have some idea of the different seasons and the different levels of growth patterns.

This world that is opened is a beautiful and meaningful one; it is a vertical garden, a home in which one can dwell by being gathered together in variegated weaving of space and time.

Insights about the way particular cultural keystone species (Garibaldi and Turner 2004) have opened worlds for indigenous peoples are being rediscovered all over North America. For the Ojibwe (Chippewa) and wider Anishinaabek peoples of the Great Lakes region of North America, wild rice, sugar maple, and sturgeon were central to survival. But, again, this is far more than a source of calories. As Minnesota Chippewa Tribal President, Norman Deschampe puts it (Whyte 2017, p. 211), “we are of the opinion that the wild rice rights assured by treaty accrue not only to individual grains of rice but to the very *essence* of the resource. We were not promised just any wild rice; that promise could be kept by delivering sacks of grain to our members each year. We were promised *the rice that grew in the waters of our people, and all the value that rice holds.*”

Philosopher and member of the Anishinaabek nation, Kyle White, develops in detail the way that a ‘resource’ can open a world with particular reference to *nymé* (Lake Sturgeon) revealing important parallels to the way our Sahaptian, Wakashan, and Salishan writers speak of salmon. This work is worth following in detail, but since a full account of the world of the Anishinaabek cannot be followed here, what is important from his analysis is the way he highlights how this opening of a world extends to all residents of the region regardless of language, culture, or tribal affiliation. He writes (2017 p. 210) of the way learning about the sturgeon and its reliance on the waterways and lakes of the region can be meaningful in cross-cultural ways;

“participants do not necessarily adopt the Anishinaabek way of thinking or living, yet they come to feel a sense of themselves as co-occupants of and relatives in a shared watershed.”

This is the key insight toward which all our preparation points. The world that is opened by the salmon is one that is opened for all the peoples of the Northwest, one that excludes no one based on language or culture, because rooted in a natural world that is prior—and the basis of—speaking and cultural expression. This is not raw materialism that attempts to describe the world completely apart from humans; that is a legitimate but derivative discourse. As we have seen, Heidegger (2001, p. 179) says things “do not appear *by means of* human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals.” And as Whyte notes (2017, p. 207), while dystopian environmentalist critiques of the Anthropocene and Indigenous activists share certain similarities, “indigenous conservationists and restorationists tend to focus on sustaining *particular* plants and animals whose lives are entangled locally—and often over many generations—in ecological, cultural, and economic relationships with human societies and other nonhuman species.” He goes on to say that while we may value species such as the polar bear that we have never seen, “it is also true that we are unlikely to invoke the polar bear in the absence of also invoking the species’ significance to particular human and nonhuman communities with whom it has long, local, complex, and unique relationships,” in other words apart from the world it holds open.

This worlding is not complete and must be taken up in characteristic cultural ways, but it can already be appreciated and celebrated prior to particular commitments to specific religious or cultural traditions. This idea is given very clear expression in the work of Armstrong. She is critical of careless thinking that fails to recognize the differences between different indigenous cultures but also points to something that is, or ought to be, common to *all* human beings, and that is a love of, and protection of, the natural world they inhabit. In an oral interview (Armstrong 2007), she tells us:

One of the things that I can see in terms of looking at spirituality is that it isn’t about religion, it isn’t about belief. One of the things that I can say about spirituality from the Okanagan view is that it’s about knowledge. It’s about the expression, and the celebration, and the maintaining, and the sustaining of the human part of that knowledge, and moving that forward generation to generation, and maintaining,

and shaping the ethic that's required of us... to be able to love that whole outside of us. When I talk about love I'm not talking about emotion, I'm talking about the responsibility, the protection, the defense, and defending of everything that surrounds you, ... That needs to be brought into the lives of *every* person... And it's not a matter of converting people, but a matter of something to do with knowledge about what we are as humans.

If this appeal to a worlding that is rooted in pre-cultural nature is not meant primarily to invoke a world from which humans are absent (and ought to remain absent), neither does it appeal to a world that is insulated from culture. Just the opposite; it is only fully opened as world by-way-of cultural expression, and in this way, the primary spacio-temporal ordering that it makes possible is amplified and made more definite. As Marlene Atleo (2006, p. 6) explains,

Narratives and ceremonial names originating in specific sites concretely tie lineages and individuals of such lineages to the land in an intimate manner. Such intimacy over time permits the elaboration of cultural models, schemas, and scripts in which culture is the central organizing feature, but as an artifact of the territory cued by sacred sites in which cognition is mediated by such artifacts interacting with sites in the territory. The sacred sites are then part of an open system of cognitive development of a culture that ties the psychological development intimately to the history of a territory and the sustained cultural scripts of the people.

But this cultural ordering of time and space is always rooted in a prior natural expression; "these learning sites require our respect to understand the clues/cues that shout from the landscape" (p. 9).

These 'shouts' require a human response, one of gratitude and creative reception. So, cultural diversity will certainly be unavoidable and indeed something to celebrate. The Spokane Indian of traditional religious beliefs will respond with somewhat different cultural expressions of gratitude and praise for the gift of the salmon than will a member of the Spokane nation who has incorporated Christianity into his or her beliefs. The Christian descended from European-American or African-American traditions will have cultural expressions that are again somewhat culturally different, as again will the European-American atheist. If the landscape 'shouts,' these cues will be responded to in different ways.



Further, if nature and culture are necessarily interwoven and imply a continual transition back and forth between the two in our philosophical investigation, the political is always also at play. For the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest, the legacy of the sacred topography opened by the salmon continues to have relevance as rooted in the particular places where they are caught. Despite all the injustices perpetrated by the forced treaties of the 1800s, signed only under the sway of the violence of disproportionate technologies, they did concede the legal right of the Indigenous peoples to fish. Thus, the fight for “northwest tribal sovereignty has been organized around the treaty-right to take fish at all *the accustomed places*” (Columbi & Courtland, 2012, p. 1). Limiting catch numbers to keep the salmon population healthy is required for their continued return. So deciding who has the right to catch how many fish and what location has long been a central part of the cultures of the Northwest, and is, of course, an irreducibly political procedure.

Deciding how to distribute and open access to natural abundance is a matter of distributive justice. Deciding how to balance the use of irrigation for farms versus water levels for fish is a matter of resource justice. This intrusion of politics into our relationship to the natural world opened by the river means that we will never have a perfectly harmonious relationship with it for we will always have competing interests at work, but it also means that interminable disputes can remain political, i.e., at the level of the use of compromise to judiciously balance competing interests, rather than hardening into absolutely fractured cultural worlds.

In the Northwest, we all belong to a world opened by the abundance of our rivers, and it remains plausible that the Palouse wheat farmer take a summer camping trip on the Columbia to fish salmon and the traditional Nimiipuu visit an irrigated farm in the spring to pick strawberries. These political compromises only operate within certain limits, however, limits imposed by nature. Irresponsible farming and the insatiable demand for hydroelectric power of over-consumptive cities threaten to exceed the balance of political compromise and pose an existential threat to the indigenous cultures of the Northwest, but only because they first pose an existential threat to the natural world of the salmon based on which these cultures developed. The eradication of these salmon runs would be a tragedy all residents should work diligently to avoid, whatever the linguistic,

ethnic, or religious cultures in which they are rooted because it would be a prodigious impoverishment of the natural world that we all share. Conversely, a commitment to conserving the salmon runs would be an example of how protecting the natural world can unify the inhabitants of a bio-region across our cultural differences—notwithstanding our political disagreements.

## Notes

- [1] There can be no substance (standing under) if everything remains absolutely distant (standing apart).
- [2] This use of fire to open glades in the fir and pine forest so that the beautiful Camus flower could grow and nourish its caretakers as the basis for culture shares important resonances with Heidegger's metaphor of the forest clearing. These connections we are in the process of developing and hope to see others work on as well.

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