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OAK THORN KIN:
Embodied Practices of Reciprocal Restoration

Amy Clarkson

BA (Hons) English and Comparative Literature

MLitt (Master of Letters) Environment, Culture and Communication

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DFA (Doctor of Fine Arts) Creative Writing

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College of Arts
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Abstract

This narrative nonfiction enacts and troubles the writing of wild places, as I move between an 'uninhabited' landscape in the Scottish Highlands and urban parks, community gardens and nature reserves of Glasgow. Weaving a creative-critical path through environmental literature, feminist materialisms, and woodland ecology, it questions what ecological restoration means within the messiness of the Anthropocene, and how this implicates cultural, societal, and personal change. In this UN declared decade of ecological restoration, large scale conservation efforts, and in particular tree planting schemes, risk negating sensitivity to places and peoples through the urgency to sequester carbon, while biodiversity loss is treated separately from matters of social justice. The scientific discipline of ecological restoration is a process enacted on habitats and ecosystems, yet it holds potential to be collaborative and reciprocal.

Using a practice-as-research approach, the event of becoming the resident of Airigh Drishaig— a woodland and cottage four miles from the nearest settlement or road— becomes an experiential study of reciprocal restoration. Bringing situated knowledge and feminist materialisms into relation with restoration epistemologies, the emphasis on more-than-human perspectives, lively matter and multi-agential movements allows for embodied practices to evolve in relationship with place. Walking, foraging, salvaging, coppicing, seed collection, seed dispersal and mapping become ways of connecting this fragment of ancient woodland to the larger story of how our ecological selves-in-relation (Plumwood) might respond to climate and biodiversity breakdown.

The writing follows an arboreal rhythm of growth and decomposition over a three-year period of fieldwork, enfolding multiple temporalities of the landscape into the text. As a former shieling site, Airigh Drishaig is shaped by patterns of transhumance, while the undercurrents of petrochemical industries and intensive aquaculture force confrontation with extractivism. Reciprocal restoration relates to former land practices, while enfolding the embodied experience and reimagining ecological futures. Rather than a human imposed solutionism, it emerges through processes of entanglement, including loss as well as regeneration, and which crucially, allows for creative learning and co-living within the multi-agential re-storying of landscapes.

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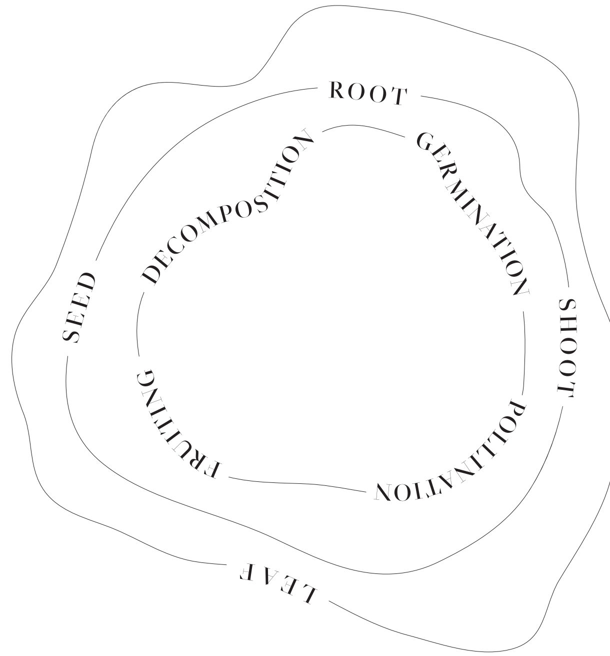
Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Amy Clarkson

Signature:

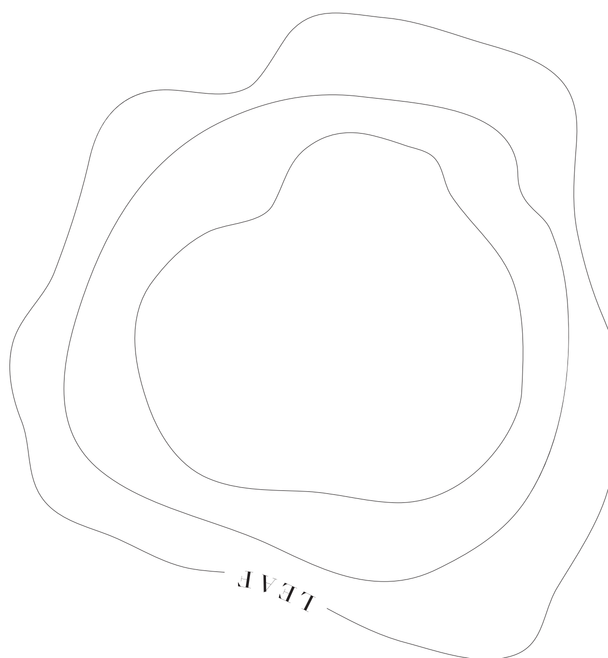

ROOT
GERMINATION
SHOOT
POLLINATION
LEAF
FRUITING
SEED
DECOMPOSITION

[I]magine a world of incessant movement and becoming, one that is never complete but continually under construction, woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are comprehensively enmeshed. In such a world, persons and things do not so much exist as occur, and are identified not by any fixed, essential attributes laid down in advance or transmitted ready-made from the past, but by the very pathways (or trajectories, or stories) along which they have previously come and are presently going.[1]

'A Storied World', Tim Ingold

[1] Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 141

LEAF: Sensing Place



Threshold

It takes time for a landscape to hook you in and reveal its influence on the shaping of your life. The morning that I first ventured to Airigh Drishaig I was full of anticipation. After months of checking the location on maps, and imagining how this place might be, my body was finally to enter the frame. I set off with my rucksack from Victoria Road at dawn, squeezing between commuters to sit up top of a double decker into the city centre. The sun rose golden behind the Gorbals, the industrial cityscape made momentarily resplendent. As I walked into Glasgow Queen Street and boarded the train to Inverness, the weight of my clothing, each item carefully deliberated over the evening before, had a reassuring feel. So too did the sharp blow of the whistle between the teeth of the station guard in the moment of the train's departure. It was a feeling that whatever I had packed, whatever I had forgotten, it would have to do. This is what I had; this is what I was doing. A seven-hour journey by train and bus to start the walk out to the cottage and woodland, four miles from the nearest other dwelling or road.

Directly north of the central belt gives nothing away as to how best to understand woodland in Scotland. Reading the landscape through the train window, you could focus on the linearity of Sitka spruce plantations, noticing their sharp edges against the bare hillsides. Or you might spot the replanting schemes, where the plastic tree guards stand opaquely, not yet revealing if the saplings are native broadleaves. Perhaps on this train-line the strongest memory would be of the tantalising glimpses of mature tree canopy in Perthshire, where for a moment the train is a white-water ride, passing dark gorges and green undergrowth cut against a shingled river. Or would the treelessness of the Slochd summit in the Cairngorms—a landmass so stark it defies judgement as to whether it is depleted or majestic—negate perception of woodland altogether? Whatever the view, I was conscious of my own instinctive desire for trees, looking towards areas of bracken as visual clues for where native woodland once grew, and could grow again.

Months had passed since a friend and former colleague, Arthur MacDonald, first told me about Airigh Drishaig. We knew each other through a community garden in Inverness, where one bright morning last winter, Arthur, bringing his

customary offering of bourbon biscuits, joined us for tea break in the shed. As we'd gathered around the gas heater, stamping cold feet, and waiting for the kettle to boil, he told us about The Old Stalker's Cottage. On the south coastline of Applecross, a peninsula directly parallel to Inverness over in the Northwest Highlands, he'd visited Airigh Drishaig the previous weekend. Arthur detailed the recent history of the place, how the previous tenant had so painstakingly rescued the cottage from dereliction, and how ten years ago, a deer fence had been constructed around the area of surrounding woodland to encourage natural regeneration.

Despite its remoteness, Arthur explained, the cottage was homely, and perfectly functioning. 'It was a surprise to find the place so well cared for, I just hope it can continue. We'll need to find a new tenant, and they're going to have to like their own company.' As one of the trustees on the board for Applecross Trust, the charitable organisation who owned the estate, Arthur had a keen interest in the area with a particular responsibility and expertise towards supporting the crofting community. The Trust were duty bound to ensure that buildings remained inhabited wherever possible. Arthur held out his phone and we peered at a photo of the cottage's exterior. A drystone building surrounded by ferns, brambles, and a rowan tree, it looked almost like a ruin but for its slate roof and three duplex windows. He swiped to the next photo, an interior shot of the wooden panelled staircase and landing. Then another of the waterfall closest to the house, its white skirt falling into a round peaty pool.

As the group asked Arthur further questions, about how the tenancy would work, I collected up the empty mugs from the table, constructing a mental image of the person to whom this opportunity would be matched. It would be a man, inevitably, probably with a boat, a dog, a four by four, most likely a gun, and perhaps some kind of internet-based business that he'd support himself with whilst living so remotely. Lucky guy, I thought to myself. A friend, finishing his last slug of tea, looked over at me pointedly and remarked, 'Isn't that the sort of thing you'd be into?' My stomach responded with a clutch of apprehension.

In the following days and weeks, it was all I could think about. For all my love of woodland, wild landscapes, and learning practical earth skills, the larger part of myself was already excusing me from the opportunity. *You wouldn't dare! Why*

would you want that? Why choose to be so far from other people? Remoteness was both a blessing and a curse. I knew it well enough for it was what I had grown up with: a lone cottage in fertile Lincolnshire, where trees had been stripped to accommodate food production. Orchard Cottages— two tiny farm labourers cottages joined together as one— was set in the gentlest of hills, the Lincolnshire Wolds, and several miles from the nearest village. To my mind, remoteness was partly what had torn my family apart: the solitary positioning of the house without the mycorrhizal connections to human community.

Within the industrial-agricultural-pastoral surroundings of fertiliser pellets, muck spread, and stubble burning, my closeness with the living world was nurtured. On an estate that was orientated towards monoculture crops, pheasant shoots and fox hunting, our garden was a sheltered island for wildlife. The remaining trees— like the Old Oak Tree which stood in the corner of the wheat field behind our house— were extensions of our family unit. The scrap of woodland that grew beyond the garden was a living playground that nurtured my formative understandings of woodland ecology. As well as the dens that I made, it was where our cats were buried, where the poplar trees rustled their night dance and where mysteries— like the huge ceramic pot my brother and I once excavated from the ground— might rise from middens below the leaf mulch.

It was only once I realised that the tenant of Airigh Drishaig could, of course, come and go, that the texture of remoteness changed inside me. It was no longer a cavernous space of self-reliance, but a layered undergrowth, tended through a pattern of continuous return and enriched by the possibility of encounters with others. I wondered at the ways in which I could care for this cottage, tend the land around it and grow steadily into relationship with the landscape. Could I hold the rural and the urban in lived relation, learning skills for ecological restoration through direct experience? The land was looking for a human inhabitant, and I had wanted to respond to it. I submitted an expression of interest to Applecross Trust.

Now I was finally heading there, questions came thick and fast. Would the cottage be damp? Would I like it there? Would my phone pick up 3G? If not for subsistence nor livelihood, then what was my reason for venturing there? If not genealogically connected to the area, nor anchored by family responsibilities, if

not driven by thirst for a solo endeavour nor seeking spiritual refuge, then what was my motivation? I wondered what might be entailed, what could be anticipated within the ambiguity of the role I was taking. Caretaker. Steward. None fitted. Each suggested I was arriving with answers instead of questions.

I changed trains at Inverness for the line to Kyle of Lochalsh. The coast-to-coast journey across the Highlands marked a change in direction, heading directly west into the region of Wester Ross. The midway point of Garve station seemed to be the point of transition, where the agricultural fertility of the east coast was left behind and the terrain thickened with bracken as the rail-track began to cut through rocky outcrops. Wester Ross encompasses a mountainous area of remote glens and sea lochs, and spreads between Lochcarron in the south, to Ullapool in the north. With one of the lowest population densities in Europe— just 1.6 people per square kilometre— Wester Ross is renowned for its scenery and wildlife, while being a geographically remote area for access to support and amenities, including public transport.[1] A once-daily minibus service connected with the train at Strathcarron station and would drop me off at Tornapress Café, from where I would walk. Another, twice weekly minibus connected Inverness to Applecross, but at this time of year, its arrival time didn't allow me enough hours of daylight for the walk to the cottage.

I reached into my rucksack, checking that my gaiters were still tucked in the side pocket, and grabbed the map: Ordnance Survey 428, covering the area of Kyle of Lochalsh, Plockton and Applecross. It was an 'Active Map (FOR ALL EXTREMES)', by which it meant plasticised. Being ready for adventure often means being clad in a slick of petroleum, from my quick drying trousers to this laminated map. Spreading it smooth against the table, the southern section of Applecross peninsula and the surrounding sea opened before me. The cartography was a mass of dense contour lines and rocky outcrops, trickling with blue tributaries. Tucked west of the knuckled whorls of the main mountain range, and south of the pockmarked inland lochans, halfway along the south coastline was the only patch of green. A tiny fragment of woodland. Right beside

[1] Highland Council, *Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Local Area Partnership: Local Area Action Plan*, Version 1.4 (May 2017), available at: <https://www.highland.gov.uk/leader/download/downloads/id/75/wester_ross_strathpeffer_and_lochalsh_local_area_action_plan.pdf> [accessed 5 May]

it, the tiny square outline of the cottage and its outbuildings: the lone marks of human habitation for miles in each direction.

I checked the route again. It entailed walking directly into Kishorn Port and Dry Dock where Mike Summers, the maintenance manager of Applecross Estate, had arranged to meet me. From there we would pick a path along the south coastline. There wasn't a footpath as such, but the distance was not so long. Less than four miles. How hard could that be? Tracing the contours of the land along the south coastline with a finger, I rehearsed where each ravine might be crossed. If this arrangement was to work, if I was to become the tenant of the cottage, then I was reliant on the route being possible, and my body being up for it.

From where the minibus dropped me off, an asphalt road led round the close-cropped tidal marshes of River Kishorn, where campervans and cars veered past me to take the high pass: the Bealach na Bà. A moment of car envy struck me, but instead of taking that iconic high road up and over into Applecross, my route would stick close to the edge of Loch Kishorn. The arrangement to meet Mike gave me a sense of permission as I passed the sign: No Unauthorised Persons. I headed towards the cluster of sail rigs, past mechanical debris that lined the track like strandlines of former industries and continued towards the shipping containers beyond.

Mike was waiting beside the silvery appendages of the brewery unit, wax jacketed with his map protected from the drizzle in a case around his neck. Flow, his sheepdog, closed the gap between us as I approached, and ran circles of anticipation around us as I shook Mike's hand. I liked them both at once. Mike had a courteousness: no questions were asked about my readiness for the terrain ahead, and only the briefest glance was thrown to my oversized rucksack. Flow nuzzled against me, apparently delighted to be taking the coastal route on a working day with this new person in tow.

We set off together with Mike leading the way beyond the shipping containers and past the open door of the salmon hatchery, bubbling with activity, towards a strip of land that passed above the sprawling industrial site. Below us, black circular cages for fish farms were in various stages of completion, some half-

formed from the hollow black pipes that lay stacked alongside, others fully ringed and a few circles moored at the edge of the sea-loch, as if slipping into the sea to spawn. Only the fluorescent figures that walked the rings like ants circling teacups gave any sense of the scale at hand.

Everything about the dry dock was colossal. Gates as thick as a dam spanned 160 metres to separate the concreted dock from the depths of Loch Kishorn. The combination of these dry facilities alongside deep water makes the dry dock, one of the largest in Europe, a significant site for marine industries.[2] Established in the early 1970s as the Howard Dorris construction yard, the dry dock was built for the creation of Ninian Central Platform which at the time of its completion was the largest humanmade movable object in the world.[3] Three thousand workers were employed for a period of two years in the making of this 600,000-tonne oil platform. The dock was currently empty, but it wasn't hard to imagine this monumental space filled with construction activities. A polyphony of mechanical noise must have echoed in the hills behind as the rig was pieced and persuaded together in an intricate weave of structural engineering.

As we circumnavigated the upper ridge of the amphitheatre, Mike pointed out the flat area of ground where the construction camp was once sited, complete with portacabins, canteen and mini mart. Nearly every available person of working age in the area was employed at the yard, with many bussed in from beyond. Over a thousand people had lived there, he explained, working eight until eight each day except Saturday, when an earlier finish would allow them to travel back to Glasgow for the night. My own journey was given new context. Nothing of this temporary village remained, but the legacy of the work undertaken by the workers, affectionately known as the 'Kishorn Commandos,' was immortalised within place lore by a song of the same name, written by folk duo Gaberlunzie. The site was characterised by a culture of long shifts, hard cash, and debauchery, with the song writers later reflecting, '[w]e were one of the few bands that dared to travel to Kishorn. It was a wild place.'[4]

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[2] Kishorn Port, available at: <https://kishornport.co.uk/> [accessed 9 March 2023]
[3] *The Ninian Central Platform,* sponsored by Howard Doris Company (Ogam Films, 1978) available at Moving Image Archive, <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/5973> [accessed 9 March 2023]
[4] Allister Thomas, 'Kishorn commandos: The story behind the Scottish oil rig anthem' in *Energy*

Nothing quite as epic had happened here since, but plans were in place for the next iteration of the dry dock, this time involving fabrications for renewable energy infrastructure. The revival of the industrial site was closely implicated with local interests. A thriving industry could secure opportunities for skilled labourers, providing the means of keeping people in the area, and the schools filled with the next generation. Talking with Mike, it was evident just how important the revival of this site was to the local economy. The North Coast 500, the popular loop of road around the Highlands, might seasonally fill the roads with tourists, but it was employment which would bring people here long-term, providing the Highland-wide housing crisis was also addressed.

I had been puzzling at the map, where printed typeface specified the presence of 'Dolphins' on two locations close to the pier and jetty of the dry dock, when Mike pointed out the presence of concrete plinths. Installed to ease the transitional movement of the platform into the water, these 'dolphins' were isolated marine structures which extended above the water to provide a mooring facility. The name invokes the momentary cresting of a dolphin from water, but remains concretised in form, long after its function became redundant. I found the co-option of *dolphin* from marine ecology to marine industry unnerving but was intrigued that industrial activities emulated ecological characteristics and were enabled by this unique configuration of land and sea.

Beyond the dry dock lay the quarry, a giant's bite taken from the lowest slope. It was as if seeing into the guts of the mountain— entrails of Torridonian sandstone. One of the most ancient rocks on the planet, it forms many mountains of Wester Ross, including the highest ground of Applecross peninsula. In a deep-time landscape of what is now the Scottish Highlands, Torridonian sandstone was formed by large-braided rivers flowing from a mountain belted hundreds of miles to the west, the waters carrying sand and pebbles across the older ridges of Lewisian Gneiss which constitute the north coast of Applecross today.[5] As there was no vegetation to stabilise the land surface, flash floods

Voice, 13 August 2021, available at: <https://www.energyvoice.com/oilandgas/north-sea/341167/kishorn-commandos-the-story-behind-the-scottish-oil-rig-anthem/> [accessed 10 Jan 2023]

[5] K. M. Goodenough and A. Finlayson, 'Geodiversity of Applecross: Statement of significance and identification of opportunities', *British Geological Survey*, Report OR/ 07/ 020, (2007), 8-9 <https://pubs.bgs.ac.uk/publications.html?pubID=OR07020#v=d&z=2&n=5&i=OR07020_0001.jp2&y=350&x=310> [accessed 10 Jan 2023]

shifted huge amounts of this debris downstream, creating vast deposits which were then compressed over time. Running several kilometres thick in places, the lower part of this Torridonian sandstone, known as the Applecross Formation, has abundant pebbly layers, rising to the surface and cresting into visibility above ground.[6]

We picked a path above the dusty pink arena where diggers and lorries stood stationary, their hydraulic arms surrendered low to the ground. It was something in between mountain and industrial yard: the sorting process for where mountain became separated into material. Pulverised and sifted into discrete piles, the sandstone was graded into mounds with each labelled accordingly.

DUST ROCK GRAVEL

Each mound represented a split-second pause before the next stage of its long evolutionary journey. After a long period of relative stasis within the mountain, the rocks and sand would move. On later reading, I discovered the sandstone was apparently favoured by the quarry for its ‘renowned colour and skid resistance properties’, making it a ‘superior surface dressing aggregate’.[7] These piles were destined for regional and national dispersal, to be spread across roads, tipped into trenches for the foundations of new build houses, and hefted into position to shore up walls for flood protection. The mountain was both ecosystem and quarried matter. From where we stood, we could see the last bend of the road before the cars disappeared into the uppermost folds of the mountain. If ever there was a need for a skid-resistance surface, the hairpin bends of the Bealach was the place. Was the road surfaced from this quarry I wondered? The aggregate easing the passage over the parent material.

At the edge of the industrial site, where an expanse of gorse and scree transitioned towards the open hillside beyond, we paused for breath. To be confronted with the scale and proximity of these sites, laid out along the coastline one after the next, was akin to experiencing a showcase of resource

[6] Goodenough and Finlayson, p. 2
[7] Kishorn Port, available at: https://kishornport.co.uk/facilities/quarry/ [accessed 11 Jan 2023]

extraction. The quarrying, the aquaculture, the petrochemical infrastructures: these not only stood in for local industry, but for the globalised extractivist practices and anthropocentric processes that have had planetary effects.

In *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,* Anna Tsing and her collaborators use the concept of 'Ghosts' in relation to the arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces which we call 'landscapes'. They suggest that each landscape is haunted by past ways of life, extinct species and the violence of modernity.[8] This sense of haunting refers both to the species no longer present within a landscape and to the imagined futures which are already impacted, or negated, by the anthropogenic landscapes and industrial processes of today. It was this sense of haunting that also struck me with the dry dock— an industrial landscape shaped by the absent presence of Ninian's Platform: a ghost to which the local economy must reinvent itself while the ephemeral trail of slow violence directly attributable to petrochemical industries ripples around the globe.[9]

Within the Anthropocene 'ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present— a time of rupture, a world haunted by the threat of extinction'.[10] In this epoch of imminent ecological tipping points, whereby planetary systems may unravel past the threshold of liveable conditions, the needs of biodiversity are entangled within the processes of resource-based industries. Donna Haraway articulates the Anthropocene as more a boundary event than an epoch. Seen in this way, it 'marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came here before.'[11] Which species will survive? Which places will still support life? Tsing argues that if the Holocene was the epoch when refugia still existed to sustain the reworlding of cultural and biological diversity, then the Anthropocene offers no such assurances.[12] Still, there remains the deep-rooted habit to look towards a wild landscape as a place of refuge, seeking possible escape from the anthropogenic change which has occurred elsewhere. As we

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[8] Elaine Gan, Anna Tsing and others, 'Haunted landscapes of the Anthropocene' in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* ed. by Anna Tsing and others, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. G1-G14

[9] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011)

[10] Gan and Tsing, G6

[11] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 100

[12] Anna Tsing, 'Feral Biologies', as referenced by Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), p 100

turned away from the edges of the site and faced the hillside punctuated with boulders ahead, it struck me that we were edging towards this 'wild' landscape through the backdoor of industry. Perhaps the approach was a useful reckoning. Not a scenic passage of vehicular access and designated viewpoints; this was instead a contoured confrontation with resource extraction, trans local-global impact and habitat discontinuities.

Industrial impact remained visible for some time yet; a beach strewn with the remnants of industrial detritus— chains, metal boxes and vast coils of abandoned rope— but the drama now came from the starkness of the hillside itself. The steep rocky hillside was flame specked with grasses, interspersed with bell heather and bog myrtle. There was no path, just the odd suggestion from where red deer had passed before. We passed colossal sandstone boulders paused in transit halfway down the mountain, bigger than camper vans. Their sides were cross hatched with swirling stratifications which suggested the coursing flow of ancient rivers. I followed behind Mike, trying to find the knack of walking across such unpredictable terrain. Thick swathes of purple moor grass, *Molinia caerulea,* disguised the ground level, and their clumps of vegetation seemed to swallow my footsteps. 'We'll stay up high under the pylons,' called Mike from far ahead. 'Much easier walking than down on the coast.'

Our route was indicated by telegraph poles which ran parallel along the coastline. Erected in 1955 to bring electricity to the south of Applecross, the line picked an undulating course across the hillside. In the same period that this electricity line was installed, conservationist and ecologist Frank Fraser Darling walked the area collecting field data for what would become the *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology*. Darling was characteristically blunt about the habitats he encountered, describing the vegetation as reflecting the 'poor rocks' of the region, listing deer's hair grass, *Scirpus caespitosus*, associated with 'poor heather', and the *Militia caerula* or flying bent that grows where the peat has managed to accumulate. He surmised of Applecross that '[t]his was

doubtless an afforested and scrub-rich country but a few hundred years ago; now it is largely a devastated land.'[13]

A straggle of young trees etched a thin green line into the hillside above us, the orange beading of rowans distinct against the birches, but the striking feature was the hydrology. Water tumbled down the crevices of the land, pushing up through the peaty substrate with each footstep, oozing ever upwards around our gaitered ankles. We crossed the first threshold of a burn, and then the second. Easing ourselves through the fast torrent which pushed up past knee height, our boots were concealed beneath the peaty cascade. Mike strode on ahead, only looking back to see if the water was deep enough to merit him passing his stick to me. I slowly slid one foot forward to find the next hold, remembering this practical tip from Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain,* passed onto her by a gamekeeper.[14] The slim book— selected both for consideration of weight and companionship of voice— was in my rucksack strapped firmly to my back. I thought of how Shepherd's embodied observations of the Cairngorm Mountain plateau had become a baseline study for the region and remembered hearing the local ranger for the area, Anna Fleming, report recently that the tree line had since shifted above the range recorded in Shepherd's text.[15] Treelines could shift in both directions, I reminded myself, and place-writing might record a moment of transition that is only later realised.

It remained to be seen what had changed since Darling's assessment of Applecross. What was apparent to him remains obscured to most through what ecologists have termed shifting baseline syndrome: the process by which each generation assumes the nature they experience in their youth to be normal, unwittingly accepting the declines and damage of generations before. Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe suggest that the syndrome even extends towards an internalised ecological impoverishment in science, culture, and institutions.[16] Our damaged ecologies become the reality that we know, and we can arrive to a

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[13] Frank Fraser Darling, *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p.26
[14] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011), p. 27
[15] Anna Fleming, talk given as part of *Into the Mountain: A Meet,* The Tramway, Glasgow. 24 November 2018.
[16] Paul Jenson and Cain Blythe, *Rewilding: The Radical New Science of Natural Recovery* (London: Icon Books, 2021), p. 1

celebrated, scenic landscape such as Applecross with no idea of its ecological deprivation. The biodiversity crisis is so insidious that thousands of species are made globally extinct each year, and yet often the ones that are lost we aren't even aware of. The Living Planet Index report reveals that global wildlife populations have plummeted by 69% on average since 1970, surmising that this staggering decline puts every species— humans included— at risk.[17]

I stayed with the bodily experience of navigating vegetation and the ground-patterning of mosses and lichens, letting it become an experiential survey of sorts, recognising the variation of textures without yet knowing each botanical name. Through a thicket of steep sided woodland, we pulled back the whips of birch branches, releasing them behind, to meet again on the other side. We took pause on a plateau of bedrock, momentarily relieved for the open ground, and overlooked the depths of Loch Kishorn below us. Passing a bag of trail mix between us, Mike began to share more about his own arrival to Applecross some thirty years ago when he married his wife, Helen and enjoyed a long period as the estate manager for Applecross Estate alongside keeping a small flock of his own sheep. Was I imagining that he watched my face for reaction at the mention of his sheep? Was it already anticipated that I would have opinion about this?

The word 'rewilding' and the legacy of George Monbiot's tirade against 'sheepwrecked' upland habitats had perhaps followed me here.[18] It was Monbiot's book, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life* which had catalysed popular interest in rewilding, particularly within urban populations, but was received more contentiously within rural communities, invoking fierce rebuttals from people who lived and worked those landscapes.[19] In the context of walking with Mike, I felt myself shying away from direct association with rewilding— despite being an advocate. I wanted to discover this landscape and find relationship with the people who knew it and lived here, rather than arrive

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[17] WWF, *Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a Naturepositive Society*, ed. by R. Almond, M. Grooten, D. Juffe Bignoli, & T. Petersen, (Gland, Switzerland: WWF, 2022) Available at: <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-GB/> [accessed 4 May 2023]
[18] George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life,* (London: Penguin Group, 2014), p. 153
[19] Sophie Wynne-Jones and others, 'Abandoning or Reimagining a Cultural Heartland? Understanding and Responding to Rewilding Conflicts in Wales - the case of the Cambrian Wildwood', *Environmental Values*, 27, 4 (2018), 1-43 <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327118X15251686827723>

as an environmentalist who thinks they know best. I kept my face neutral and interested in Mike's flock, for I was. Besides, on first impressions it seemed that these bare hillsides were more directly ravaged by red deer than by sheep, with the Highland population still far above the optimum number of 60,000 that Darling had advised as appropriate on the strength of his survey.[20] On this front, Mike and I were firmly in agreement.

Mike pointed out details of the landscape, correcting my pronunciation as we talked. '**Arrrr**- i- **dri**sach. Emphasis on the first syllable of each word.' A conscientious student of Gaelic, Mike was originally from southern England, but after a lifetime of living and working for the estate, he was embedded into the peninsula, with a keen interest in its heritage. He shared snippets of information around the recent history of The Old Stalker's Cottage and the individuals who had cared for it. The last tenant, John, had lovingly restored the cottage from ruin, and had left just a couple of years ago after inheriting a house in Cornwall. The person prior to John— 'the Hippy'— had lived there for a while when it was a dark, damp shell of a cottage, but, confided Mike, 'he'd heard voices in the hills.' My mind flashed with the details, processing the information in relation to the beginning of my own relationship with this place— apparently just the latest individual in this contemporary lineage of English eccentrics. How long would I last? What nickname would be ascribed to me? Would I hear the hills?

We reached the deer fence and climbed over the stile into the land that was known as Airigh Drishaig. As we passed through another kilometre of moor grass and areas of bog, Mike remarked that the fence had seemingly no impact, on this part of the land at least, and was not yet yielding financial return. Our footsteps followed deer trods— an obvious indication of the deer fence's partial failure, and the cause of this ongoing vegetative suppression. Through the grant aided scheme that had funded the construction of the fence, a certain measure of afforestation was necessary for the annual subsidy. Without the regeneration of trees, the investment was not yet economically viable. Our route continued to zigzag, walking downhill to cross each burn to then rise the other side. The

[20] Frank Fraser Darling, p. 410

turquoise platform and eight dark circular cages of a fish farm came into view, stretched across the waters beyond a bay.

Then came the trees, pouring down a crevice from hill to sea, a thick green relief of mature woodland. I gasped at the beauty— *this is shelter*— was my first thought. A buzzcut of young birches skimmed the circumference of mature woodland, and beneath our feet, the grasses shifted in texture to now include the springy stems of bog-myrtle. After the repetitive scarcity of the habitat we had crossed, it was apparent that we had reached if not a refugia, then a place of relative biodiversity and a viable source of seed. By the shift in habitat, and the shift of feeling, this was a place distinct from its surroundings. This was Airigh Drishaig. Mike told me this was Gaelic for *Thorny Shieling*, and sure enough, the gable end of the cottage and a chimney peeped up from a thicket of gorse and bramble.

A simple cottage, set into the hillside as if it grew from the land itself. This was a house unhitched from roads, but the telegraph poles that skimmed past, dropping a connective wire to the roof before continuing through the hills, gave assurance that this was not a ruin.

It was love at first sight. Keeping my eyes fixed on the dwelling, my feet scrabbled and dropped between heather, bracken, and moor grass— a choppy crossing for the final furlong. Finally nearing the cottage, the front garden came into view. Squeezing through the side gate, we were met with an explosion of flowers: an entirely new habitat. A garden. Ox eye daisies, crocosmia; yellows and pinks, oranges and white. Saplings of ash and willow edged the pathways, and the grass thickened with lengths of yarrow and plump leaves of plantain. While Mike made for the door, I set my rucksack to the ground and took out an oatcake, and broke crumbs onto a flat rock in the corner of the garden. An offering to the beings, past and present, for whom this place was home. *May my presence be good food for this land. May it be known that I come gently, with respect*.

The door wouldn't open. After much fiddling with the lock, Mike looked anxiously at the key between attempts. It turned but to no effect. I took a breath. 'Permiso', I whispered softly; the South American way of asking

permission before entering a room serving better than any other language I knew. I turned it slowly and the doorknob fell off in my hand. Mike suggested that the only way we might be successful would be by carefully removing the window and unlocking the door from inside. I remembered that I had a knife in my bag and unsheathed it to use the tip, carefully easing away the wooden batons which held the glass pane in place. Once removed, Mike made to step forward, but instead I reached through the hole. With belly across wood, my hands stretched towards the floor as Mike hung onto my feet. Slowly, my balance tipped forward and my palms touched down on the woven mat that lined the hallway. Upside down, I met the cottage with my hands first, and my heart above my head. Or as Mike later put it, 'you were carried across the threshold.' Once inside, the handle turned easily, and the door opened.

The cottage was a perfect size: its proportions fit me. A simple two up, two down, with the surprising addition of a plumbed-in bathroom. It felt loved and cared for. It had a kitchen with table, fridge, and cooker. A small grandfather clock hanging on the wall, paused at twenty past two. A cupboard filled with usefulness: candles, saucepans, a pile of thoughtfully stacked newspapers. A living room with furniture, a bookshelf, and enough firewood for the next fire. A porch with tools, wellie boots, midge spray. Upstairs, beds with duvets, a drawer of sheets and towels. A dressing gown hung on the back of the door in the upstairs room with a double bed. That must be John's. Having taken away his most treasured belongings, he had left the rest to be part of the house, leaving it carefully set for the next person to continue with. I could almost feel his presence, showing me around this cottage he had so lovingly restored.

Flow, a working sheepdog, stayed outside as Mike explained the basics: the taps, the power, the electricity supply, the jobs that need attending to with most urgency, the barn which must not be entered— close as it was to collapse. After eating our packed lunches together at the kitchen table and sharing a pot of coffee, we replaced the windowpane and disassembled the lock, oiling it carefully before putting it back together. Mike stood, wiping his hands. 'Well, good luck. Let us know how you get on, and if you ever need a hand with anything, I'd be glad to help wherever I can.' He departed through the garden

gate, taking the footpath back towards Toscaig, in the opposite direction of our arrival.

I explored again more slowly, touching surfaces, and opening the windows to let in fresh air. A table in the kitchen for writing. A cupboard filled with cans of food, grapefruit, and sardines, most of them now long out of date. A stove in the living room, a rug, a sofa, a cushion. A tiny dead bat, dried up on the hearth: a perishing of life since the door was last opened. A visitors' book in the porch, detailing the last twenty years' worth comments left by walkers, left next to a kettle with cups and a tea caddy. It was a home with an energy of its own, a living story to enter.

Meeting the Land

Without a rucksack on my back, and without a guide, I emerged from the cottage feeling different from my arrival. I stood in the garden and sniffed at the damp, floral air, my eyes roaming across the petals which lit the mass of green. Despite being overgrown with long grasses, and amassed with brambles and young birch saplings, the years of tending in this garden were apparent. A small bench was positioned against the side of the cottage, framed by towering pink Japanese anemones. I lingered for a moment, almost tempted to sit, but it was the woods that called me, and the sound of the water that tumbled down the hill to the sea.

Behind the dilapidated barn, a path suggested itself through a scrubland of gorse, hawthorn, and brambles. Mike had indicated I should cut back the gorse around the cottage, suggesting the stumps would need poison to be suppressed fully. I pushed this suggestion to the back of my mind. It hadn't felt like the right time to advocate for scrub in that first conversation, but the use of poison was the last thing I wanted to consider. Scrub showed that the natural processes of succession had already begun to take effect. The seeds of these species were likely spread by the preference and habits of birds, like the beady-eyed thrush who sat high in the hawthorn, watching me curiously. Micro-spider webs were held within the patterned spines of the gorse that I passed on route downhill. Deer prints were scarfed into the peat. They had apparently maintained this passage through the gorse in the absence of human intervention.

The hillside opened into a spread of heather, the last bells still a vibrant purple. To the left, a patchiness of bracken led towards tight clumps of birch saplings, populating the lower altitude. Still a hundred metres above sea level, the view across Loch Kishorn was immense. The depth of water surrounded by steeply sloping land on each side bestowed a fjord-like quality. My eyes followed the curve of the land from the inlet of Loch Carron, round the craggy edges to the lighthouse of Plockton, and then along the coastline to towards Kyle of Lochalsh, just out of sight. Above this near horizon, a mountainscape panorama stretched, folding geographically distinct features into one epic view. The munros of the Five Sisters of Kintail poked out, and the temple shaped dome of Beinn Sgritheall on Glenelg. Next along was Knoydart, with Ladhar Bheinn peeping over, and then

the foothills of the south of the Isle of Skye, with the Skye bridge glinting across the Inner Sound.

A drystone wall ran down the length of the hillside with an opening that suggested a well-worn approach into the rounded profile of oak woodland. I left the panorama and entered through the gap into the realm of sessile oaks. A huge oak, whose skirts held a world of mosses, enfolding boulders, and roots beneath continuous green coverage, split into two at a height which invited— instructed— my body. With one hand on the wide girth of the horizontal branch, I pushed myself up and lay flat-backed with my feet up against the trunk, one heel half hooked into a muscled hole. Tracing my eyes up this vertical heft, past tresses of pale lichens to where ferns spill from crevices, and branches fused together like pursed lips, my arrival seemed miraculous. The oak felt like the grandmother of the woods, gathering me close in greeting. I took a long deep breath and felt the tension of the journey ebb.

I followed the sound of water, and came to a deep gorge completely saturated with the rich green of moss. Far below, white water raced through a sequence of black pools. Trees stretched for the light, ivy scrambling up a diagonal rowan, birches pressing against oaks, each sprouting with ferns. Following carefully around one side of the ledge, each downward section revealed itself to be more dramatic, with one section entirely vertical, as if blasted away by great force. Wedged in the sunken hollow of the waterway, colossal boulders had reached a compromise of stasis, shadowed by a dark lichen-stained splash zone. The horizontal plane of a great fallen oak crossed the water with branches upended, roots ripped from the rocky bankside, and behind, the long needles of the waterfall pummelled its descent into a cloud of vapour.

The noise pushed me backwards and a mantra of safety moved through me, aware as I was of each footstep in John’s wellie boots. I found a rocky seat nestled into the side of the gorge and as I sat, tears flooded my eyes. A wave of gratitude and responsibility came from witnessing the green power of this gorge, and a sense of meeting the heart of the place.

Later, I walked down to the sea in the sun with a towel around my neck, watching the rib boat approach the circular cages of the fish farm. The rib

circled fast around them, predator-like. These were the cages that the smolts— the one-year-old salmon— were transported to after being raised in the hatchery. A sudden intense anger that the cages were positioned directly beneath the outlet of the waterfall prickled my skin. The water which tumbled down through the gorge and out to sea was met with the myriad of chemicals utilised by intensive aquaculture.

On the beach, I saw where a boat had been moored in the past: a rope was wrapped around a hawthorn tree and a sack of coal tucked under a collection of old floorboards. An old gas heater had been left. I walked along the shoreline, eastwards. Industrial marine units had washed to shore, their rigid plastic forms poised awkwardly on boulders. A vast coil of yellow polypropylene rope, faded and degraded into a splay of brittle strands, had been pecked at for nesting material. At the thickest end of the rope, single stems of moss propagules had colonised the substrate.

A strand line of fresh seaweeds stretched along the shore: sea lettuce, gutweed and kelp. The intensity of their organic colouring pulled me close. I sat beside a burn on a big flat rock, listening to the song of freshwater meeting sea water. As I began to undress, a white-tailed eagle with great flapping wings flew straight over my head. High above but unmistakable in form, I felt the hook of its curiosity towards my presence. I was an anomaly in his territory. How long since he had seen bare human flesh?

I stripped and entered the sea, gasped and splashed, clear and cold. I dunked three times. My clothes were already wet from the falling rain as I got out giddy with exhilaration, pulling my numb legs through the fabric. Clutching seaweed in my fist, I headed back to the house, deciding that I would cook noodle broth for my first meal here.

At the kitchen table, after eating, I drew up a list.

<u>Practical considerations</u>:

Everything that is carried in must be carried out
You must be feeling well enough to walk back out again
You must be careful with yourself
You cannot afford to slip or fall
You must remain in daily contact with a loved one and have regular contact with those who live close by.
Be kind to yourself
Eat well
This is a place where new pathways can be taken— a place where old habits can be dropped or remade.

Outside the kitchen window, a beading of rain hung from the birch. Petals of the mallow flowers, wet and bedraggled, clumped in a last hold against submersion. Brambles pushed themselves against the pane of glass, their reddish stems fuzzed with white. The highest was seemingly assessing a break in— strategizing to push through the rotten window frame and balloon its way inside, looping in arches around the table, cooker, and up the stairs. I'd have to cut it back. The placename of Airigh Drishaig seemed to suggest a longstanding endeavour to clear space amidst the brambles for human inhabitancy to be possible.

Is that why I was here? To protect this house from becoming fully rewilded? To assuage the vegetative power which might one day override this stonework, and push through the cracks? Was my role a mediator between continued human habitation and the wild edges which might reclaim these stones? I was here to facilitate human passage to this cottage, maintaining paths and allowing access for the odd walker to take refuge in the shrine of the porch, to take communion with the unlikeliest of sacred artefacts: the electric kettle.

I began to read the Walkers' Logbook, piecing together the story and timeline of how the cottage was restored through the words of visitors. The entries dated back twenty-five years, with additional postcards tucked between pages. An archive of diverse scripts, scribed in biro onto yellowing, lined paper recorded

each visitation, noting weather, sightings of wildlife, thanking John for the tea and biscuits, wishing him well, promising to return.

The bookshelf in the living room, full of books and videocassettes, had a Kodak pack of photographs. A double print of the cottage before John had started working on it, showed its dark interior stonework and an impromptu kitchen rigged up alongside a toolbox. A glossy image showed the kitchen range ready to be hoisted by a helicopter, with two women standing alongside it, poised in a jazz-hands, excitable posture. I saw the face of John. There was a kind glint in his eyes; his lithe frame clad in checked shirt and gaiters, hand resting against the side of the porch he'd built for the cottage. John laid the groundwork of restoring the cottage: a labour of love that matched his skillset and availability.

If I was next in this lineage of tenancy, then what would unfold through my own presence here? Was there an ecological niche that I could fill? How could I support those who came beyond me? I'm trying to not get ahead of myself, to not project visions and ideas onto this cottage, onto this place. I want this process to unfold through relationship, to begin by encountering, to be led by the agential forces of the land, rather than by preconceived ideas or objectives of what this place needs.

The breakers became larger at lunchtime and a fishing boat chugged stoically through a mask of spray. I sat on the lumpy sofa, holding the book, *Crofts and Crofting* in my hand. I hadn't known that the word, Croft, stemmed from the Gaelic word, *coirtean,* meaning a small, enclosed field.[21] Crofting is a small-scale and low intensity agricultural practice unique to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, with importance as a culturally and geographically specific interaction between people and place. A croft is a parcel of land sometimes with a croft house and is like a smallholding although governed by legislative framework overseen by the Crofting Commission. The book was inscribed with a dedication to John, thanking him for his hospitality and wishing him well on his croft. Although this land did not have crofting designation, there was obviously a

[21] Katherine Stewart, *Crofts and Crofting* (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1990), p. 1

resonance, or an aspiration towards this. I nodded off on the couch, suddenly exhausted.

I awoke with uncertainty, craving sugar and stimulation. I realised that the initial sense of excitement would change as I became more familiar here. Boredom might creep in. In the kitchen I cleaned two shelves in the dresser, examining the jars and packets of perished food stuff, questioning whether I should not keep them. Surely in a zombie apocalypse I would eat pasta from 2006. But I buried it all, opening the rusted cans and tearing apart packets that had been attacked by food moths, their larvae pearlising the plastic seams. Grapefruit segments, water chestnuts, kidney beans, cumin, mayonnaise were emptied into the hole that I'd dug into the peaty ground full of heather roots. I left the tuna and sardines out on the grass, trusting they would be found and enjoyed. I splashed lemon barley and ancient soy sauce into the gorse and emailed Applecross Trust to confirm the tenancy.

Succession

It had been a gradual process from first hearing about the cottage, to me writing an expression of interest. Apparently, no-one else had applied. For the interview, I'd arrived at the café in Inverness somewhat flustered, aware that I smelled of campfire. Just that morning I had finished facilitating a four-day Family Wild Camp, an intergenerational gathering of forest school type activities. My mind was still reeling from the final tasks of matching lost property to the participants and the unfortunate incident of my colleague's spaniel catching a red squirrel and parading its limp body around the closing circle.

Archie, the executive manager of Applecross Trust, was a welcoming presence, professional and personable as he shook my hand and began to talk about Applecross as we waited for our coffees. 'The Gaelic name for Applecross is A'Chomraich', he told me. 'It translates to "The Sanctuary." There's something of that quality within the landscape there, within the geological holding of Applecross bay.' I was aware that I was inevitably hearing the introductory remarks used for many presentations, and yet it was spoken with an apparent deep respect for the place. Archie explained that Applecross Trust acted as the caretaker of Applecross Estate, managing the land to ensure future generations could continue to enjoy it.

Extending to almost 70,000 acres, the estate covers most of the peninsula. Historical land ownership passed through the lineage of the MacKenzies of Applecross for three hundred years, before the estate was sold first to Duke of Leeds in 1857 for £135,000, and then to Lord Middleton in 1862 for £78,000.[22] In 1929 the estate was sold to Captain Arnold Wills, grandson of Henry Overton Wills. Founders of the W.D and H.O Wills tobacco company of Bristol, the extreme wealth of the Wills family is said to have created more millionaires in Britain than any family other than the Rothschilds.[23] The Wills, first the Captain, and then his son John and wife Jean, managed the estate for almost fifty years before the charitable trust was established in 1975 to take ownership and

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[22] Iain MacLennan, *Applecross and its Hinterland,* (Glasgow: A'Chomraich Publishing, 2013), pp. 14-25

[23] MacLennan, pp. 23-24

responsibility of the estate, with Richard Wills (great-grandson of Arnold Wills) serving as the chair for the first twenty years. As the website of the Trust explains, '[t]he owners of the Applecross Estate wished to preserve the outstanding natural beauty and wilderness heritage of the peninsula for the public benefit, and manage it in a sustainable, progressive manner; this was the catalyst for the charity which exists today.'[24]

Sugar and tobacco plantations and the accumulated wealth from these industries were a key factor in enabling the vastly unequal land ownership and subsequent 'sporting estate' management model which still dominates across the Highlands. The formation of Applecross Trust was not without controversy. In Richard Wills' own written explanation, avoidance of capital transfer tax was part of the decision-making process.[25] For the first decades of its running, none of the trustees lived on the peninsula, with the majority based in southern England. In 2010, land rights lawyer Andy Wightman, published *The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who Owns Scotland (And How They Got it)* which accounts for how the Highland landgrabs first played out and how they resulted in the most concentrated pattern of land ownership in the developed world.[26] Two years later, Wightman campaigned to open membership of Applecross Trust to local people.[27] Ultimately unsuccessful, in a news report from the time, Archie commented, '[i]t is a campaign with political basis which has no real interest, or care, for Applecross as such. It is more of a land reform package by the back door.' Wightman responded that Applecross was fragile and vulnerable, and commented, '[a]s long as this vast area of land is owned by a tiny number of people who don't even live there and come to visit to do a bit of shooting, I don't think the prospects are very good.'[28]

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[24] Applecross Trust, available at: <https://applecross.org.uk/the-trust> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]
[25] 'Applecross Letter', available at: <http://www.andywightman.com/docs/Applecross_letter_full.pdf> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]
[26] Wightman, Andy, *The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who Owns Scotland (and How They Got it),* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010)
[27] BBC News, 'Community bids for Applecross and Mount Stuart Trusts', *BBC News*, 28 Sept 2012, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-19748352> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]
[28] BBC News, 'Charles Kennedy criticizes Applecross trust decision', *BBC News*, 14 Nov 2012, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-20323237> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]

In the decade since, efforts had been made by the Trust to become more community oriented, with an intention towards increasing local representation and transparency. Simultaneously, since its formation in 2008, Applecross Community Company was going from strength to strength and was overseeing a steady growth of community owned projects, including a Hydro scheme called AppleJuice, community garden and allotments, AppleSeed and broadband scheme AppleNet.[29] It seemed that Applecross, and perhaps Scotland as a whole, was at a crossroads, caught in the changing of tides between a powerful lineage of unequal land ownership and the potential emergence of something much more diverse. Land management was also in a state of flux, with some estates managed for biodiversity, while others ascribed to the traditional sporting estate model which kept red deer populations high, supressing regeneration of native woodland.

I wasn't yet sure what the priorities of Applecross Trust would look like in practice, but as our conversation turned to the availability of the cottage, I realised that it was important to them that the place remained cared for. 'What we're needing at Airigh Drishaig', Archie explained, 'is for someone to be the eyes and ears of the land.' His words, perhaps unintentionally poetic, had me picturing how the role would combine a physical exploration of the land with the writing and layering up of observed details, gathering details and clues that could inform land management of the area. A kind of mapping, both creative and purposeful, it suggested a specific role with the land.

'What's your own situation?' asked Archie, 'Is this something that would fit with your own aspirations and lifestyle? How do you think you'd get on living in such a remote, wild place?' Talking about it from the partial comfort of this leatherette chair, placing my words against the background hum of cafe chat and the coffee machine, made the question an exercise in projection. Whatever I could imagine of it now would be sure to be surprised, disrupted, overturned. To Archie's question, perhaps I said something to the effect of, 'This opportunity gives reason and intention to my favourite mode of being— finding a way to become

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[29] Applecross Community Company, available at: <https://www.applecrosscommunitycompany.org/company-projects/> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]

community with a place, finding a way to play a part in the wellbeing of a woodland. I'd be very much interested in caring for this cottage and land.'

Perhaps I was also thinking, as someone who is landless and without financial means, living in this country of vast unequal land ownership, how could I turn down an opportunity to have meaningful, ongoing relationship with a cottage situated within a wild landscape? It was possible I was already speculating, that through being a tenant of the cottage, and with an interest in rewilding, I could potentially influence the direction of the land management. Maybe this was the beginning of something that I did not yet dare wish for. Whichever words I used, I managed to represent my practical skills and character favourably enough, for by the end of our conversation, it was agreed. Next week I would walk out to see the land with Mike, the maintenance manager, and in the meantime, over a second coffee, we sketched out the details of the tenancy agreement.

The tenant would have practical responsibilities to both the cottage and the land which surrounded it. As Archie detailed the tasks that would be expected of me, I jotted down the keywords while marginalia of other possibilities grew alongside; the activities that I hoped to be able to offer in service to the woodland. A balance sheet of necessary maintenance tasks and my own aspirations began to emerge. To my mind, I was entering the story of a place, whereby I might be able to play an active role in supporting the ecological restoration of the land, and to find a way of making a home there while doing so. To Archie, representing the wider concerns of Applecross Trust, securing a tenant would safeguard the cottage and the heritage of the site against abandonment. Written out together on the page, the tasks appeared to be mostly mutually affirming. Yet, what it might mean to one person to 'look after' a place, could be underpinned by a narrative entirely distinct from a different person, or in a different age.

In the estate office of Applecross House, 1836, a deal was struck between the landowner, Thomas MacKenzie, and a local shepherd. The story goes that the Bains, a family of shepherds from the Applecross peninsula had requested the use and residence of the land at the coastal settlement of Airigh Drishaig for the running of a sheep farm. As they held greater influence with the estate owner of

the time, the request was granted.[30] The seven families who lived at the township of Airigh Drishaig, or Aridrissach as it appears on a map of the time, were moved to the village of Culduie to make way for this new enterprise.

Sometime directly after the arrangement was made, the words ‘sheep farm’ were carefully scribed onto the map, which hangs in the estate office to this day. Over the suggestion of a knoll and open ground, the script was inked onto the cartographic representation of where the sheep-fank came to be built. The deal corresponded to the wider movement taking place across the Highlands, whereby forms of social clearance were exacted for the economic reasons of ‘Improvements’, predominantly through such sheep-based enterprises. In the flick of a fountain pen, the social and ecological fabric of the landscape came to be changed.

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As a global movement, rewilding holds a complex relationship with social history, human inclusion, land ownership, indigenous rights, and cultural landscapes. Within the context of the Ghàidhealtachd, the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, the social histories of place reveal a cultural identity woven into the ecological fabric of the land that was violently ruptured through land grabs and Clearances. A ‘wild landscape’ could equally be called a cleared landscape and calls for repeopling often counteract calls for rewilding.[31] Environmental philosopher, Dolly Jørgensen claimed that ‘rewilding discourse seeks to erase human history and involvement in the land and flora and fauna’, implying a ‘split between nature and culture [that] may prove unproductive and even harmful.’[32] Disputing Jørgensen’s stance, cultural geographers Prior and Ward counter-claimed that in fact the entanglement of human and non-human agencies are intrinsic to conservation endeavours, but that non-human autonomy should be

[30] Applecross Placenames Project, available at: <http://www.applecrossplacenames.org.uk/map/> [accessed 11 Jan 2023]
[31] Jim Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn Limited, 2014)
[32] Dolly Jørgensen, ‘Rethinking Rewilding’ in *Geoforum* 65, (2015), p. 482.

celebrated as fundamental in the creation of experimental, forward-looking futures.[33]

Dutch environmental philosopher, Martin Drenthen proposes that cultural heritage and rewilding do not need to contradict each other and has instead called for a 'fruitful exchange' to take place.[34] By understanding each as an interpretation of the environment which offers a 'horizon for self-understanding', Drenthen suggests that either perspective towards landscape could be better understood as a narrative.[35] Rather than just conservation practice and discourse, rewilding is situated as a deep time perspective of land, wherein the land is released from human imposed control. Rewilding is thus sometimes forwarded as a non-anthropocentric approach to landscape and the role of humans in nature.

Drawing on the notion of place being understood through social histories that remain legible through archaeological ruins, Drenthen suggests that as vegetation grows and conceals archaeological traces, or when a once tended grazing site turns to scrub, rewilding might render a place to be less meaningful, less culturally legible. But more significantly in the Highlands, where the clearance of people from the land, driven by the profiteering of sheep farms and deer estates has resulted in social injustice and ecological deprivation, the valorisation of any biological value of the 'wilderness' qualities or opportunities for such a landscape, could be interpreted as erasing, or further colonising, what was once a landscape of communal belonging.

Geographical metaphors of landscape as text help us think about power, and how social systems came to be reinforced through the controlled aesthetics of land management. Drenthen questions the notion of legibility within a landscape, as if landscape is an objective structure containing signs that refer to each other, and the humans are left as the readers, the neutral observers. Instead, he proposes an interpretation of a layered landscape, suggesting a palimpsest that is constantly being written and rewritten, with distinctive narratives each

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[33] J. Prior and K. Ward, 'Rethinking Rewilding: A Response to Jørgensen' in *Geoforum* 69. (2016) p. 134
[34] Martin Drenthen, 'Rewilding in Layered Landscapes as a Challenge to Place Identity' in *Environmental Values*, 4, 27 (2018), p. 419
[35] Drenthen, p. 412

offering a different reading of the same place.[36] With the stones of the former township consolidated and repositioned to create the one remaining dwelling of the Old Stalker's Cottage, its footprint could be considered a palimpsest. With the cottage almost continually inhabited in some form or other since census records began, the stones have shuffled across the hillside in a continual remaking of dwellings long before, destabilising the sense of cultural heritage as one, consistent baseline. Archaeological records suggest a human presence there right back to the Mesolithic. This was always a peopled landscape, shifting and changing.

The moral significance of rewilding, Drenthen ventures, is in its ability to offer a different perspective on the palimpsest, by resituating human involvement with the landscape within a much larger context, and that this context can then be used as a critique for the often all-too-human anthropocentric outlook on life.[37] As if a human-created place could be lifted like a lid from a landscape, and the land beneath could be seen looking back. The notion of ecological baselines is often used by proponents of ecological restoration to restore the narrative continuity of deep time.

> References to a baseline are like tokens that help support a re-interpretation of human history and landscape from a deep time horizon that allows us to see nature itself unfolding as it always has done before us and will continue to do after we're gone. [38]

The shifting natures and multiple baselines of cultural heritage, ecological communities and more-than-human geographies implicated within an understanding of place, could be better understood through what cultural geographer, Doreen Massey advanced as, place as a network or interchange. Instead of being perceived as a fixed and bounded site, Massey proposes that places are made by the people and things passing through them through time. If this sense of network was extended to include the more-than-human movements of geological processes, long extinct fauna, and industrial impact, then place performs an act of gathering: never one 'seamless, coherent identity, a single

[36] Drenthen, pp. 413-414
[37] Drenthen, p. 418
[38] Drenthen, p. 418

sense of place which everyone shares,' but instead an ever-changing variety of overlapping and even conflicting narratives and experiences.[39]

As Archie and I talked over the tasks that were to be carried out, I felt relief that this was not an arrangement based solely on an exchange of money. There were responsibilities— tasks— that would implicate me physically with the land, in a distinct but continuous way with those who had lived there previously. The succession of human habitancy at Airigh Drishaig, has long been defined by the forms of relationship held through living and working the land. Our task sheet was formulated through an intention of looking after the land, rather than for subsistence living, and yet it had many commonalities with the responsibilities of each generation who lived there previously.

Tim Ingold proposes that to perceive the landscape is to carry out an act of remembrance. Within the 'dwelling perspective', whereby constitutive tasks are performed through the skilled agency of individuals and communities, a temporal array of ongoing embeddedness is created, which he conceptualizes as the 'taskscape'.[40] Rather than readers, or spectators of a landscape, the taskscape situates humans as participants through the practical movements, and contributions made through these acts, or tasks of dwelling. '[I]n dwelling in the world, we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it.'[41] Ingold suggests that rather than layers of a landscape being understood as discrete, closed off entries, that the temporality of the landscape shows that the present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced, or a future that will in turn replace it: rather, the present gathers the past and future into itself.[42] In this view, each successive human community and each individual who inhabits a taskscape, is consistently contributing to the making, and remaking of a place that is pregnant with the past.[43]

By 1841, the Bains had settled into their new home in the main cottage of Airigh Drishaig just uphill from the newly built sheep fank. With eight children in hand

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[39] Doreen Massey, 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place' in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change,* ed. by J. Bird and others, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 66
[40] Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the Landscape' in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 195
[41] Ingold, p. 164
[42] Ingold, p. 196
[43] Ingold, p. 189

and her husband away in the nearby village, Margaret Bain, aged thirty-five, opened the front door. 'Farmer', she stated, to the official who having journeyed the long distance out to Airigh Drishaig, diligently recorded the name and purported age of each individual present in the cluster of three households for the census.

One hundred and seventy-seven years later, the same age as Margaret, I began to unpack the supplies that I had carried out to the cottage. Sleeping bag, notebook, packets of food, headtorch, knife, first aid kit and toilet roll. I'd prepared for the likelihood of a basic bothy and hadn't anticipated it would feel so homely. I tucked the first of my two books, *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd and Annie Dillard's, *Tinker at Pilgrim's Creek*, onto the heavily laden bookcase, joining alongside *The Ascent of Man* by Jacob Bronowski and David Attenbourgh's *Living Planet*.

I lit a candle and pinned the map to the wall, tracing the route we'd made from Kishorn with my finger. The phrase Archie had used, 'the eyes and ears of the land' kept resurfacing. Now that I was here, it was clear that I could not possibly hope to perform that function with neutrality. Every encounter would be filtered through the relations, preferences, limitations, and biases that I knowingly and unknowingly carried with me. Every observation would be shaped by the land that had shaped me. I was not Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'transparent eyeball,' which claimed a transcendental view of nature as absorbent rather than reflective.[44] Nor was I a Gaelic speaker. I was only at the surface of the map, silently mouthing the placenames which revealed a deeply embedded cosmology of relationships between people and place.

And yet something had already begun. The ache in my thighs, and the smell of woodsmoke from my first fire in this house hinted of the embodied processes involved in coming to know and care for this land. Perhaps each human body could be considered a layered landscape. A unique composition of all the places we have ever related with, ancestrally and individually, moving within us.

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[44] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses and Lectures,* (1849; New York: Literary Classics, 1983), p. 16

Whoever we are when we arrive is sure to be shifted by the experience of being there.

Oak Kin

My hand moved through the dry leaves, swirling deeper into mulched matter and exposing a loamy underbelly of soil. Fingers clasped around the first acorn, dark and full-bodied. This was the kingdom of sessile oak, *Quercus petraea*. I was learning a new language from their branch shapes. A certain cragginess marks sessile as distinct from the stately-home English oak, or penduncculate, *Quercus robur*. Each twist and turn of these Atlantic oaks were an embodiment of the forces they had reckoned with, turning abruptly as if countering sudden changes in the prevailing wind. Curves of changing ambitions. Angles of inclemency. Resting against, reaching back. Folding in expressions of struggle and survival. I learned that it was their acorns which were sessile: attached by the base, destitute of a stalk or peduncle.

My partner, Graham was here with me for the first time. We'd chosen a route on the map to walk out west away from the cottage and along the hillside of Meall na h-Uamha, beyond the patch of woodland I had spent most time with so far. Crossing the undulating contours, we picked our way over seams of bedrock which rose to the surface, tattooed with lichens of white and rust. Up high, we got a sense of scale as the land dropped in distinctive terraces to the sea. It was like an auditorium, with Loch Kishorn as the stage. Each terrace was a plateau of molinia grasses, edged with strata of boulders, and inhabited by half-dead looking oak trees and clusters of regenerating downy birch. The action was focused on the fish-farm: eight circular cages, a central platform with generator, and a daily exchange of boats. We trained our binoculars and watched the silver bodies of the salmon, leaping over each other in a thickness of forced muscularity.

After an hour's walking we reached the knoll and stood to watch the light glittering off the water before descending to the woodland below. 'I could smell the trees before I saw them', said Graham. We sat together under an ancient downy birch, *Betula pubescens*, who grew outwards from a white lichened rock face. The birch seemed to mark the beginning of the westerly edge of the woodland, a welcome presence after the bare contours of hillside. We leant silently against the expansive mass of bark that had grown into scored, armour-

like plates. Thickets of moss loomed from each boulder, adding dimension to the lichens, which lay flat like rock breath.

I had been excited to introduce Graham to Airigh Drishaig, but now we were here together, we had contorted into a strained politeness, not yet knowing our roles. Not knowing how this place might impact and shape our relationship. As we sat, sharing a flapjack and an apple, my frustration built to a crescendo and escaped from my lips. A free-flowing vent of a desire for us to share in this wildness: for us to not be harnessed into a supposedly civilised way, nor to any pre-prescribed ways of relating. 'Shall I be Crow then instead?' asked Graham. He leapt up and flapped his arm-wings, tossing the map onto the ground. 'Croak, Fuck shank, Jiggery poke.'[45] The outburst dislodged our awkwardness, and we moved downhill through the trees, cackling with laughter.

In the steep ribbon of oakwood that runs parallel above the coastline, we started to forage for acorns, plump and plentiful, some already sprouting their radicle root. Oaks depend on biological seed dispersal agents to move acorns beyond the range of the existing canopy, to occupy a space with access to sunlight. Within this fragment of ancient woodland, the usual seed dispersal agents of oak were conspicuous by their absence. Red squirrels were absent from this part of the peninsula, although they had been successfully translocated to other areas in the region.[46] Jays, the other primary dispersal agent of acorns, were not common to the region, although had recently been seen more frequently in Skye. Would these creatures return if I could learn the steps and play their game of seed dispersal to extend the edges of the woodland?

I planted one into the leaf mulch, away from the other trees. Should it be planted sprouting up or down? I decided on sideways. There was a honeyed, musky smell as I buried it, then flattened the earth. Graham told me last night about how he'd heard on the radio that the energy created by all the leaves on the planet in one day was greater than the energy subsumed by the entire industrial revolution. I was in awe of these lobed oak leaves, clocking up

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[45] Crow's language is taken from the character of Crow in the book by Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015)

[46] Trees for Life, 'Red squirrels reintroduced to Shieldaig', Available at https://treesforlife.org.uk/red-squirrels-reintroduced-to-shieldaig/ [accessed 10 March 2023]

opportunity to photosynthesis before autumn. The lobing leaf shapes were echoed by lungwort, *Lobaria pulmonaria*, a fleshy, leafy lichen, like latex, which dripped from the trees. An indicator of ancient woodland, and low air pollution, lungwort was once common around the UK, but was forced back to these westerly fringes.

Ground focused, our seed collecting took us away from each other. We called in bird noises for a while, contact calls of a different species, then lost each other all together. I stood on the beach in front of the black slide of a waterfall and filled an oyster shell from its flow to hold to my lips to sip from. The burn ran diagonally downhill, before the water tumbled white over a smoothly bubbled wall of sandstone, red as terracotta. On contact with the shingle beach, the water disappeared completely, moving unseen to the sea.

Between the sheets, our love making was interrupted by ticks. As my hand moved across smooth skin, I felt a minuscule, telling lump. We were not alone. A quick check revealed a substantial number of them, grazing, scattered across skinscape. Inner arm, upper thigh, right flank, left shoulder. And one on me, crawled in close to my own miniature forest. They demanded an exploration of each other, passing over areas of flesh like a search light, widening crevices with gentle hands, searching for the tell-tale smack of puckered red, centred with a tiny bead of attached pressure. With my tick-remover, I carefully hooked, then spun each creature anti-clockwise, holding my breath in concentration. One slipped through the net, and I cast again. Spin quick, pull back. A tiny ripping noise as it unlatched and a watery demise into the toilet. A dot of lavender oil onto the skin, potent and perfumed. Kisses on each landing point.

We were wide awake now and I was reading aloud facts about ticks, scrolling between reports and statistics on my phone under the covers. Deer, or sheep ticks, *Ixodes ricinus,* are blood-sucking ectoparasitic vectors which feed on the invertebrates of the land, small to large, as they pass from larva, nymph, to adult, requiring a blood meal for each stage of development. The main wildlife hosts in upland Scotland are red deer, *Cervus elaphus,* which are ‘tick

reproduction hosts'.[47] A connective force, ticks can carry the bacterium spirals of Lymes disease, which may or may not be held within the tick, and which may or may not pass on the infection if left within your body for over twenty-four hours.[48] Each engorged adult female can lay thousands of eggs in spring before dying. 800,000 ticks can inhabit one small section of grass.[49] As climate change advanced, tick populations and instance of Lymes disease were expected to multiply exponentially.[50]

The repeated pattern of the wallpaper in the bedroom began to look like ticks. I imagined the outside world, filled with them, and was struck by this risk and responsibility. Lymes disease was a medical anomaly which intersects with other concerns and conditions causing long-term debilitation. Ticks were becoming the unspoken emblem of wild landscapes, of interconnection, of ecological imbalance.

We swam every day, dug steps into the bank behind the barn and cut back the gorse that had overgrown the path. After a week, Graham left to return to Glasgow, bound by the rhythms of the school calendar for his work and his two teenage children, Fern and Ossian. We agreed I would text him every day at the same time, and that he would raise the alarm if he hadn't heard from me. Alone once again, I promised the oaks that I would fulfil the task of seed collecting. I looked up the method of storing acorns over winter for their stratification period and popped them into a zip-lock bag into the fridge with the intention of planting them into containers come spring. It was only a hundred or so and then autumn was over, but it felt like the first intentional act of writing myself into relation with this woodland ecology.

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[47] Francisco Ruiz-Fons and Lucy Gilbert, 'The Role of Deer as Vehicles to Move Ticks, Ixodes Ricinus, between Contrasting Habitats,' *International Journal for Parasitology*, 40, 9 (2010), pp. 1013-1020

[48] Lyme Disease Action, available at: <https://www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk/about-ticks/> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

[49] Mountaineering Scotland, available at: <https://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/health-and-hygiene/ticks> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

[50] C. Voyiatzaki and others, 'Climate Changes Exacerbate the Spread of Ixodes ricinus and the Occurrence of Lyme Borreliosis and Tick-Borne Encephalitis in Europe-How Climate Models Are Used as a Risk Assessment Approach for Tick-Borne Diseases', in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 19, 11, (2022), pp. 6516

Over the months, I came back and forth from Glasgow, staying for a week or two at a time. The community car scheme provided a vital link between train station and the nearest township, Toscaig, from where I could walk in on a four-mile footpath— a route far easier than from Kishorn. I perfected the knack of carrying enough provisions to last for my stay and started to carry out odd jobs around the cottage and garden and continued exploring. I followed the water. *Allt Maol Fhraochach* runs down the hillside in a succession of slides and falls. Each stretch of water was uniquely charactered. Repeatedly following this same burn downstream, I paused at each waterfall pool along the way, enraptured by the aquatic nuances of speed and flow, the archiving of water into rock. I followed the deer trods, eager to learn where they crossed the water to get to the other side, to where the land had been heavily grazed. I felt myself looking for clues and cues to enter the field of relations, like a peripheral stalking of ecological stories.

The propulsion to physically encounter and explore my surroundings over this first year felt effortlessly focused, in the most free roaming, imaginatively engaged sense of the word. Annie Dillard identifies this instinctive, explorative desire as 'our original intent': the imperative to deeply roam the neighborhood in order to 'discover at least where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why.'[51] Dillard's phenomenological explorations of the creek near her home developed into experiential forms of natural science, such as her informal list of creatures that 'got away'; living creatures witnessed in various states of disarray.[52] Aiming not so much to learn the names of creatures, Dillard instead conspired to keep herself 'open to their meanings.'[53] I began to photograph the scat and pellets, feathers and tracks, looking to understand the unseen communities of this landscape.

My initial explorations were on the macro level, patterns of curiosity spiraling through repetition and expansion. Ingold draws parallels between the act of the hunter, searching for subtle indications, and the storyteller, perceptually attuned to picking up the information that otherwise might be missed.[54] For

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[51] Annie Dillard, *Tinker on Pilgrim's Creek*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1974, repr. 2007), p. 14
[52] Ibid, p. 238
[53] Ibid, p. 139
[54] Ingold, p. 190

Dillard, these roles combine: 'I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself,' the telling of her explorations leading the reader *into* the place itself.[55]

There was a stillness and calmness to the way that I explored the land. I knew from an archaeological record that there was a rock-shelter on this coastline.[56] I wanted to find it through chance encounter, by experiencing and exploring rather than by following coordinates. It became a game, testing out the possibilities of shelter. Find something— a natural feature— to Get Within. I began to accept this as a practice of some kind, with each potential shelter giving me reason to get inside, curl up for a while and listen.

1. A bed of dried leaves, crunchy to the touch. A human sized space, long and narrow, edged with angular chunks of boulders, footed with a diamond shaped stone. An instinct to check first for adders. I lay down and noticed a foreboding boulder, shouldering the top wall to the ground, wedged with smaller rocks, but felt instinctively that it was structurally sound. A woodlouse skirted the rock wall, the light catching on the pleats of its body. Waves crashed below in a distant continuous roar, with closer upsurges cresting and splurging in suck-backs. A cool breeze found its way into my body.

2. My scalp was encrusted with sediment. Mineral deposits dropped around me onto the ground of this half-cave. Rock folded into a pointed recess, low and welcoming to sit beneath, and I slid my head up into the furthest point to lie down. The rock exuded pastel dampness, minutely studded with soft crystal forms, chalky rich. A globular, orange jelly mould was softly responsive to touch. The entrance was protected by an assemblage of holly and a giant-stemmed rosehip, thick with thorns.

3. Walking along the coastline at low tide, scrambling across boulders directly opposite the generator of the fish farm, I eventually found the rock-shelter. I stood outside. A low overhang of rock protected a triangular vestige of shelter that was big enough for at least twelve people to sleep within, protected from

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[55] Dillard, p.14
[56] Airigh Drishaig, Canmore available at: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/192322/airigh-drishaig> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

the elements. The positioning on the coastline made me imagine the coracles, pulled in from the tide. As I squatted to peek into the gloaming, I felt a presence behind me, and turned quickly, fully expecting to see someone— a fisherman— standing beside me. There was no one there, but I backed away slowly, heart pounding, and sat on a rock to contemplate the presence of the rock-shelter from a respectful distance. This was the original shelter of the land.

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One hot day in summer, a couple of thumps against external woodwork alerted me to movement outside. I ventured downstairs with the thought that a bird might have flown into the porch. As I approached the front door, a single siskin sat in the birch opposite, calling a repetitive alarm call. I waited, looking sideways to the bird, unsure whether it was in recovery or anticipating an incident. In the next moment, a dark glossy creature appeared at the door. A pine marten. Slowly, it lifted its head, it's small ears roundly attentive, and we stared at each other in mutual surprise. In an email conversation with John, he'd told me how he had regular visitations from a pine marten, Dean Marten as he called it, and would leave cheese and muesli out on the windowsill. He'd asked me whether it was still around and expressed regretfully, that it must think he'd abandoned it. The pine marten— Dean or otherwise— had returned.

After a long moment, it turned away and lolloped up the grassy path. Over the summer months a male pine marten might roam for distances up to twenty-five kilometres to reach breeding grounds. Ordinarily nocturnal, their hormonal drive at this time of year necessitated bolder behaviour. It seemed likely that this male pine marten was roaming in search of a mate. Later, I realised the large stone lid of the compost bin had been knocked to the ground. The visitor had been investigating food options. In the absence of cheese, or muesli, I broke up some oatcakes and left a tub of water on the bench for it— a ritual of hospitality inherited with the tenancy.

Only last thing at night, just as I'd finished brushing my teeth, did I notice a dark coil on the bathroom floor. At first, I thought it was a slug, but on closer inspection, it was a soft, dark coil of scat, embedded with tiny seeds and the remains of beetle wings. The earlier thud was suddenly explained. The pine

marten had ventured into the cottage. I disposed of it in the toilet in a gesture both domestic, and strangely disconcerting. Both of us were outliers in this territory, testing the waters of belonging, seeing if we could entice others to join us.

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I don't know when I first saw Grandmother Oak as an octopus. Either as I walked towards her or in a moment of looking back when walking away. Did she wink at me? It makes no sense, as her tentacles would be trailing above in the water, but her trunk has the quality of an octopus head and body, skimming through the woodland on a seabed of moss. She is coy and inquisitive, transforming in colouring and stature. A matriarchal trickster who coils her tentacled limbs through the thickness of air.

By autumn, I was ready. Early in the season, the luminous green highlights of the windblown acorns alerted me. It had begun. The ripe dark ones required a more careful eye against the leaf mulch. My hands reached wide; acorn after acorn plucked from the mossy spread of roots.

It was a mast year, a bumper year. Who knew if or when such abundance would come again? This was the forest pushing for expansion, acting collectively to produce more than could be eaten.

On impulse, I walked to Applecross Primary School and asked the teacher, Tom, if they might be interested in starting a tree nursery. Tom was immediately affirmative and told me that the kids were keen foragers, with their own jam making enterprise called 'Sticky Fingers'. He assured me that if I was to continue to collect the seed, we could grow the trees in the school grounds next year. I began to organise compost and root-trainers from the tree nursery I had once worked at in Inverness to be delivered to the school.

I followed my feet and bodily intuition across the terrain, rarely looking up. Dot to dot, the acorns prescribed a path of sorts. I waded across waves of dried bracken, then sank low to reach between stems, retrieving seeds to tuck safely

into the bag. As the days went on, I took multiple bags with me, learning that even a stroll could become primetime gathering.

I submerged a hand within the bag as it filled, a rolling density of silken weights. Witnessing their colour variation, the blush of pink against tan, darkening to full button brown.

Each tree gathered from expands the genetic range of the hoard, my roaming attention and meandering footfall a natural propensity towards diversity. A full bag was left swinging from a tree branch, anchoring my return.

Tessellated in faux lichen, a moth master of disguise moved freely over the tree bark of the oak and onto my hand. It slowed, antennae down, its cover blown by this encounter with smooth flesh. I identified it that evening, searching through online ID guides. *Merveille du Jour*. Marvel of the Day. Flying only in this season of fruiting brambles and ivy berries, and dependant on oak for its laying of eggs, its presence entwined in my mind with this first falling of acorns. It was a Teller of the season.

Sometimes a nut is not a nut. Sometimes it is a mushroom, thrusting upwards with the same rounded jut and expectant life force.

There was plenty for everyone, evidenced in collections of empty caps, shrewed and mouselled, the sites of past feasts. My fingers roved across territories where others would dance and gorge. My human eyes missed more than they saw, safeguarding, sharing with the next.

An acorn accompanied me into a meeting with The Applecross Trust, one year on from the start of my tenancy. I showed the trustees photos of the deer damage to the oak saplings and emphasised that fixing the fence and addressing the deer population was critical to the regeneration of the woodland. They promised to take action, and voiced appreciation for my work so far.

Not all the seeds collected would be viable. Take off their caps first as these will make the seeds float. Separate them in water. The full, viable seeds will sink

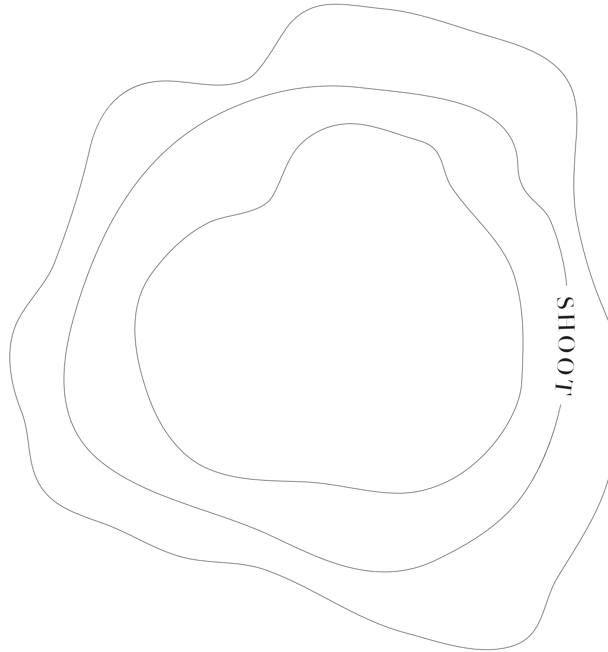
slowly to the bottom. Give them time. Skim off the floaters— hollow, half-formed or weevilled— but watch out for early sprouters, as they will float too.

Coolness slows their germination. Bag them up and store them dormant in the fridge for the winter. The radicle root pushes through first, breaking out of its skin-shell enclosure. Will they push through into your dreams, take root in your daily thoughts?

By the end of the season, when the acorns on the forest floor had ripened to a rich dark brown, it would be their staring white eye that caught mine. But I walked away, having reached capacity.

My departure was marked by the confetti of common spangle galls. Released from the underbelly of oak leaves these ginger-green discs staked their claim within the cycle, laying the next intricate rhythm of dependency.

SHOOT: A Wild Basket



Base

I'd always planned to make a basket come spring, but I couldn't have guessed it would be here, inside my tenement flat in Glasgow, at the start of national lockdown. I wove slowly, feeling the vibrant solidity of the willow stems between fingertips. The give and the take. I pushed down on each individual strand with the fleshy base of my thumb, guided by their creak as they gathered towards this new collective form. Within the structure, a space slowly came to be held. My hands learnt with each successive turn, getting in the way of each other at first against the bouncing muddle of upright stakes, but slowly finding positions which permitted some sort of flow. I checked the emerging pattern against itself: one step forward, two steps back.

Despite being new to the craft, I kept thinking to myself at each stage of the making process how familiar each act seemed, how intuitive. Scoring lengthways down the middle of a thick, ruler length stick of willow with the tip of the knife, you turn the blade as if turning a key and an opening is created. Just large enough that another wand, its own tip *slyped* to a point for ease of passage, can slip through and form a cross. Then, inserting three more to conjoin in the same way, four wands pass through four others. Thus, a starting point is created for the base of the basket to coalesce around. And so it begins, although the weaving process itself, like any story, feels like a meeting in the middle, unfolding long before and far beyond the hands of any one weaver.

The base of a circular stake-and-strand basket begins with the 'slath': a cross, or a compass that points to the four cardinal directions. I placed it on the floorboards and stood momentarily, my bare feet either side of its easterly point. My arms stretched out in some elongation of intent and the compass became a calendar: a Celtic wheel where my own body marked the alignment of the planet, held between the balance of light and dark on this day of Spring Equinox. A moment in time, suspended. It was meant to be a bramble basket, made from stems cleared from the garden at Airigh Drishaig, but I was in Glasgow when lockdown started and so the plan, like everything else, had to be adapted.

Gathering willow from Queens Park at dawn had some sense of ceremony. As I selected and clipped the stems with secateurs, I felt furtive, not knowing whether it was allowed— either for me to harvest from this public park, nor for such a 'non-essential' activity to be conducted at this time. Poised to spring into its full budding of male catkins and first leaf, the sliver of time left available for harvesting was now.

Something of the act took on its own momentum. As I stepped over the brick flower-border into the bushes, the first rays of sun streamed over the hill and my thoughts became solely emplaced within the harvesting. With a propensity for growing in straight lengths, Common osier, *Salix viminalis,* is known as the basket maker's willow and is thought to have been introduced to Britain from Europe in ancient times.[1] A friend— a gardener with an anarchist disposition— had tipped me off as to this willow's whereabouts, assuring me that it would only be hacked back by the council at some other time in the year less beneficial to the cycle of the plant than now. We can give each other these permissions of sorts, even within the bounds of a city.

Searching with my hands, I scanned the stems for those that were long, straight, and roughly between pencil and little finger thickness, taking pause before the first cut. What permission could be asked of the plant itself? What commitment could my harvesting offer in exchange for this years' worth of growth? Within my quiet asking, there was a feeling of respect for this plant, and a conveying of need. There was gratitude within my body, warm and urgent. As an early flowerer, willow provides a vital nectar and pollen source to bee species. Although pruning or coppicing can promote the longevity of certain trees, it would be hard to pitch my need against that of a bumblebee taking its first feed of the season. I reassured myself by only taking a fraction of what grew. I committed to using it well.

As the stems were selected and snipped, I laid them alongside the edge of the flowerbed. Striations of matte yellow and glossy green, thinning to wispy tips clotted intermittently with soft grey catkins, they seemed both orderly and

[1] Kew Gardens, 'Plants of the World Online', available at: <https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:779152-1> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

unruly when aligned as a collective. A heron arrived to grip the paved edge of the water just metres away from my activities and took pause. A shaggy shaman of the city, it surveyed the shallow pond and the resident ducks. Mallards, moving gently into their first foragings of the day, glided around over-sized model ducks whose backs were emblazoned with a plea largely ignored: 'Please don't feed us Bread.' I stood in presence of this oddkin community, stroking a tiny tail of willow bud between my fingers, until the heron uplifted and flew onwards, broadly winged, in the direction of the city centre.

Once it was bundled and tied together, I hoisted the pile to my shoulder and headed towards the park gates. Despite leaving the environment of their growth, the willow would remain uniquely matched to this site by the trace elements of heavy metals held within its cellular structure. Like all species of willow, *Salix viminalis* absorbs contamination encountered within its environment, even the cadmium, zinc, copper and lead often found within the polluted soils left behind by post-industrial sites common to urban locations. Fast growing, productive and deep rooted, the natural propensity of willow to restore living systems is now recognised as a phytoremediation method through which moderately polluted soils can be restored.[2] The pile that dug into my shoulder could perhaps reveal the subterranean history of the park, the toxicity levels mapped within the internal channels of its xylem.

With each step I took, the willow absorbed and exaggerated the movement, snaking and shuddering down its length. I walked down the middle of the road to leave the pavements clear for the first joggers of the day. The bundle made me feel conspicuous, as if I might have just walked back into civilisation from a different scene, a different age, or a different landscape altogether: back from the wild commons.

The quietude of the street— and the entire city— unnerved celebration for the start of spring. I stepped away from the window and sank back down to the

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[2] Julie K. Jensen and others, 'The potential of willow for remediation of heavy metal polluted calcareous urban soils', *Environmental Pollution*, 157. 3. (2009), 931-937. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2008.10.024>

floorboards, willow in hand. All the instructions I'd read advised to wait for the willow to semi-dry before weaving, to ensure tightness in the final weave. But I couldn't wait. I needed the action, the act of weaving, regardless of outcome. I selected the two thinnest whips from the pile alongside my thigh, stretching to read the next instruction over my shoulder from the screen. In the absence of a physical teacher, I was learning from Jonathon Rigeon's, *Beginner's Guide to Basketry*, following the Stake and Strand basket.[3]

These whips were to be woven sunwise around the cross, wrapping over each other back and forth in circular progression. First one row around, then the second. It was the third that stabilised the form, enabling its growth. The form of the base spiralled slowly into existence. My fingers learned how to splay open the central stakes, transforming the compass into a ships wheel as the strands wove around, circling and widening. My hands were at the helm of a vessel yet to be woven.

As I wove, I imagined the cottage at Airigh Drishaig. The bramble shoots would be starting to grow again out of the gaps in the stone walls, pushing their way towards the window frame. The sea air would be seeping into the house, dampening the jar of salt in the cupboard. Bats would soon be stirring beneath the roofing tiles, performing their close-flying hoovering of the roof at dawn. The garden would be stirring into life, first the daffodils.

The pattern of the base chimed with something known instinctively. Older than any hedgerow, the basket existed before folklore or language itself could recall. Hand-skills emerged from lands thick and tangled with green, from watersheds abundant with life. Ecologies and lifeforms of the past were embedded within the techniques and origins of basketry. A craft which had evolved alongside us from the very beginning. A craft which had evolved *us* alongside it. Through the abundance of the living world and our primal instincts of experimentation and resourcefulness towards the gathering of seeds, roots and plants, the essential act of carrying more than our hands could manage alone enabled the creation of what was probably the first cultural device: a recipient.

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[3] Jonathon Ridgeon, *Willow Basketry, A How-to Guide*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), Ebook

In what she names as the 'Carrier Bag Theory of Human Evolution', anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher speculates that prior to the tools of protrusion, extraction, or violence: the bone/ the digging stick/ the weapon, came the tool of gathering: that which brings energy home.[4] With the ingenuity provoked by having to meet a need within your immediate surroundings, the act of plucking and giving shape to a large leaf to hold a bounty of gathered berries is immediately familiar. The stained fingertips, the safe keeping of just enough for the next day. A sip of fresh water from a shell. The laying of dried grasses over the length of others. First one way then the other. A twist of the hands, an experiment. For through the means to carry or contain, there comes possibilities that extend beyond the physical capacity of the human body alone. 'A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.'[5]

A basket is intertwined and integral to our human evolution, but its associated story of gathering, of holding, has hardly been told, side-lined by the drama of the hunt: the action story, the hero's story. Ursula Le Guin, in her essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' gathers the kernel of Fisher's anthropological proposition, and sows it within the larger context of our human relationship with story. Instead of the story of the Ascent of Man— the killer story, the Techno-Heroic story— Le Guin nurtures the Carrier Bag Theory to give rise and urgency to a new, ancient story that is much needed for these times: 'the untold one, the life story.'[6] The recipient/ the container/ the basket is the very essence of that life story— carrying forward ancestral knowledge in the act of making that which will enable and carry forward the next generation.

With each strand I wove around the stakes, there seemed direct connection with the hands of the unknown elders and ancestors whose lives extended far beyond any personal ancestry or genealogy. The hands that had first carried Common osier to these islands. All those hands carrying forward, each *handing over*. This visceral translation from the Latin of *tradition* is noted by Ingold, foregrounding the tactility and materiality of ancestral skills which form the very basis of

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[4] Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980)
[5] Ursula Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1986) in *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, (Grove Press: New York, 1989)
[6] Le Guin, 1986, p. 168

sustainability.[7] As Ingold contends, basketry as a way of telling, or as a way of knowing, is much akin to the telling of a story. Its action has a narrative quality, like lines in a story that grow rhythmically out of the one before and lay the groundwork for the next.[8]

The reassertion of the container as the original artefact transforms our notion of human evolution alongside the living world. It is basketry, Professor Sandy Heslop proposes, above all other activities that has made human nature.[9] In Le Guin's words:

> If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful into a bag, or a basket, or a rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter […] or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place […] and then the next day you probably do much the same again— if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly for the first time.[10]

Encompassing both science and art, basketry requires some skills to begin, but crucially, it also teaches through the process. The product is not just a basket, but a person with a better understanding of materiality in hand, improved hand-eye coordination, a conception of structure, and the ability to plan: a weaver. The two interconnected products: the basket and the knowledge that it shapes, are, Heslop contends, at the very core of our human propensity towards adaptation. Within the weave, there is the totality of the living world. Ingold suggests that basketry evolves a sentience within our fingertips, a connection and communication with the living world.[11] Even in the city, our humanness is not woven separately, but in relation with the earth, *as* earth itself.

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[7] Tim Ingold, keynote speech [Lecture], *The Woven Communities Symposium*, (Aug 29-30 2012), available at: <https://wovencommunities.org/symposium/symposium-videos/> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]
[8] Tim Ingold, 'On Weaving a Basket', in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 347
[9] S. Heslop, *Basketry Making Human Nature*, (University of East Anglia: Colchester Print Group, 2011), pp. 14- 20
[10] Le Guin, 1986, p. 168
[11] Ingold, 2012.

Staking Up

Once the base was complete, I inserted eight lengths of willow, extending them straight out like sunrays, before persuading them to shoot upwards. These were the stakes of the basket— the framework that the strands would coil around to form the container. My activities were matched by the scuffles of our resident crows. In the kitchen of our tenement flat, just behind the boiler, a pair had inhabited a cavity in the wall. At first, my flatmate Dominique and I had been worried that they'd entered the flue itself and that their nesting might result in the hazard of blocking the airflow of the boiler. Luckily, they had selected a cavity with private access via a mystery opening in the brickwork, which appeared to have no structural implications. Their micro dwelling was safely nested within the larger container of our own. At times, there'd be a muffled busy-ness from the top of the kitchen wall. A scratching, punctuated by a sharp thud, like a marble being dropped and rolled. After a commotion, one would emerge to swing on the electrical line outside the window, twig in mouth, head cocked in an encouraging assessment of the architectural choices of the other.

I received news from Applecross Primary School. The teacher, Tom, emailed to let me know that the one-thousand oak seedlings we had planted into root trainers with the kids a couple of months previously were growing well. He'd attached a photo. Thin stems of bright green held the first lobed leaves which hung flatly. Soon, Tom and the couple of kids who remained in the school would start putting them outside to harden them off. Apparently, the whole community had been out for the low spring tide, physically distanced in familial clusters to pick mussels from the shoreline.

Over dinner, I shared these tidal foragings with Dominque. She told me about her own news from the village of Natashquan in Quebec, where she lived before moving here last year. The season for snow crab fishing had begun, although it was suspended due to storms. The villagers were under the same physical distancing and travel restriction measures as elsewhere, although as Dominique described the severity of their winters, it seemed the lockdown was simply a new form of limitation. For a while, through this shared storytelling, we came to inhabit the places we missed.

Perhaps the concept of the Wild might only have ever existed in relation to the intensely bound space of the Domestic, or the City, each creating the conditions for the other to exist. With our attention now tethered to the immediate needs of the personal, familial, and societal, does our awareness of the wider living world shrink or expand? Can it do both? Habitats expand through the absence of human activity: on the outskirts of Glasgow, an osprey began to nest on an out-of-action golf course. Through the experience of our human restriction, the Wild, that conceptual space of otherness, expanded to include all that which can't be accessed, all that was beyond the realm of our direct experience. A fantasy that exists beyond city walls, the Wild seeps back through reports and then memes of 'nature returning'. Dolphins' swimming through the rivers of Venice; a roe deer strolling up Sauchiehall Street.

Wildness, however, remains relational: a possibility held within encounter, within each localised environment or unseen cavity, interwoven within the living fabric of our surroundings. I'd met the birch tree the first day that I arrived in Glasgow, long before securing a flat to rent. On the wilder side of Queens Park, in a part designated as a wildlife reserve, the birch grows on a slope above a treeline that obscures the cityscape. The trunk is scored with rough diamonds, with greenery that cascades down a series of branches positioned like the rungs of a ladder. Holding a takeaway cup, I'd climbed the tree and sat high on a branch, sipping coffee, and reconciling myself with the constant waves of surrounding traffic. An escape route into the canopy, I'd only climbed the once.

Now, even without leaves, the low hanging tendrils of the birch offered an invitation of privacy. I stooped to enter its realm and to take rest. With the city soundscape completely changed, birdsong was amplified, exposing all that had been below the surface level of mechanised sound. The greenness and the flowing forms of bark texture and shadows held a new vibrancy, significance, and magnificence. The birch enveloped me completely as I sat. The sense of a partial cocoon, that of a known relationship, or the security of a favourite blanket wove around me. The bare branches almost swirled into patterns of motion and the bird song sounded so bright, so tender. The buds were still tightly bound, and I'd not yet missed the flowing of sap.

The next day, a half-filled bottle of sap awaited where I had tied it carefully to a sawn-off branch the night before. Its liquid swirled with some unspoken addition: more than water. I lifted the bottle above my head momentarily in gratitude before sipping carefully, letting my lips experience it before tasting it fully. Just the subtlest of nutty sweetness— a distillation of natural sugar. A thickness. This was the taste of last year's sunlight, the sugars overwintered in the storehouse of the roots before rising to back to feed and enable the swelling of this year's leaves. A cycle of time looping back on itself, temporality was exchanged. I leant back into the security and sustenance of this trusted tree: a relationship that had grown before I'd really needed it.

Weaving the Sides

The fabric of the world was ripped open, the frayed ends apparent in every direction. The disruption of the larger social and political bodies, the continual unravelling of the world as we know it, the obvious brokenness of planetary systems. All those hands. The ripping reverberated within each personal body, each reeling with the implications of the pandemic. I turned instinctively towards this act of making. Weaving the basket became a mode of being in relationship with uncertainty.

From the base, the upsett forms the transitional weave between the base and the sides. You have your weaving materials prepared, the long strands lying ready next to your thigh, but now the weave of the world appears different. The conditions have changed. How will you meet the shifting form you are presented with? How will your strands of possible experiencing meet these newly revealed planetary conditions? The weave is not only in your hands.

In a time where tactility with the world was limited, and where physical contact with human relations was restricted, the act of weaving became my companion: a visceral, sensuous conversation between body and land. Was this an attempt at control during a time of uncertainty, or was I seeking an embodied way to understand the changing world? Basketry has long been associated with the thought process that has shaped human adaptations.[12] Ingold extends the mode and metaphor of weaving towards that of a worldview, one synonymous with that of many indigenous cultures as a way of perceiving and being in relation to the experience of being alive:

> The world of our experience is, indeed, continually and endlessly coming into being around us as we weave. If it has a surface, it is like the surface of the basket: it has no ‘inside’ or ‘outside’. Mind is not above, nor nature below; rather, if we ask where mind is, it is in the weave of the surface itself. And it is within this weave that our projects of making, whatever they may be, are formulated and come into fruition. Only if we are capable of weaving, only then can we make.[13]

[12] Heslop, p. 14-20
[13] Ingold, 2000, p. 348

Working as a mode of self-soothing, it regulated my thought as I moved from left to right, crossing strands from within to without, around and around, utterly, dimensionally engrossed in a physical, holistic relationship with the multiple forces at play, like some ancient art of recuperation.

Haraway takes in hand the living web of carrier bag narratives, passed along between Fisher and Le Guin, and crochets on her own theoretical lifeforms to create a 'Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others,' insisting on the multispecies nature of such an endeavour. 'With a shell and a net, becoming human, becoming humus, becoming terran, has another shape— the side-winding, snaky shape of becoming-with.'[14] Becoming-with broadens the scope of adaptation beyond any singular human quest and casts back us within an earthly contract, whereby each act, be it gathering, weaving, living, or dying becomes a multi-species act of collective, mutual dependency.

The materials exerted their own physical force and demanded complete attention. A dialogue emerged, whereby my own use of force and dexterity had to attune to the strength and flexibility of the materials. Slowly, I found the form and shape for my own body in relation to the materials, modifying my movements accordingly. A willow stake jutted into my face, catching me unaware. Overestimate the angle of the weave and the willow could snap. Occasionally, I'd long to be working alongside a teacher to mirror their body, matching my movements to their own. In the absence of another human, the willow became my teacher, along with the encouragement from those elders whose wisdom could be found on the bookcase.

Reaching for the words of indigenous Potawatami botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her beautiful text, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she explains how the Western tradition of the recognised hierarchy of beings, where humans appear on top, is switched back in Native ways of knowing to where human people are considered the younger siblings of creation. 'We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn— we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance.'[15] I'm conscious that as I'm comforted by

[14] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 119
[15] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), p. 9

Kimmerer's words, I want to ensure that I don't claim these indigenous teachings as my own, nor remove the cultural loss and reclamation of her people's language. Instead, I wonder how these words might enliven my own sense of relations, starting with this plant that is in my hands. Willow offers the same instruction, the same invitation, regardless of epoch or cultural framing.

Held between my open legs, or up against my chest, the willow, in its emerging form as basket, shaped my own physicality and movement. My body attuned to its ways, to its flow. Within Celtic tree lore, the essential energy of the willow is recognised as the power to go forth, into the unknown, with greater confidence and trust in ourselves and our abilities.[16] Imbued with the energy of the water it commonly grows alongside, willow is said by the English herbalist and celebrant, Glennie Kindred, to allow the emotions of our own watery bodies to come to the surface, moving through levels of sadness to facilitate healing.[17] It teaches how to bend in relation to external forces without breaking, with a flow that finds a way towards possibility. Such is its tenacity for life that even when broken, or uprooted, it will continue to grow.

When I accidently snapped the willow, I peeled back the outer layer of thin green bark— its inner membrane moist and satin smooth— and instinctively pressed it against my forehead. Its coolness was soothing, and I remembered that willow bark, containing the active chemical salicin, was the original aspirin, and could be absorbed through the skin. Stacy Alaimo articulates the relationship between body and environment as 'trans-corporeality': a kind of viscous porosity through which nutrients and toxins alike move in a transit which is both exceedingly local, and revelatory of a globalised network of social injustices and environmental degradation.[18] What could willow teach us of transmuting the heavy metals within our bodies, or transforming high levels of pollution?

The tips, each precious burst of life, were gathered up from the floorboards and trimmed at their base to become a handful, then a jarful, submersed in water.

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[16] Glennie Kindred, *The Tree Ogham*, (Nottingham: Glennie Kindred), p. 18-19
[17] Glennie Kindred, p. 18-19
[18] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 15

Budding slowly on the kitchen table between meals, the tiny soft tufts transformed before my eyes. A pattern emerged from beneath their downy hairs. Teardrop scales pushed yellow to the surface, erupting into globules of dusty pollen, clinging from anthers which thrust forward in their yellow stemmed growth, hovering out from the surface in an architecture that demanded the attention of pollinators. Other stalks sprang into leaf, their process unnoticed until unrolling in a muted green. How long until these tips each transformed to leaf? I could sit and watch them unfurl, anchored by their steady transformation. A honeybee flew in through the open window and surveyed the thickly crumbed pollen of this table-top bounty. Weeks later, the bottom of the jar was filled with roots, coiling their barbed threads within the confinement of this glassy space.

There is a shared investment into life no longer being as we knew it. Without yet knowing what will have to be endured, or what will have to be passed through to get from where we are now to what we might become, we are momentarily suspended whilst everything transforms around us. If our plant teachers have guided us as humans, then the even more ancient life forms of viruses and pathogens have their shaping powers too. Acknowledging the historical legacy of pandemics forcing humans to break from the past and imagine the world anew, Arundhati Roy writes: 'This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.'[19]

The basket remained open in its weave, the tall stakes left standing like archways. There was a part of me that wanted the process to remain open-ended. There was no desire to immediately tie off loose ends and for the process to be completed. For as long as the weave remained open, the activity remained continuous, whether I was directly engaged in it or not. I saw the weave while out walking, in the thicket of the blossoming blackthorn, tumbling itself in continuous lines that prevented entry to all except the birds who sang buoyantly from within its protective arms. There it was again along the walkway of the River Kelvin, the force of the current having pushed fallen branches into the net of the flood barrier in an irregular but persistent weave. Even the main shopping

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[19] Arundhati Roy, 'The Pandemic is a Portal' in *Financial Times*, 3 April 2020, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> [accessed 12 April]

street of Glasgow, Sauchiehall Street— the shops still closed— carried willow in its place name, with *saugh* being Scots for willow, and *haugh* a boggy meadow.[20]

The thought of weaving a couple of lines got me out of bed on difficult days. Its open ends held me within a process of transformation as the news unfurled around us. The search for plant materials for the basket continued, heightening my awareness of textures, colour, and growth. Within Queens Park, along a different path, I walked past a thicket of deep russet red that stopped me in my tracks. Dogwood. The name resurfaced from a distant garden memory whilst lying in bed that night, the vividness of its colour reverberating through me.

I returned the next morning with my secateurs, lingering near the bushes until dog walkers had passed by. Once my hands met with the stems, it was apparent that these would curve just as well as the willow, and although much shorter in length, I was selecting for their colour alone. This patch of undergrowth that I'd scarcely ever glanced at became a sensorium of colour when seen through the eyes of the basket. Stems varied from a deep polished mahogany to the bright ruby gloss of a boiled sweet, each tipped with a flash of lime green just emerging into leaf form. Selecting and snipping these shoots enlivened my sense of purpose, bringing them back to the half-woven basket like an offering. I kneeled to weave a bright band around its stakes: a walkway across woven space.

[20] Trees for Life, 'Willow mythology and folk-lore,' available at: <https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/trees-plants-animals/trees/willow/willow-mythology-and-folklore/> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

The Border

When the time was right, there was a pleasure in moving towards completion, weaving the border to close the rim of the basket. First the stakes were folded down, so that they splayed outwards, radiating like the sun. Then, each stake was woven around the next, before being tucked into the rim. An exactness and solidity began to form, until, with the final stake persuaded to slot into position, the basket was complete. The marvel of a basket, Kimmerer notices, is in its transformation, its journey from wholeness as a living plant to fragmented strands and back to wholeness again as a basket. 'A basket knows the dual powers of destruction and creation that shape the world. Strands once separated are rewoven into a new whole.'[21]

The basket was a composite of Queens Park, bound together as its own distinct territory. The close confines of tenement blocks were designed in relationship with this proximity to the park. Streets feed into the various entrance gates, transitioning from paved road to strands of paths. These breathing spaces of urban parks were purposely designed as the green lungs of the industrial city. In 1866, the Glasgow City Improvement Act gave a legal structure to the new imperative to create parks. As cholera swept through Europe, the role of parks and green spaces was formally recognised for the first time, and with the clearance of the slums of the east end, city improvement work became increasingly progressive and was pushed to benefit those most in need.[22] Within fifty years, by the end of the nineteenth century, one thousand acres of park and green space had been created in Glasgow.

Following the creation of Kelvingrove Park in the West End, Queens Park was laid out by landscape architect Joseph Paxton in 1857, before opening in 1862.[23] Urban parks from this period were intentionally designed with an awareness of transitional spaces and Queens Park exemplifies this in design. An avenue of trees is offset by a tangled bank, the formal rose garden set into the dark growth of yew trees. Neuroscientists now recognise the heightened emotional

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[21] Kimmerer, p. 256

[22] Jane Ramola Davenport and others, 'Cholera as a 'Sanitary Test' of British Cities, 1831-1866, *The History of the Family*, 24.2 (2019), pp. 404-438

[23] Glasgow City Council, 'Queens Park Management Plan 2011-2016', available at: <https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=31515&p=0> [accessed 8 March 2023]

response— the pleasurable anticipation— that we receive from such transitions of habitat, stimulating what are known as 'border cells' in our brains.[24] Benefiting from the ingenuity of this eighteenth century design, our repetitious habits of lockdown walks were intensely localised, yet remained somewhat novel in character.

Paths were worn smoother, and new desire lines formed as space was sought out away from popular areas. Cut throughs which once felt sketchy became well used. I began to follow subtle bodily impulses towards a feature, contour or texture as opposed to having a destination in mind. A desire to walk over the tree roots worn smooth with footfall, or up the cobblestone path slippery with morning dew, or to crunch my way over an expanse of spent beech mast before the slope of grass.

In the centre of the park, on top of a steep sided drumlin giving the land its original name is the Camphill encampment. A series of rounded standing stones sit within a lozenge of earthworks. It has been speculated that this hilltop enclosure might date to the Iron Age, although it remains undated.[25] The site is frequented by dog walkers and nightdrinkers for informal fires of varying degrees of success, leaving smashed glass and charred remains. There is an alignment here that radiates out to multiple hill lines beyond, and an archaeological dig found the remains of an ancient road, suggesting a pathway far older than any official urban planning.[26]

At first light, when the night's coolness was still pooled around the bases of the trees, it was common to see someone else standing here, also listening to the dawn chorus. One morning I turned a corner to see a man crouching low in the bushes, looking out towards the view as if with a need to be completely immersed. Our collective need for nature had been starkly revealed but was

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[24] Asher Mullard, 'Neurons on Border Control', *Nature* (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1038/news.2008.1313>

[25] Canmore, 'Glasgow Queens Park Camphill', available at: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/44292/glasgow-queens-park-camphill> [accessed 8 March 2023]

[26] Dr. Kenny Brophy, 'Psychogeography in the Park' in *The Urban Prehistorian*, available at: <https://theurbanprehistorian.wordpress.com/2017/09/15/psychogeography-in-the-park/> [accessed 8 March 2023]

held within the confines of this locality. It was as if the limitations themselves had created the revelation, and the brightness of this connection.

Just as more than one bird could feed from the Scots pine trees at the top of the hill— the tree creepers working their way up the trunk and nuthatches coming down— we adapted to holding space between us. Walking aimlessly, my movement would often be in dialogue with that of another human, slowing pace to allow the other to pass in front. Seeing another person walk among the blossom trees came with an awareness of us breathing the same scent. The traces of another's presence, such as finding twigs pushed into the ground at the foot of the birch tree, displaced any notion of a particular route or spot being mine alone. Empty cans and bottles of buckfast were abandoned among the grasses, strandlines of cultural displacement. Stick bivvies popped up in the undergrowth like mushrooms: the fruits of home schooling and outdoor play. Over-night a sequence of rope swings appeared throughout the park like magic. Throughout the restrictions, the park performed every service we demanded of it. Solace, escape, stimulation. A palimpsest of sanctuary, playground, and social space.

In his introduction to Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, Richard Mabey defines the parish as 'the indefinable territory to which we feel we belong which we have the measure of. Its boundaries are more the limits of our intimate allegiances than lines on a map.'[27] Mabey coined the term 'parochial ecology' to encompass the known relationships encountered within the walking range of a human, taking the Parish bounds— as did Gilbert White's own inimitable naturalist study of Selborne— as the territory. Walking within the bounds of Queens Park each day, I began to wonder whether this term could be adapted to become a non-secular 'parkocial ecology,' in recognition of the intensely felt affinity that individuals and urban neighbourhoods hold with their local parks. Summiting the brow of the hill, a walker catches a glimpse of the church spire below and for a moment is held in a pastoral scene, the picturesque intentionally designed by Paxton.

[27] Richard Mabey, 'Introduction to Gilbert White,' in *The Natural History of Selborne* (1788) ed. by Richard Mabey, (London: Century, 1988)

In her book, *Everybody Needs Beauty: In search for the Nature Cure*, Samantha Walton asks, 'if eighteenth century innovators turned nature into picture, crafting little islands of ideal scenery, what impact did this have on shaping our understanding of nature and how we treat it?'[28] Walton traces the historical understanding of parks as places of natural restoration for humans.[29] As urban parks were invented in relation to ideas of wellness at the time of the industrial revolution, designed as spaces to keep the workers fit and healthy, how would they cope with these new conditions of a proportion of society suddenly furloughed, and the entire population of a neighbourhood largely without gardens made dependent on accessing this vital green space?

Our intensified need became ever more heightened when councils— the gatekeepers of each park— began deciding whether parks would remain open, according to social behaviour and choice of activities. The absence of social groupings was evident too. Those most compromised, whether by physical vulnerability, personal circumstance or cultural disadvantage were absent. An unease lurked behind this vital public space. Who could no longer access these places? While physical exercise was permitted, the act of sitting on the grass, or a bench, was sanctioned without the clarity of specific guidelines. Access to outdoor space— or to any gradient of wildness— became more politicised, more personalised, and more contested than ever. The main paths and central benches had the heaviest of police presence, sometimes on horseback, moving people on from the main artery of the park with the shout of 'You must be exercising. You cannot be sitting'.

Dawn and dusk gave possibility for the most space. Walks at dusk invariably drew me to the bottom westerly point of the park— an area lesser known and somehow magnified in size by being relatively unexplored. This section of the park offered the thickest of thickets, and pre-lockdown was notorious for dogging. Past a stand of blackthorn, edged by hawthorn and white beams, with rowans emerging from the centre, I walked slowly, barely moving forward through the tunnelled paths, watching the last light of the day jut through the tangled silhouettes of bramble briars. Poised on the highest of vertical branches,

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[28] Samantha Walton, *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 159
[29] Walton, p. 169

a blackbird sat and sang. Regular traffic noise of the city environment has caused adaptation from urban blackbirds to sing later into the evening— and breed earlier in the season— than their rural cousins. Evolutionary biologist Menno Schilthuizen argues that it's this very kind of adaptation which illustrates that, as the urban environment expands its reach, it will become more and more an ecosystem in its own right, writing its own evolutionary rules and running at its own evolutionary pace.[30] What the blackbird made of this interruption in the usual levels of traffic noise was impossible to know, but it seemed to scribble its song with total command, and I was in acceptance that normal service might never resume.

As days, then weeks went by, our collective response shifted. What had felt like a delicate and sensitive balance, became bolder and more relaxed, even volatile. When the weather intensified further into long consecutive days of heat, the green spaces began to fill with people, each thirsty for the sun and the allure of lying flat to the earth, or for the comfort of being in closer proximity with human others. The park bulged; the edges began to fray. The helicopter was near constant overhead and on a hot afternoon, the grassy slope down to the church was packed full of people who watched as a police officer gave chase, then slipped, in pursuit of a bare-chested teen.

It was never about the basket itself. What did I even need a basket for? What did I have to gather, or hold? In the city there was no wood to carry, or seaweed to forage, not even an outside washing line to inform a practical usage. 'Even an empty basket contains the smell of the land,' reassured Kimmerer, 'a connection between people and place.'[31]

The final task was to trim the tips of the willow that stuck out from the weave. Each snip of the scissors neatened the form, bringing it ever more into focus. The finished basket had an energy of its own, filling the room with a bright and shifting form as I witnessed it throughout the day. First, the stakes were a circle of people standing, facing each other with their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders: a collective intimacy. Emblematic of the mutual aid networks

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[30] Menno Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution*, (London: Picador, 2018)
[31] Kimmerer, p. 257

which rippled through the neighbourhood. Or was it a partially slatted vessel, upended? A body, a ribcage, hollow without its associated respiratory system of tubing and accompanying lung bags. Empty from its fight for breath.

Later it was a nest that I wanted to crawl within, to wrap my creaturely self around my human self for this duration, shielded from the shifting uncertainties of the wider world. Too big, I lay beside it instead, spooning my body around its form and looking through the weave into an interiority partially obscured. Glimpsed through the corner of my eye, its architectural scale became monumental: a gathering place of significance, situated in the ancient wildwoods of a world still to be woven. Porous and permeable, it promised the leaching of spores and seeds as it settled to take root on the forest floor of my living room. And as it dried, the willow bark wrinkled like the ageing of human hands, craggy and wizened. The stakes strained then loosened like tendons weathering against the passing of time, but still the form held.

Gathering

> [T]he world is now open for play, and yet closed off seductively… and […] in this playground there are mysteries and beings and other presences (and absences) that totally recalibrate the logic of our quests so that the questions to ask about the future, about our lives, about living well, might not even be here yet for the asking.[32]

As the blackthorn offered protection from above, so too did it below. The tiny white flowers of hairy bittercress flashed as I walked past, and, crouching low with an extended arm, I was able to pick handfuls of the tasty leaves, careful to avoid the thorns overhead, but glad of the protection they afforded from dog piss. I began to keep a plastic bag ready in my pocket. There were tree salads to be had: leaves of lime trees and hawthorn momentarily tender as lettuce. My foraging extended to the outer reaches of the thicket, where an entire carpet of newly emerged nettles presented themselves. I picked despite their exposed position, relying instead on a thorough wash in the kitchen sink. Nettle's broad furry leaves and depth of earthy green— even the occasional sting— were welcome in my hands like old friends. Regenerative and non-discerning of park, waste-ground or garden, nettles inspire me on every level: political to poetic. Awareness of their nutritional nourishment propelled my picking. A medicine that could be dried and stored, harvesting nettles felt like worthy preparation for a life-story.

As I picked, I noticed a woman further down the hill also gathering with that tell-tale stoop of attention to the ground. She took her time, low and stationary— a different movement from nettle picking. We were too far apart for me to call over, and really, I'd just wanted to relish the unspoken companionship of being more than one forager. Days later, I saw her again sitting within the grasses, her purple hair bright against the lushness of trees, picking the long leaves of ribwort plantain and folding them into a sandwich bag. We began to speak from a distance, sharing our enthusiasms for the edibility of the season, and for this park. An Australian, her visit to Glasgow to see her son had been unexpectedly extended by lockdown. So, she was using the time to get to know the local herbal and edible plants here; the contrast from those in Oz as

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[32] Bayo Akomalafe, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences: Letters to my Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home,* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2017), p. 120

distinct as if she had landed in the vegetation of a different planet. ‘It’s like paradise this park,’ she enthused. ‘I never knew green could be this green.’ Her fresh-eyed appreciation for foraging nourished my own and expanded the feeling of the park as a common.

The food waste collection stopped. Every time I went to discard vegetable peelings, my movements were hardwired towards the cupboard under the sink. But now, each time, I had to adjust my physical pattern to head over to the other side of the room, to the rubbish bin. Watching fruit waste fall on top of plastic rubbish was a sight I did not wish to become accustomed to. It somehow symbolised everything that disturbed me the most during these times: a total reliance on systems which may not hold. A snowball effect of how the environment and social systems might be further impacted through the ensuing management of such a crisis. My initial discomfort at this action was enough to begin to seek out what alternatives might exist.

There was a community garden, part of Battlefield Community Project, which had a compost pile. It was close enough to merit walking over with the contents of our compost caddy, juicily contained within a bag. The garden stood in a square of green space where an end block of tenement flats had once stood. Now a thriving oasis of raised beds and a willow tunnel, the garden seemed to bounce the radiance of its greenery back onto the sandstone walls and windows of the streets which surrounded it. The compost bay bulged full to overflowing, but I gratefully emptied my own contribution on top. That compost pile recurred in my mind’s eye for a couple of evenings as I lay in my bed feeling physically unused, and I imagined the compost spilling from its bounds. I realised that this was a physical, essential task I could put myself towards. Within a couple of phone-calls it was all arranged. Abbie, the same gardener who had directed me towards the willow, was coordinating the volunteer group, and they were delighted for me to take on the role of Compost Coordinator.

Some days later, garden fork in hand I stood before the overflowing pile. Graham and I had gathered pallets from the mechanics yard, wheeling them down the street on a borrowed wheelbarrow. We stood before the bright blue pallets now, figuring out their best possible configurations— taking time to savour this delicious outdoor activity together. In the flats all around and above, the

morning's activities stirred into life. Neighbours called across to each other. One leaned down from a third-floor window to chat with a couple standing out in the street, distanced from a woman in her garden so their kids could exchange Easter greetings, comparing details of chocolate received so far. An electric lawnmower began to move in the back lawn of a close; a basket of red washing was hung up to dry.

The layers of fruit rot and waste vegetable peelings; screwed up cardboard and tea bags— endless tea bags— these are the sheddings of the domestic experience. The excess, the unusable, the dregs: scooped, peeled, scraped and collected. Here, these intimate edges of daily life, the outer skins of our personal and familial subsistence coagulate into a collective matter. The compost bay would take an even bigger hit through this time of lockdown, especially with the city council collection now ceasing to operate.

First there was the mature compost to sort: a dark crumbling substance transformed from past seasons of household offerings and ancestral plant matter, turned full cycle from waste to nutritious compost. By riddling carefully, spadeful by spadeful, the remnants of plastic matter and twigs were extracted. Teabags, their fabric form no longer biodegradable; compost bags, supposedly biodegradable but not within the timespan of unprocessed organic matter, and a random assortment of things. Some slipped from a hand unintentionally— the ubiquitous vegetable peeler— others included optimistically, or unknowingly, such as baby wipes. These greyed tattered remnants were carefully extracted and mounted up in a bucket like relics of a modern archaeological dig.

Between fingers, sifting clumps carefully through the mesh, the creatures of the compost were revealed, in all their distinct movements and forms. The vigorous wriggle of a tiger worm in the palm of my hand, or the sinuous flick of the escaping centipede. Woodlouse after woodlouse, coyly transforming the spent edges of the pallets. And that was just who could be seen by my human eyes. A teaspoon of soil apparently holds 200 million bacteria and an equally astonishing diversity of life forms, each bringing their own particular action and contribution towards the network of relationships that constitutes towards this coherent

collaborative organism we know simply as, 'soil'.[33] In acknowledging the vitality through symbiosis that soil so vividly enacts, Michael Given advances a theory of the 'Conviviality of Soil.' Etymologically, *conviviality* suggests a 'living together'.[34] As a theoretical approach, Given suggests how it celebrates the 'shifting, emerging, fading, struggling connections and interdependencies that in their unfathomable complexity constitute life.'[35]

Haraway makes the case likewise that 'we are humus, not Homo, not Anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman.'[36] As the most recent pile was being turned over, forkful by forkful tossed into the next bay ready for the following stage of its transformation, it was apparent that the pile was predominantly made up of what composters call, 'greens.' These quick rotting vegetable peelings that provide nitrogen and moisture are an essential component of the alchemy but when acting alone, were prone to making compost wet and slimy. It was 'browns' that were now needed: a mix of cardboard, scrunched up paper or fallen leaves which would rot more slowly, providing fibre and carbon and creating air pockets for the aerobic decomposition of the pile and encouraging mycorrhizal connections.

With my shoulders starting to ache, I took a break and walked down the street to catch some of the late afternoon sun. Amidst the cars parked up on the pavements, a couple of people were stuffing huge sheets of cardboard into the back of their vehicle. With a friendly question to ascertain whether this was waste or treasure for them, I secured the carbon layer for the compost. I tried to contain my excitement as the couple carried the cardboard down the street with me and dropped it next to the compost bay, but it seemed that they too felt pleased with the exchange. Judging by the size of the box, stamped with 'exported from Vietnam', it had packaged a large item of furniture, a sofa or chair. The streets were slipstreams of potential materials with which to generate compost. It was suddenly clear to me: cities could be producing kilos of gorgeous soil. People cannot *make* soil but they can help it grow, if, as Given puts it, we are prepared to join the conviviality as being one contributor

[33] D.C. Fouke, 'Humans and the soil', *Environmental Ethics,* 33, (2011), pp. 147–61
[34] Michael Given, 'Conviviality and the Life of Soil,' *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774317000609, p. 130
[35] Given, p. 131
[36] Haraway, p. 55

amongst billions, and at the timescale of the soil.[37] For now, it was left to the interactions of the bacteria, worms, insects and life forms, who, along with the rain, would be steadily weaving the words imprinted on that layer of post-consumer waste, and all subsequent layers of domestic peelings.

Given points out that the parallels between human community and soil are striking, stressing that growth, politics, community and livelihood are 'co-fabrications' between a host of co-dependents with their own needs and limits, non-humans and humans alike.[38] Like soil, we depend on huge colonies of microbes in our bodies, whose numbers far outstrip the numbers of our own cells, with the ability to extract nutrients from food and to transform oxygen to generate energy: a task that would not be possible otherwise. Far from being bounded individuals, 'we,' like soils and all other living beings, comprise of conglomerate communities, living in symbiosis. We are ecosystems.[39] Like soils, the boundaries between us are semi-permeable, intricately bound within multiple agencies, exchanging energy, thoughts, nutrients and physical support with our equally semi-permeable partners.[40]

Over the following weeks, I joined with this group of community gardeners, making collective plans through WhatsApp threads of shared tasks and plant lists, success stories and photos. My windowsill became a seed propagator and soon my journeys to the garden were accompanied by both compost bag and a trayful of seedlings ready to plant out. As we planted baby lettuces in one of the raised beds, Abbie pointed out the presence of a mighty, hairy-leaved kiwi plant, that had self-seeded from the compost and was spread across the pathway. Graham and I decided to build a frame for it to grow against, a scaffolding to support its wilful growth. It might not ever fruit, but its determination commanded our attention and respect. A feral uprising from the compost, the kiwi was an icon of the garden, coiling her way up the timber frame of the newly built Pergola.

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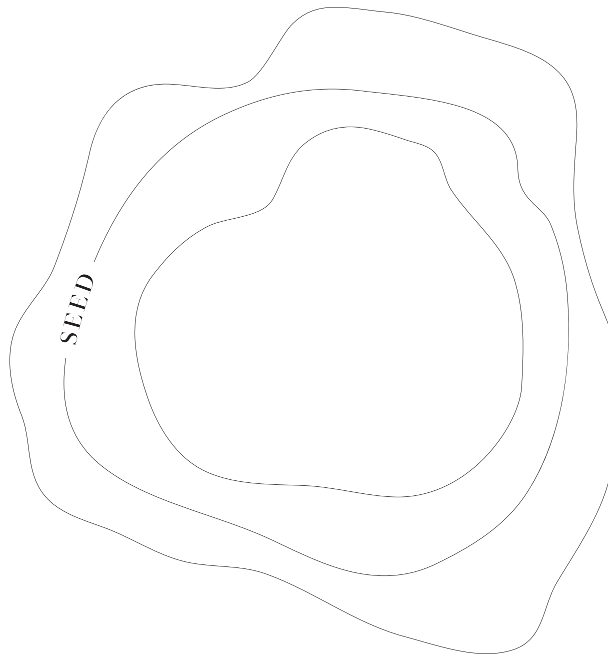
[37] Given, p. 123
[38] Given, p. 131
[39] Fouke, p. 147-161
[40] Given, p. 130

This community garden: beautiful, necessary, and beloved to its neighbourhood was self-sprung and opportunistic, representing the emergent property of the city. As neighbourhoods across cities began to reclaim gap sites and back lanes as community spaces, what arises is not the picturesque design of landscaped parks, but the relational form of multispecies commoning, tended by the proximity of living with. At the edge of the garden, between the brick wall and the whisky-barrel planters, I planted out the off-shoots of willow left over from my basket making, to grow on for the next generation of city weavers.

Each act of restoration reaches towards a possible future. The basket would travel with me, backwards and forwards through time. It would be an artefact of this moment when the systems of our relationship with the planet were brought sharply into question. When health, survival, wellbeing, and mutual dependency were held by each neighbourhood.

SEED: Collective Dispersal



Ways to Arrive

At first sight the bones were barely distinguishable from the weathered wooden slats of the bench. I'd left the shelter of Strathcarron Hotel and made a beeline through the rain towards the small group of trees. This triangular patch of grass marked the middle point of Strathcarron, largely defined by the crossing of railway and road. As I approached the bench, the form revealed itself. It was the skeleton of a bird, half-submerged and seemingly wedged between slats. A sunken hollow of bones, its remaining wing feathers offered an immediate recognition. Crow. Judging by this westerly location, it was presumably a hooded crow, *Corvus cornix*. Just a furry ring of black remained around the beak, left open from its final, exhausted cry.

A bench speaks directly to these in-between moments of not yet arrived. Was it now so unfrequented, so unused, that no-one had passed close enough to hear the uproar of the crow? What a sadness, to die slowly, in the heart of a village. Placing my rucksack beneath a tree, I took a stick and extracted its chest carefully, levering against the breast plate, to lift it from the grip of the bench. Despite the absence of flesh and feathers, the body reclaimed something of its crow-ness: feet, beak, and wings made coherent. I looked for where to lay it, but was faced only with this sliver of grass, and the recycling bins of the hotel carpark. It felt too close to people's houses to leave it here. There was something of this hollow form that made my fingers decide to wrap it in the soft cellular shroud of a compostable bag I had with me. It was not an action of coveting, but a strangely enlivening feeling of being gifted with responsibility, entrusted with the task of where to lay these bones.

Of all people, I was glad it was Róisín who was picking me up from the station. We'd first met on a permaculture training course where we had gotten to know each other through tanning the hide of a road-kill deer. As a zoologist, I knew that she wouldn't bat an eyelid at me bringing this extra passenger along for the ride. By a careful intertwining of plans, we would join with two other friends, Ida and Ama, who were making their own way to meet us. Together we would make a loop around the south-westerly tip of Applecross peninsula, collecting tree seed as we walked and stopping at Airigh Drishaig along the way. At long

last, after many solo trips, and months of not being able to travel at all, this was an opportunity for adventure.

When the van rolled up beside me, I grinned at the sight of Róisín, her hair wild and windblown, hands clutching the steering wheel. Last seen in Glasgow on Victoria Road, mid-lockdown, there was a sense of us meeting now in our preferred habitat. Slinging my rucksack in the back of the van that was filled with our supplies for the two weeks ahead, I jumped in the passenger seat and popped the bagged skeleton on the dashboard next to the collection of drying fungi and threaded string of rowan berries. On a quest of looking for her own wee parcel of land, Róisín was roaming the Highlands, foraging and exploring as she went, accompanied as ever by her huge Gaelic dictionary which lay open on the camp bed in the back of the van. I pointed towards Lochcarron, conscious that I was the guide.

As the crow flies, the journey from this closest rail station to Airigh Drishaig was but fifteen kilometres. Perhaps the crow would swoop along the longer shores of Loch Carron, angling for carrion at the wooded tip of Ardaneaskan, or follow the road to Kishorn, taking leave over the shinty pitch and shoreline of Ardarroch, to skim the deep waters of Loch Kishorn. Keeping steady progress for another seven kilometres, even if stopped to take pause on craggy Kishorn island, needling at fish bones left by an otter, it could still arrive to Airigh Drishaig long before we'd even put our gaiters on. By sea or by air: that is how these fringy sea-lochs are best travelled. Still, I was very thankful for this lift. We would take the route most synonymous with Applecross, the historic mountain pass named Bealach na Bà— the Pass of the Cattle— seventeen-kilometres of single-track road over a 650-metre-high mountain range. The route gave a journey as close to flight as was possible, the road scaling the contours of this glacial landscape, skimming past rock-buttressed edges and elevated corries that cut through the sedimentary strata of this ancient rock. The bones of the land pushed up through the mountain range, jutting like clenched knuckles, or wing metacarpals.

The hill-pass was shrouded in a fine mist, concealing everything but the immediacy of the hairpin bends and the shock of matt grey scree slopes. The full white of waterfalls loomed close then passed unseen beneath tarmac. The road is just a ribbon of asphalt over the hillside. Fragile, and in need of constant

repair, it illustrates the impermanence that any road assumes over a landscape. Tarmacked in 1950, the Bealach in summer months could perhaps be known as the Pass of the Tourist: an experience marked firmly on the Highland bucket-list of places to experience by way of its inclusion on the NC500, a circular route around the Highlands.[1] Our ascent was punctuated by the usual steady stream of hired motor homes and then a sudden run of vintage jaguar cars gliding fast up the steep gradient. Róisín aimed for smooth transition using the passing places as well as possible, cursing the ostentatious display of sports cars beneath her breath. We caught up with each other's news between passing places. The cost of land had skyrocketed over the past year, and there was some weariness in Róisín's long list of places she'd looked so far.

The carpark at the top of the hill was full, despite being momentarily devoid of views out to Skye and beyond. To be able to drive into the clouds, and arrive on a mountaintop, offers a valuable accessibility. Yet is a strangely insular way of experiencing such a dramatic landscape, navigating others on the pass so fleetingly, and yet with the action of each driver determining the safe passage of all. Once we had parked up at Toscaig pier and put on our walking boots, it was a relief to leave the van. We were glad not to pass any other walkers on the first short section of road, partly for the wrapped crow I held before me, and partly for the hugeness of our rucksacks. As it was, nobody noticed as we slipped off the road, leaving our bags before the tangle of rosehips and edging up and into the first grouping of hazel trees we came too. We were anxious to check for nuts. It was for hazelnuts that we had organised this whole adventure around. Between phases of lockdown and the unique turns of the season, I hoped that we had judged it about right.

The small copse of hazels held a resonance of having once been well-tended. The trees grew beside an old, abandoned cottage that still had a smart net curtain across its door, tidy until the last. Presumably it had been inherited by someone who didn't want to live there, but who didn't want to sell it either. Beneath the mottled overhang of multi-stemmed hazels, there was protection from the rain. I unwrapped the crow and placed it gently beside the trunk of the oldest tree. Set against the vivid spread of moss, the pale bones took a renewed

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[1] North Coast 500, available at: <https://www.northcoast500.com/> [accessed 3 May 2023]

distinctness of form, the feathers blacker than before. It was an offering, as much as a life— or death— could be offered by another. Over time the bones would become part of the land, teased apart by a curious fox or turned to soil by the undertakings of invertebrate hustle, slowly entering the tree itself.

We didn't have to search far for confirmation. Between rocks and roots, adorning the moss like beadwork, were the papery yellow wrappings of windfall hazelnuts. Each cluster or coupling assured us that our timings were aligned. Peeping out from bonnet-like bracts, or lying free, the nuts were a dark promise of brown. Perfectly ripe.

Hazel, *Corylus avellana,* first made its move some 11,000 years ago. As the ice retreated, the start of the interglacial period was abrupt. Estimates from ice-core samples in Greenland show that glacial climates were replaced by fully interglacial conditions in less than a century, perhaps even just 5-10 years.[2] Along with birch, hazel was one of the first woody species to establish itself on this newly exposed landmass. Whereas birch seeds, tiny and aerodynamic, took to the air for their colonising of the tundra, distribution patterns revealed by pollen analysis suggest that hazel most likely travelled by sea, with hazelnuts floating on sea currents to arrive to new shores.[3] Pollen records indicate that hazel made its move across the British Isles from south-west Ireland, utilising the currents of the Irish sea to sweep along the western seaboard to arrive in Wales, northern England, and north-east Ireland, reaching up the coastal fringes of west Scotland, and curling around the most northerly strip of coastline.

Imagine the journey experienced: tossed and turned against the churning waves, a single hazelnut, or a familial cluster, bouncing and surfacing, floating, and waiting; biding their time, utterly at the whim and mercy of the sea currents. Washed up into sheltered inlets, hazelnuts reached the shore, pushed into a place of planting by the last lick of a turning tide. This dispersal theory, the most widely accepted hypothesis of their arrival, is backed by analysis which shows that the more exposed shorelines, where flotsam was not as readily

[2] Richard Tipping, 'Woods and People in Prehistory', *People and Woods in Scotland,* ed. by T.C Smout, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 17
[3] Alexandra Coppins, *Atlantic Hazel: Scotland's Special Woodlands,* (Kilmartin, Argyll: Atlantic Hazel Action Group, 2012)

deposited by the currents from the Irish sea, did not receive hazelnuts quite so soon.[4]

With everything that is needed for life safely contained within the testa of their outer shell, seeds are equipped to take such a journey to reach favourable conditions. 'Seeds remind me of spaceships,' remarks Peter Thomas, 'they contain everything they need to colonise new worlds.'[5] Until a hazelnut has safely landed, its internal food supply of fatty oils serves to keep the embryo alive to sustain early growth. For germination to begin, the seedling would meet earth and sunlight first with radicle root, then with plumule shoot, when photosynthesis could take over to create life energy.

Hazel thrived as a pioneer species, optimising the exposed conditions in which there was no competition of canopy. Juniper, dwarf willow and rowan, remnants of the vanishing tundra, had been among the first species to respond to Scotland's warming climate, and had dominated a land covered in grasses, sedges, and mosses. But as shrubby species, they were pushed towards ever higher ground, along with species such as the mountain hare and the ptarmigan. While the warming climate enabled the successful colonisation of birch and hazel, other species unique to the tundra became extinct.[6] The wild horse, arctic fox and collared lemming all disappeared in the early postglacial period; reindeer surviving until the tundra had been completely replaced by woodlands.[7]

Producing nuts within their first ten years of growth, each successive generation of hazel pressed inland, making their own waves over land, aided by the ever-growing accompaniment of mammals and birds who began to thrive within these woodland conditions. Moving west to east, hazel left a steady green band in its wake. In some regions further south, hazel moved more than a hundred miles over the next five hundred years. The geographical spread was less in the Highlands, with progress curtailed by the colder climes and geological characteristics of the central landmass and east coast. In Wester Ross, the first

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[4] Alexandra Coppins, *Atlantic Hazel: Scotland's Special Woodlands,* (Kilmartin, Argyll: Atlantic Hazel Action Group, 2012)

[5] Peter A. Thomas, *Trees: Their Natural History,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 2014), p. 284

[6] Emma Wood, *Climate Change: Peatbogs, Plague and Potatoes*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2009), p. 26

[7] Wood, p. 26

wave of their colonisation encompassed Applecross peninsula from its outer westerly edge to reach inland and stopped just shy of the Bealach.[8]

There wasn't long to collect these first nuts before meeting with the others— just enough time that a small bagful was easily be gathered. These would be carried with us on the first leg of our walk: talismans of our intent. Strapped to the outside of my rucksack, the bag of hazelnuts would travel the bounds of its ancestral territory— a land that, for most parts, is as devoid of hazels and all other trees today as it was before their first ancestral landing some 10,500 years previous.

[8] Coppins, 2012

Toscaig to Airigh Drishaig

We assembled on the footpath just beyond Toscaig: a collective easily identifiable by the sizing of our packs. Four women, four rucksacks. Ama, Ida, Róisín and I. Each with walking pole, sturdy boots, and equipped with personal tent, kit, and food supplies for a week. We were as self-resourced as nuts, ready to make this voyage across land together. With just the most minimal of introductions, our small group began to walk together, constrained as we were by the amount of daylight hours to cover the distance. We did not yet know the shape of the days we were to share, but we'd agreed that for the first couple of nights, we'd camp at Airigh Drishaig, near the cottage. For each of us, it was the first occasion this year walking as a group. We would become community for the next week, with no pre-determined notion of what that might entail. Each person was a dear friend to me, but it was our first-time meeting as a group. Gathering on the path, it felt as though we might have forgotten how to be in a group. There was a sense of reticence in revealing ourselves by way of small talk, or perhaps there was relief in the act of walking.

Soon enough, the path exerted its shaping power, and we walked in a spacious line, each focused on finding footholds across the stone path running up and away from Toscaig. Meeting and merging with water, the path is utilised by a burn in places, the contours of the land conjoining and diverging as the water finds its way back downhill. Made in the early 1900s, the beginning stretch of path is notable for its skilled construction, with long lozenge stones creating drainage points, and the natural features of bedrock extended with laid Torridon sandstone. The path absorbed our attention, as we steadily found our stride. A widening of peripheral vision revealed the flame-throw colours of the hillside. Walking behind the others, I saw how we matched the colour-scape of the land: a deep burgundy knitted jumper on Ama, Róisín's orange jacket, and a yellow rucksack on Ida.

Our first proper pause came at a natural rest stop: a boulder platform looking out over the Inner Sound. Scoured by successive glaciations, the deep rock basin between Skye and the northern mainland was carved by the ice that had covered

the Applecross mountains and was over 250 metres deep in parts.[9] Looking out over the water, you might spot the surfacing of minke whales, or sometimes a submarine. Its depths are utilised by operations from the British Underwater Test and Evaluation Centre (BUTEC), which trials sensors and aural emissions, and tests underwater weapons such as torpedoes used by the British Navy and Ministry of Defence.[10] Framed by the overlapping horizons of islands, with the Cuillens directly ahead, the view over the Inner Sound was immense.

The Crowlin islands sit closest, with a row of formerly occupied houses just discernible to our squinting eyes. It was hard to immediately answer the questions of Ama, who wondered aloud why the community had left. It was only later, on further research, that I could appreciate the details unique to this place-story of clearance. Eilean Mòr, the bigger of the two islands, had supported a small community of people from about 1810 until 1920. They'd been moved from Applecross Estate to make way for sheep farming and had resisted deportation overseas and moved to the islands to subsist by fishing. Eventually assimilating back into the mainland community, they fastidiously transported the roofing beams of their houses back with them— wood by then a precious resource— leaving behind only the stone ruins.[11] Nowadays, the islands were inhabited by a flock of feral sheep.

The Isle of Raasay mirrors the length of Applecross peninsula. Its tabletop hill, Dùn Caan, catches the eye, and in the right light, you can just make out the sedimentary shelves, like giant steps down to the sea, where sits the former township, Hallaig. Sorley MacLean's poem, 'Hallaig' utilises these steps and geological landforms to perform leaps across his homeland, with place names studding the poem with a place identity born from generations worth of belonging. John Murray understands this topo-mnemonic repetition as MacLean 'casting a net of names over the cleared landscape so that a territory can be re-possessed by its former inhabitants.'[12] Largely cleared of people in 1851,

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[9] Wood, p. 18

[10] Ministry of Defence, [Press Release], 'Highlands and Islands play 'key role' in UK defence', (12 Aug 2022) available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/highlands-and-islands-play-key-role-in-uk-defence> [Accessed 8 March 2023]

[11] Alan MacGilivray, 'Crowlin Press', available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20111002111356/http://www.crowlin.co.uk/crowlin.htm> [Accessed 8 March 2023]

[12] John Murray, *Literature of the Gaelic Landscape*, (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2017), p.160

MacLean's evocation of Raasay counters the depths of this devastating loss by holding a vision of its progressive repopulation, whereby the deserted landscape is filled with known and beloved people who transform into the trees of the island. Meg Bateman notes that within the ecologies of the poem, Raasay becomes more abundant than any one historical baseline.[13] Although who could say what was possible for the 170 islanders who lived there at present. Raasay's community-owned renewables project launched this month, with aspirations to build sustainable housing to support repopulation.

We turned from the coastline to walk inland, the footpath skimming close to the distinctive dog-legged turn of river Toscaig where it cut its course through the land, edged by trees. From river to sky, our attention went upwards, pulled by the presence of white-tailed eagles soaring high above the headland. Two of them, flirting with the contours below, circling in the uplift of air currents that arose from this last section of trees before moorland. After tracing the outline of their primaries and the unmistakable hook of their beak, we caught each other's eyes, reassuring ourselves that yes, we could take faith in identifying those broad, broad wings. We couldn't help but feel a welcome from their presence. Somebody half remembered that, in contrast to the shy nature of golden eagles, white-tailed eagles sometimes seek out human presence and activity in a landscape. Hunted to extinction in Britain in the 1800s, this pair have descended from the successful re-introduction project which saw the release of young from Norwegian nests on the Isle of Rum between 1975 and 1984 and later in Wester Ross between 1993 and 1998.[14]

In the forty-five years since the first birds were released, sea eagles have re-colonised most of Western Scotland and the population is faring well, to the point that this year, chicks from double broods were selected to be translocated to the Isle of Wight, for the reintroduction programme that has been initiated there.[15] As apex predators they hold this territory seamlessly, swerving the

[13] Meg Bateman, 'Skye and Raasay as Symbol', in Farquar, A. (ed), *The Storr: Unfolding Landscape*, (Glasgow: NVA, 2005), p. 95

[14] The Scottish Ornithologists' Club, 'White tailed eagle- a successful conservation story', available at: <https://www.the-soc.org.uk/get-involved/blog/white-tailed-eagle-a-successful-conservation-story> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

[15] Roy Dennis, 'White tailed eagle update summer 2022', *Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation*, available at: <https://www.roydennis.org/2022/07/14/white-tailed-eagle-update-summer-2022/> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

shoreline and cutting the hills, their presence affirming their ancestral grounds and assuring continuity, despite the break in lineage. We did not know it yet, but these two eagles would be present for each day of walking, their presence above becoming more familiar with each sighting. The coloured coverings of our rucksacks would move slowly across their land like coloured pins on a map. For the next week, we would be held under the heart of their range. Movements across land or sky witnessed in mutual curiosity of each other.

At the half-way point, opposite the near symmetry of Lochan an t-Sagairt, *Loch of the Priest*, we paused and put down our bags to stretch out our backs and snack. Suddenly desperate to relieve myself, I scampered back along the path, and up high into the bracken above. I dug with a dried heather root, reaching down into the thick peat and bracken roots to open a hole in the earth. My hands teased apart strands of a thick layering of burgundy sphagnum moss— so wet that I hoped it would be tick free. It was a relief to squat, safe in the knowledge that the odds were low for anyone to be in near proximity. I took my time and was struck by the sensuality of outdoor excretion. The wetness of the mosses, the burying, and the heeling back in. The careful invisibility of my actions.

The narrative of 'dirty campers' had proliferated during the heightened frenzy of tourists this summer, revealing the extent of our cultural estrangement towards responsible outdoor practice of this most basic of needs. Yet, it was possible that human excrement could be safely disposed of, and even— when away from sensitive areas such as water courses and mountain plateaus— could, over time, be beneficial to the land. As an afterthought, I took a hazelnut from my pocket, and poked it into the peat nearby. It was unlikely that the timing of nutrient breakdown would coincide with the germination, let alone for this heathland to then support the flourishing of a single tree, but it felt significant to imagine that there might be a chance. Each seed represents a chance.

A trail of rowan berries periodically punctuated the footpath, their acidic red distinct from the muted surroundings. Notable for their distance away from any tree they had been regurgitated in partially digested form. Inevitably, the path we took was utilised by a succession of animals, whose historical passage likely informed the route the footpath was to take: plotted by the navigational preferences and landscape wisdom of collectives of grazing herbivores and

utilised by predators and prey alike. 'Each path starts as a desire line', notes David Farrier.[16] The route of the footpath was later utilised for the installation of telegraph poles for electricity cables to run from Kishorn to Toscaig.

The deer population fetch their dues still for this historical groundwork. It was apparent how the dark dense timbers of the telegraph poles had been commandeered as rubbing posts, worn away into pale thinness by shoulder flanks and lowered antlers. The surrounding areas were worn in open expanses of peat slurry. In the long absence of woodland in this landscape, the telegraph poles have become proxy for mature trees, providing rubbing posts and perches for the small row of stonechats who surveyed our progress across a particularly boggy patch of ground. My thoughts coalesced around these lines of deer trods, path and pylons, appreciating how their intertwining facilitated our own journey.

The piles of rowan berries continued periodically, always in the centre of the footpath, always in the same stage of decomposition, suggesting a continuous journey made by the same creature, the eater of the berries. A seemingly ritualised placement, the creature favoured the footpath to traverse this landscape, perhaps marking a territorial display of its usage. The final pile was found as the path descended, just metres away from a rowan tree— the first on this side of the peninsula— whose berries had begun to drop to the ground in inviting clusters. Seemingly, we had walked a journey in reverse, walking head-on into the recent presence of what we suspected to be the pine marten, a beading of seeds left strung across its range.

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In 2014, artist and poet Alec Finlay was invited to devise an art project for the inauguration of the John Muir Way, a 215km coast-to-coast footpath that runs between Helensburgh and Dunbar— Muir's place of birth. Inspired by the initial impetus of walking, seeds and poetry, Finlay devised an intervention called 'Seeding the John Muir Way.'[17] Carrying with them dried tree seeds, the

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[16] David Farrier, 'Desire Paths,' *Emergence Magazine*, (May 2020), available at: <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/desire-paths/> [Accessed 8 March 2023]
[17] Alec Finlay, *Seeding the John Muir Way*, with Hannah Devereux, Morven Gregor, Gerry Loose, and Andrew Schelling (Edinburgh: n.p., 2014)

expedition followed the path and planted seeds along the route. Their collection included Scottish native species from local provenance, and more controversially, several species native to North America, sourced from arboretums. These non-natives, Finlay justified, were included by way of recognition in how our landscapes were irrevocably changed by the prodigious amounts of species brought back to Scotland by human collections, most notably by the introductions of David Douglas, whose name is attributable to the twinning of modern woodlands with the Pacific northwest.

As they walked the way, writing poems and documenting the experience, the poets planted the seeds alongside the path. Finlay writes of this intentional act of seed dispersal as a kind of spelling: a poem in the making, that 'spells out' the possibilities for reforestation, both in the sense of linguistic endeavour and a broader, more mystical kind of summoning. The seeds have agency of their own. Some will sprout and flourish, others will be eaten, but this, as Finlay tells it, does not detract from the intention of the poem itself, which remains full within the imagination of the planters.

> The planting will really happen, though the trees may not. Is that a problem to the poem? Only if you look to read it out-of-doors, mile-by-mile, specimen-by-specimen. The poem is complete in the imagination, the seeds are a test of earth and what it will bear. What fails to grow is not at fault, and, whatever happens, the world will be a good few leaves taller.[18]

There is something entirely fitting that this poetic act, quietly reinstating the human as a seed carrier and agency within a landscape, was carried out on the John Muir Way. Perhaps the action, intentionally or not on behalf of Finlay and the collective, speaks to the more recent, necessary questions about the legacy of John Muir. Honoured as the forefather of the North American conservation movement that founded the National Parks, his celebrated writings of first arriving to California, reveal an ecological perspective blindsided by an ignorance of indigenous practices. In Kat M. Anderson's study of indigenous Californian land management techniques, *Tending the Wild,* understandings of 'resource' are interrogated, and with them the myth of pristine virgin lands is

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[18] Alec Finlay, 'Seeding the John Muir Way', *Alec Finlay Blog*, available at: <https://alecfinlayblog.blogspot.com/2014/02/seeding-john-muir-way.html> [Accessed 16 Jan 2023]

unpicked.[19] Integral to the biodiversity Muir witnessed was the living dynamism of a sacred subsistence relationship between people and place, which often included the intentional reseeding of areas commonly foraged.

Anderson contends that the human forager becomes 'an active agent of environmental change' within a landscape.[20] While seed dispersal might seem the reverse action of a forager who collects to fulfil their need, most usually for sustenance, they are closely related, and often coupled in action. Whether through conscious intent such as the indigenous method of planting seeds in places they may come back to harvest from; or as simply as eating wild fruit along a trail, and spitting out the pips, seeds travel with us. Our mammalian presence within a landscape often performs the role of seed dispersal.

The seed itself is inter-relational: requiring the dynamic between plant and a specific partner, be it wind, bird, mammal, or poet. The specific digestive juices of pine marten or bird serves to stratifies the rowan; the ritual dispersal and burying undertaken by red squirrels' safeguards and expands the range of the next generation of hazel trees. On reflection of their walk, Finlay writes: 'It was this project, perhaps more than any other, that made me realise even now in the 21st century the extraordinary fecundity of the planet and how closely our globe, from outside, itself resembles a seed.'[21]

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We had just enough light to cross the footbridge at the burn and navigate down towards the treeline through the gloaming. Back-set by last light falling onto Loch Kishorn, the fish farm was illuminated, directly adjacent to the land. This woodland has a thickness not seen elsewhere on the land. I led the way through gorse bushes, apologising for the roughness under foot as I showed our tired group toward the flattish piece of ground that I'd found the year before. This was to be our campsite. For the first few days, we had the relative luxury of using the cottage as our base. It was a novelty to cook for four people. I'd gradually been squirreling away packets of dried food and spices with each visit,

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[19] M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*, (California: University of California Press, 2005)
[20] Anderson, p. 2
[21] Finlay, ibid.

building up provisions for this event. I'd long been dreaming of sharing this place with friends.

As I cooked, the others gathered sprigs of dry gorse, fallen birch twigs, and dragged oak logs from the barn, coaxing the fire into life in the pit, and reassembling the driftwood benches around it. We sat together with our bowls, spooning mouthfuls of cardamom spiced dahl and rice, watching the blue dusk creep across land, sea, and sky. To the west, the Isle of Rum caught the last of the light. From this angle, its peaks take the form of wings, raised for flight like a giant eagle. Slowly the easterly rise of the full moon lifted above the hills, shining above the loch. The Harvest Moon. The clouds surrounding her shifted formation as we watched, each transition casting an amorphous suggestion of character.

When a group comes together for the first time, there comes an unvoiced question: how much to tell or entrust? When the group experience is to end again so soon, when transience is the commonality, how do we hold an experience of togetherness, how do we attend to that urge to belong? Jaded, uncertain or keen, we can never arrive in equal nature. We can never reveal it all. These days together would only ever be partial— a fragment of community. We would step away and each go our own way once this was done. And yet for this handful of days, we were a tribe.

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As birch and hazel set about clothing the land from coastline inwards, the first human settlers— hunter-gatherers— followed their very same route. Approximately two millennia after the hazel pioneers had established amongst the birch, human settlers left traces of their arrival first on the shores of Rum, and then up and down the west coast of Scotland. Tipping goes so far as to suggest that perhaps people followed hazel.[22] Whilst the exact vessel for their seafaring voyages remains inconclusive, one likelihood is the lightweight coracle. A simple vessel made of hide stretched around a frame of wooden poles— hazel being the obvious choice— these easily perishable frames left no archaeological

[22] Tipping, p. 27

trace, although their design has been utilised ever since. Whatever the exact form of vessel, it is thought that these seafaring first settlers followed the same route and chose the same shores to make landing on, a decision informed both by sea currents and by the leafy abundance that hazel had laid before. As Smout emphasises, 'people and trees were colonists together: we have a long association.'[23]

Together, the skills of seafaring and of living within woodland would have formed through successful generations of intimate association with their surroundings, creating the wider bodies of knowledge that came to define the identity, and survival of Mesolithic communities. Archaeologist Graeme Warren articulates that paying attention to the sea and woodland in particular, skilled ways were a key aspect towards senses of self.

> Bodies of knowledge of this kind were not blindly inherited, as part of an individual's birthright, but were inculcated through practice: skills were both taught and learned and the process of passing on skills formed a key texture of social life.[24]

The early settlers, whose movements matched the availability of edible species including limpets, mackerel, and hazels, were shaped by both scarcity and abundance. It would be tempting to romanticise Mesolithic freedom, but to do so, warns environmental historian Emma Wood, is to forget the constant and extreme uncertainty which dominated nomadic life. Wood describes how climatic disasters could fatally remove food sources through threats of famine and storm, and the transient nature of sheltering in the mobile camps would be shaped by constant awareness of the external dangers including lynx, bear, auroch and wolf, alongside old age, illness and injury.[25] 'Scotland's First Settlers' project of Edinburgh University undertook a five-year mission to unearth signs of an extended Mesolithic community in the Inner Hebrides, excavating several sites dotted along the Applecross peninsula, including the rock-shelter at Airigh Drishaig.[26] Their excavations revealed the nomadic nature of these hunter-gatherers, who lived along coasts, on islands and inland, staying in skin shelters

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[23] Chris Smout, *People and Woods in Scotland: A History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 1
[24] Graeme Warren, *Mesolithic Lives in Scotland,* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), p. 90
[25] Wood, p. 33
[26] Karen Hardy, Caroline Wickham-Jones, *Scotland's First Settlers* [data-set] (2007) York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor], https://doi.org/10.5284/1000285

or caves and following the seasonal movements of animals and fish they hunted, and the availability of plants. The favoured points of these early settlers are identifiable by archaeological excavation of the middens they left behind.

Middens represent the outcome of enormous activity. Revealing far more than just diet, middens are an assemblage of associations in place: hunting, fishing, clothing, fires, and treatment of the dead each evidenced. Protected by the calcium carbonate content created by the limpet shells the middens are predominantly filled with, excavations have revealed elk bones, fish bones and red deer, all radiocarbon-dated to around 9000 bp (before present).[27] The charcoaled remains of hazelnut shells are often found too, including in the rock shelter site that was excavated by the project at Sands, a beach north of Applecross. Archaeologists there also found ochre and a species of dog-whelk from which a purple dye could be made, suggesting that hunter-gatherers had time and energy beyond basic survival. Middens reveal how for hunter-gatherers, their patterns and rhythms were influenced by tide, and consequently were shaped by the moon more than the sun- governed routines of the later agricultural turn.[28] Low tide revealed shellfish and seaweed available for gathering; moonlit nights enabled the continuation of foraging or hunting at times of abundance.

Hazel was undoubtedly an important foodstuff, providing fat, protein, and essential oils, storing well and, in a mast year, falling in huge quantities. The evidence from an excavated shallow pit at Staosnaig, Colonsay, estimates it to have been a storehouse for 300,000 nuts.[29] A diagram produced from the Colonsay archaeological dig shows a four-metre diameter pit crammed with the residue of roasted hazel nutshells: a method which prolonged storage capacity into the winter months when fresh resources were scarce.[30]

Harvested rapidly within the same season, this colossal undertaking has been interpreted in a variety of ways: from the notion that such a hoard must have

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[27] Wood, p. 33
[28] Tony Pollard, 'Time and Tide: Coastal Environments, Cosmology and Ritual Practice in Early Prehistoric Scotland', in T. Pollard and A. Morrison (eds) *The Early Prehistory of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 165-182
[29] Warren, p. 69
[30] Tipping, p. 25

been intended for trade of processed nuts, to the hypothesis that a hoard of such a size suggests a distinctive overexploitation of a resource, associated with a decline of hazel on the island.[31] Whatever the interpretation— whether for trade or for feast, revealing mismanagement or a wider strategy of harvesting from surrounding islands— this historic hazelnut hoard would have been the result of relational teamwork and the interplay of individual effort. A kilo of hazelnuts cleaned free of bracts and foliage, would be around 1,200 nuts, making the Colonsay hoard weigh around 250kg, the equivalent of about twenty of our rucksacks.

[31] Warren, p. 69

Carried

We decided in advance that we would each be responsible for cooking two meals for the group and carry the ingredients. Ida had a bagful of dried borlotti beans, patterned in purple and pink. As she soaked them, she told us how they'd been saved from seed passed from generation to generation in her family and had crossed the Mediterranean from Italy to be grown in a community garden beside her canal boat in London. Cooked in a long slow boil with a herbful tending of flavours, at the end of our first full day together, the beans were spooned onto our waiting plates and topped with a rich reduction of tomato sauce. 'Just like in the village', she told us. She carried the easy warmth of southern Italy within her gestures, intermingled with her soft Birmingham accent.

Ida got us moving each morning, teaching us balancing games to play beneath the oak trees. Stretching backwards on one leg or extending our peripheral vision— our 'Owl Eyes'— her passion for natural movement and games for nature connection was infectious. She greeted by name each living being that we encountered: 'hello Oak Tree, hello Tick!' Perhaps it was a way of committing to the present for beyond the containment of this week, on return to London, her life would change, leaving behind the garden she had created there to venture into the unknown. She carried a medicine bag filled with brown dropper bottles, each with a hand-drawn label depicting the tincture it held. Propolis, birch polypore, buckthorn, and elderberry: each medicine told of a wild ally she'd met and harvested, time tested and trusted. For a walk of such duration, and already endowed with a rucksack of considerable size for her physical frame, each bottle was a commitment to wellbeing.

Róisín carried with her a tiny coffee press, bright orange on the flame of her gas cooker, and would share small ceremonies of caffeine with anyone who so desired. Zapatista was the coffee of choice: the passing of strength from one warrioress culture to another. Around the fire, Gaelic songs were offered on the condition they would not be dissected, Róisín countering firmly when any repetition of a line was requested. She carried a longing that sometimes translated as dissatisfaction, perhaps for us to be more indigenous than we were, or for a time when wisdom and language remained commonly rooted in the land. She carried potatoes. Deep purple and the darkest blue, they'd been

grown in her Mama's Ayrshire garden, and although heavy, they were the bounty of the season. Baked in the fire and sprinkled with rock salt, they set the seed for a conversation of how tatties could be grown here at Airigh Drishaig and stored over winter to feed the tree-planting actions we might hold in future years.

Ama carried with her two books, and yet her pack seemed lighter than any other. She always offered to carry more when we packed our supplies for the next leg of the journey. She read to us one evening from her Rachel Cusk novel, her intonation steady yet sensual. Her gait was seemingly effortless across the terrain, with a grace that lifted as the day progressed, as if temporal immersion elevated her capacity for wonder. There was a buoyancy even within strife: a river crossing performed without boots was interrupted by a sock escaping downstream, yet this only led to laughter, and to a delight in walking back to camp barefooted across heather roots and soft peat. Ama held an open-eyed readiness that was easily encouraged or dismayed by the response of others. A receptivity of meeting the world anew. She described an encounter with a giant slug, telling us over breakfast of how fearful it had seemed, one antenna poking above ground and testing the air as if for the possibility of friendship.

Ama held the skills for focusing: a form of meditation in which the attention is given to the sensations which arise through the experience of the body. She shared the practice with us one rainy afternoon, leading us verbally into a sense of grounding before we took turns to articulate the sensations which arose within us. Through the practice, we experienced how the emerging sensation could be met without seeking to change it: a radical expansiveness which permitted us to be here, just as we are.

I carried the ingredients for breakfast. Jumbo rolled oats, tahini, dates, and apples. I carried a sense of responsibility for the group, seeing the land as if through their eyes and continually assessing whether it was enough; whether I was enough; if the group were bonding, if we were safe. I carried the first aid kit, with two sets of tick removers, tea tree oil and the risk assessment sheet. I was conscious that if anyone so much as sprained an ankle, we'd likely need assistance from Mountain Rescue. I was chief tick remover— spotting a tiny one that had embedded itself between Ida's eyelashes— and feeling responsible for

the incessant surge of ticks. Waves of ticks rose up our trouser legs and we swept ourselves down fastidiously and removed all outer clothes before entering our tents.

We took our time to meet the land, and each other. I was reluctant to be the guide— of the land, or our experience—wanting instead for the group to meet in our own way. We were spontaneous, then hesitant, suggesting shared activities and following individual curiosities. Each of us were different each day. One of us arrived in full menstrual flow; forewarning the others of this tender load and need for spaciousness. Passing through us in waves of energy, depletion, and vulnerability, our moodscapes transformed continuously, overlapping in strandlines of effort, renewed energy, or edginess. 'It would be better— more informative— to ask where we are in our menstrual cycle, as opposed to where we come from,' Róisín observed. Out walking on the land, we found a lichen growing against exposed rock that looked like womb lining: ruby red with swollen curls of fleshy membrane. My interior pulsed with recognition.

Ida's basket, made of soft rushes and strips of willow bark, was the first. She led the way in the making and then shared the technique, the craft seeming like child's play, our hands instinctively wanting to copy and play the game too. Over the course of a particularly dreich afternoon, sat inside around a pile of freshly cut rushes, the tiny baskets grew from our hands. Small and compact, with the exactness of a wren's nest, one featured a handle, twisted, and plaited from rushes, while another incorporated a thick band of gorse bark to embellish its rim. One was especially wide in form, an ample, sturdy container, remade twice along the way to completion. Widely curved at the base, then narrowing at the top, the fourth was poetically pear-shaped. It seemed a holder of great depths, a source of soulful expression.

The material form of the baskets seemed to give rise to questions that gathered beneath the surface of our group experience. How do we create a container for our experience, both individually and collectively? How do we hold our own story, in relation to others? How does our own sense of identity come to relate to the indigenous knowledge and place-identity of these lands? How do we create a sense of belonging at all?

For many geographical theorists, place is a central role within the process of identity, whereby the mix of nature, meaning and social relations that constitute us are made possible only by the activities of place. ‘The inter-threading of place and self can thus oscillate from having places make us more aware of ourselves and our distinctiveness, to making us less aware, to the point where place and self are fused and conflated.’[32] Awareness of this oscillation can make belonging itself seem like a mythical place, that if we keep searching for, we might eventually find. Dreamwork practitioner and writer, Toko-pa Turner asks a different question. ‘[W]hat if belonging isn't a place at all, but a set skill: a set of competencies that we, in modern life, have lost or forgotten?’[33]

Shaped by fragmentation, and from the experience of being from and going back to elsewhere, there was a transience within our togetherness. Yet, there was relief in the experience. A half-memory of having reason, and necessity, to come together. Long after the group's departure, the baskets sat together on the living room table, in a community of their own making.

[32] R.D Sack, *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 131-136
[33] Toko-pa Turner, *Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home*, (Salt Spring Island BC: Her Own Room Press, 2017), p. 19

Ravine

We set out together from the cottage, crossing at the footbridge and then heading up the higher edge of the land. Traversing across tussocks and up boulders to reach the top ridge, we found the path that skirted the inside of the deer fence. I'd wanted to take the group to the most biodiverse fragment on the land: a ravine over on the far west of the deer enclosure. With the first mention of the idea, the others were immediately affirmative. The intention to seek out a refugia of biodiversity felt revivifying.

A partial failure of form, the deer fence has been continuously breached in specific points and had been due to be mended before being postponed by the pandemic. Each deer path within the enclosure demonstrates the deer's successful transgression of the human made boundary, so often accomplished by these most determined creatures of the land. This path is more distinctive than others, a collaboration of intent between deer and the occasional human walkers who walk the route west from Airigh Drishaig. It scores a line along the inside of the deer fence in a manner almost ritualistic: a walking of the bounds, or an affirmation of the designated area. We followed the route, grateful for their footwork and designated sight line that leads across the boggy moorland terrain.

It is a curious thing, the near total absence of hazel on this land today. While the oak woodland has remained in fragments, thick within the area closest to the cottage, and patchy along the coastal stretch, hazel has all but disappeared. When Airigh Drishaig township was repurposed as a sheep farm in 1836, any regeneration of woodland or formerly coppiced stools of hazel were presumably suppressed to the point of vanishing, subject to the preferential browsing of sheep, and then to the increasing numbers of red deer. By 1875, there were no groupings of trees marked west of Airigh Drishaig before Uags other than the ravine which still protects a remnant woodland to this day.[34]

We took pause at the top of the ravine, sitting in loose formation to pass dried fruit and nuts between us. Róisín offered up words of Gaelic in the landscape for

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[34] Ross-shire & Cromartyshire (Mainland) map, publication date 1880, *National Library Scotland*. Available from: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74428442> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

the rest of us to try. As we sat overlooking the distant hills, we learned *gorm,* blue, and *liath,* grey; their sounding accompanied by recognition of mountain ranges which carried these colours in their names, like sudden epiphanies of place. In anticipation of collecting tree seed, or foraging edible plants, Róisín taught us how to ask, 'may I harvest you?' *Am faod mi do bhuain?* We tried the words, not knowing what might be encountered, but feeling the necessity of asking permission and approaching in a respectful way. Our journey was down through the ravine, following the green sliver of canopy, enticing us to follow its unfolding flow downstream.

When each person was ready, they stood and stepped away one by one. Spacing each departure by a handful of minutes, we embarked on a solo descent, collectively held in a shared movement downstream, but in a journey of our own making. From the moment of departing from the group, each individual entered the spell of their own experience, unseen by the others to be witnessed only by the more-than-human world.

> Near the top of the magic gorge, I paused for a long while, crouched like I might be ready to spring, or like I was hiding, crouched small and full of rushing excitement at this world. I was next to a big old Birch, whose trunk would have told me more stories if I could have heard them. We were also in the company of Rowans, and water, sparkling with the love of the sun, flowed below. And I was falling in love, delighted in the spiralling connection of beauty and wonder, my skin this bark, my eyes this green, my breath steady soaking it in.[35]

As soon as I began, stepping beyond the sightline of trees to catch the first glimpse of the water below, I remembered just how precarious parts of the ravine were. A sudden overwhelming sense of responsibility flooded my body: had I adequately forewarned the others? I was used to being out here alone, making continuous assessments for my own abilities and movement, yet this was a shared endeavour which would now go unseen until we met again on the beach below. All I could do was take faith in knowing something of the abilities and temperaments of each person, knowing that each had experience of similar terrains, most with far greater experience of climbing than my own. With the first scree-slope dropping down below, I found myself willing the ravine to

[35] Amabel Crowe, reproduced with permission from the author.

reveal paths to each one of us, offering safety to the others within each tiny, considered step of their descent.

The ravine is the most biodiverse, bio-abundant woodland in the wider area. It hums with vitality: a green seam deeply impressed between the hillsides. A secret seam that affords protection from deer. Trees grow horizontally outwards from the steep sides, leaning over the tumbling water which falls in a succession of pools, each wide enough to momentarily consider how your human form might meet it, and be immersed. The hazels seem to be considering this too, their roots emerging over bed rock, to meet deliberately with the spray and swirling waters. Surrounded by a layering of vegetative textures, multitudes of moss grow thick against lichened bark, set against the constant course of flowing water.

With a hyperoceanic climate, the north-western reaches of Scotland are subject to the frequent rainfall and warmish summers that result in such mossy woodlands, classified as temperate rainforest or Atlantic woodland. Dispersed across the reach of the Atlantic, remnants of temperate rainforest remain nestled into seven tiny, distinct coastal pockets, as various as New Zealand, South Japan, the Himalayan foothills, and the Appalachian mountains. Within Europe, where temperate rainforest would once have been widespread along the Atlantic coastline, Scotland represents the last stronghold of this rare habitat, whose remnants have remained since the last Ice Age. More recently, this internationally rare habitat has come to be evocatively— and for some controversially— referred to as Scotland's Rainforest.[36]

With no such security that the word 'stronghold' suggests, its existence in Scotland hangs by a thread, often in just such an inaccessible place as this steep ravine, where it is protected from red deer. Indeed, it is exactly the diversity of topography that we grapple with in this descent, which gives rise to the diversity of species that defines this habitat. Within the interplay of steep sided rock face, curved hollows and the horizontal juts of tree growth, micro-climates of

[36] Woodland Trust, 'State of Scotland's Rainforest Report', (May 2019), available at: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/2019/05/state-of-scotlands-rainforest/> [accessed 16 Jan 2023]

damp and cool, light, and dry, overlap and intermingle to create a patchwork of possibilities. Set against the substrate of native trees and boulders, the distinctive characteristics, and patterns of life in temperate rainforest emerge in the micro: an intimate world of liverworts, lichens, mosses, and ferns.

Following the water downstream, with attention placed in the physical process of safe movement, the mind is free to layer impressions and gather flashes of recognition: the double rowed embroidery of liverwort snaking around the camouflaged bark of rowan; the conspicuous jellified outreach of bright green lungwort. Crouching, a hand skims across leaf mulch to retrieve a scattering of hazelnuts from beside a pool, flesh reflected by the moving water.

These living textures resonate both with familiarity and something of the shock of having been so recently estranged, then re-immersed in such diversity. When you pause, nose to green, to count seven different varieties of moss growth layered around the girth of an oak tree or look back behind to see the branches of that same oak stretching upwards to reach the light, a pattern recognition is stimulated: that ancient kinship of fractal forms.

How do each of us relate as we move down the flow of water, pausing beside a tree trunk or to lay a hand over a smooth river rock? What thoughts move through us as we come into the presence of these bryophytes and ferns, tiny heart glossed violets and hazels in wide green reach. How is it to walk, through this microcosm of abundance? Each footstep must be carefully exacted, nothing taken for granted with our own physical presence, but a constant tending and calculation of just how much weight to place, and where.

In Lucy Jones' compilation of research towards why our minds need the wild, *Losing Eden*, she shares the scientific hypothesis that higher levels of multi-sensory stimulation in nature might trigger molecular cascades which activate neurons— the nerve cells in the body— and neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to adapt, shape and adjust.[37] As we encounter and navigate mild stressors in the environment, our nervous systems are triggered, releasing different molecules into the bloodstream. This chemical change has been theorised both as the

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[37] Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden: Why our Minds need the Wild*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), pp. 84-85

'inoculation stress hypothesis', whereby the stimulation of an environment is thought to inoculate against further stresses, and the 'arousal theory', whereby the presence of complexity, novelty and uncertainty activates excitement or pleasure in the brain. Following the water downstream, our own bloodstream transforms alongside it; navigating the topography, our neurological responses come to be stimulated, responding to same diversity of terrain that enables the biodiversity of life forms.

I paused beside a filmy fern growing beside a pool, noticing a desire to take root, even momentarily, within this journey of water through rock. This habitat can only host human presence momentarily. A peek of a coloured jacket through the trees reassured me that the next person was just ahead. We moved as a collective, each with the space to find our own footholds in our own rhythm, with the gaps growing and stretching between us as we entered the distinct temporality of our own experience. We were almost as a rope: each person a knot which supported the positioning of the others— within earshot if a call for help was needed. Each knot distinct but connected.

As we emerged from the ravine, a horizontal rowan tree gave an irresistible invitation to hang from its trunk. The burn, flowing almost flat now, cuts through a plateau of bracken where woodland would once have stood, before meeting the shoreline and disappearing beneath shingle in its final secretive flooding to the sea. Arriving one by one, we pooled back together on the beach. A group once more, we began an instinctive unpacking of lunch ingredients. A couple of us were barefoot, Ama had already swum.

There was a hushed thoughtfulness in our lunch preparation. Words came slowly. No description of what we had experienced was necessary. It was remarked that the act of coming down solo had felt safer, with nobody rushed or propelled to follow the same footholds that walking after a 'leader' might have encouraged. Instead, each person took the route that their bodies suggested. Or rather, that the physical dialogue with the ravine suggested.

Ida shared that although she'd felt challenged and alone at the start, she felt supported by the ravine, and experienced it almost speaking gently to her of how to approach and walk down: 'Step over here, put your foot on this stone.

There. Hold on to this bough, and move under, then around,' as if giving guidance on how to know it, how to be with it. Listening to Ida speak, looking from her face back up towards the green seam we had emerged from, my perception shifted between them.

First the ravine was the figure— central to the picture—and the social context of our group was peripheral background, and then the reverse— the four humans on the shoreline as the central figures, the ravine as peripheral. Described in terms of such a gestalt figure-ground shift, environmental identity and the social are constantly encroaching on, enveloping, and redefining the other.[38] How do we relate to each other now after experiencing such abundance and diversity, walking back to the camp across moor grass and bare hillside? As we walked away from that seam of temperate rainforest, what would we remember of those textures of life force, or the movement of water? How would that movement inform our relating with each other? That same energetic impulsion that the plant-life thrives on has now been experienced by our nervous systems: our attention enlivened; our thoughts stimulated. A refugia to the species who remain there, the ravine's biodiversity is currently restricted to the physical topographical confines, a thread of terrain with a vitality and an intelligence distinct from other ecologies surrounding it.

Rebecca Tamás writes that when we think of the loss of ecosystems, or environments, we most often think of the *practical* human cost, or at best we consider this alongside the loss of the environment or creatures, their suffering and destruction.[39] Alongside these crucial considerations, Tamás forwards the notion of the consideration of *mind,* that our capacity for thought is intrinsically connected to the specific, diverse, radical difference of each ecosystem. That in fact the health of our own wider eco-mental system, as Gregory Bateson terms it, is dependent on the agency and indifference of the nonhuman. Studies have found that areas of high biodiversity also contain more linguistic and cultural diversity.[40] Tamás proposes, that 'with the death of different spaces, different

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[38] Susan Clayton & Susan Opotow (eds.), *Identity and the Natural Environment*, (London: The MIT Press, 2003), p.11
[39] Rebecca Tamás, *Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman*, (London: Makina Books, 2020)
[40] L. J. Gorenflo, Suzanne Romaine, 'Linguistic diversity and conservation opportunities at UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Africa', *Conservation Biology*, (2021), DOI: 10.1111/cobi.13693

environments, different histories and different bodily forms of moving through them, forms of thought die too.'[41]

[41] Rebecca Tamás, p. 40

Airigh Drishaig to Uags

The day was bright, and our optimism and excitement were palpable as we set out on the next leg of the footpath, loaded with our rucksacks once again, this time striding beyond the ravine to climb out of the enclosure. The eagles were above and in conflict with a crow, their flight paths circling and diverting from the noisy protestations. We tried to discern the exact nature of the drama, but their wingspans drifted eastward, exchanging direction with our own.

On the stile, we paused for a moment, to imagine what the enclosed area might look like in twenty-five years, then fifty years. Would the regeneration of this woodland— as part of a mosaic of habitats— be such that red squirrel could find their way back to the site? With translocations having successfully taken place in Shieldaig in the north of the peninsula, the Trees for Life project officer responsible for their return had advised that the best chance of red squirrels returning to Airigh Drishaig would be through habitat expansion and the creation of wildlife corridors.[42] The route that we would walk today, from the woodland at Airigh Drishaig, to Uags, was one such possible corridor.

Out of the enclosure, we continued the barely perceptible footpath: a route new for each of us, and which although marked on some maps, is mostly advised against for all but experienced walkers equipped with map and compass. The terrain necessitates careful steps. Reading the plant life to avoid stepping into the 'bog roulette', as Ida called it, we aimed towards drier land, marked by bog myrtle and deer tracks, instead of rushes and sphagnum which could quickly submerge our boots. Reading the vegetation afforded safer footsteps, but our route was also backed up by a smartphone land-ranger app: the pinpoint hovering over the map confirming with unnerving accuracy that the merest suggestion of a path before us was indeed, the way, or that we were just metres away from it.

The details of domesticity travelled with us. The pot was strapped to the side of my rucksack and made a quiet muttering song as we walked, as if speculating on

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[42] Personal Communication by email with Becky Priestly (Trees for Life Project Officer)

future meals. It was curious to observe what happens as domesticity is transposed into a walking adventure. We found points of containment within the landscape: a viewpoint with a boulder-table and a patch of warmth for our lunch. Walking becomes the journey, the destination, the activity, the end point, and the process.

As we walked, my mind turned to contemplate how seasonal movements could once again inform part of our cultural belonging. The season of collecting tree seed shapes us in one way, the season of tree planting in another. Connective practices begin to create relational interactions between people and place. Was it feasible that this footpath could become a wildlife corridor, re-planted, or re-seeded by the presence and participation of human walkers? Could encouraging human walkers to this land aid biodiversity?

The cultural loss, and the ecological loss are evident within each traverse across the landscape, despite it also being so strikingly beautiful. Have we come to internalise this double-edge as part of our environmental identity? So much has been lost in this landscape, so much impoverishment has taken place within our ancestry: species vanished because of anthropogenic activities. And yet the largest historical loss of woodland, approximately 3000 years ago, came about because of climatic change.[43] Tree cover began to retreat, with no indication of human involvement. Peat samples reveal a story of how the climate became increasingly wetter, washing away mineral soils which supported woodland, and setting the stage for the slow, incremental spread of peat. The land became saturated, resulting in a large-scale drowning of woodland.

What impact does this have on our psyche, to remember the far vaster timescale of woodland sweeping across the land, and then retreating, before our human influence began? Could we reimagine ourselves as being part of a much bigger mind, an unfolding ecosystem, wherein we are invited to play specific roles? Is this the power held within the urge to restore Scotland's Rainforest? To fill the ecological niche of partnering with the hazel, moving their seed across the land until the other creatures had a chance to return. With a hand on a hazel tree in

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[43] Harry Godwin & Joy Deacon, 'Flandrian History of Oak in the British Isles, in *The British Oak: its History and Natural History*, ed. by M.G Morris & F.H. Perring, (Berkshire: E.W Cassey, 1974), p.60

the ravine, there was a sense of the trees surging, wilfully returning. The bigger story of a species, of a land, of which we are but a tiny part. Seeds in a pocket. The seed gatherers on the land. A tiny temporary part of multiple ecologies. Deeply dependent: intra-dependent. Our actions would inform their future, and our shared earthly conditions.

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There was a vitality and exuberance in our step, and in the air, as we arrived to Uags. The gable ends of the cluster of cottages remained standing, and I had a feeling of coming to visit the neighbours. Once thriving communities, these coastal settlements along the south fringes of the peninsula would have been reliant on the connectivity afforded by the sea. Wherever there was boat access, passage across water would have been favoured over the arduous crossing of land. But for visiting friends in the next settlement along, the route we had just made linked these communities together. This was the counterbalance to the term, Scottish Rainforest— the fact that so many of the places with remnants of this habitat were once inhabited, and that the woodland ecologies, far from being untouched, were complex collaborations between human and nature.

One, two, three rowan trees emerged from the drystone walls. The grass was well grazed, and there was a suggestion on the surrounding land of where a garden and a kale yard, might have once been. And there was Uags bothy. Standing firm with a modern metal roof, this was the remaining functional building of the settlement. Mountain Bothy Association owned, it had been restored and reimagined for an itinerant contemporary community of occasional walkers. Rucksacks dumped outside; we made a dash for the beach.

The barnacles were squeaking, the sun liquid on the water. Mountains, stillness. We stripped: piles of clothes left on the rocks and arms wrapped around bodies, walking tentatively, soles across shells. I nudged into the water, until I could convince myself to lunge forward, beyond the submerged kelp and into the saline depths. The surface was a-shimmer as I swam towards Ama, whose wet head bobbed before a backdrop of the Cuillens.

We cooked outside, chopping herbs and vegetables and seaweed, balancing the pot filled with quinoa on the stove. Full of deep nourishment, the allure of an early night came with dusk. With the tents prepped in a row across the clipped grass beside the bothy, I ducked into the woods. Washing my moon cup into the mossy hollow of an oak tree, the blood seemed black in the torchlight. Would a hedgehog find this offering? Or would it slowly seep with the rain towards the drip line of the tree. Our route is marked by these micro-sites of nutrients: a map of our humanimal presence for other species who would read the intimate testimonies of our bodies on their territory.

That night we realised whose grounds we had camped on. The stags bellowed with gnarly, chewy grimaces of testosterone-filled protestation. While we lay flat in our sleeping bags, two or perhaps three stags surrounded the tents and bellowed from either side. Just the thinnest fabric separated us as they roved across the grass, seemingly navigating the forms of our tents with ease. Listening to their calls long into the night, I wondered if these stags had scraped the ground to brandish plant matter and branches within their antler tips, to make themselves appear larger. Eventually, I felt confident enough that they weren't going to tangle themselves with the guy ropes and dozed off exhausted.

The next morning, before we set off again, I peeped into the living room of the bothy. A red deer stag skull, antlers outstretched, hung above the fireplace, the hearth of which was infilled with sand, marked by the boot-print of whoever had pressed it into place. With roughly hewn planks for kitchen shelves, an armchair and bookcase, the room had the spartan feel of having comfortably hosted many a walker over the years of its existence. The bookcase was prepped with examples from the canon of North American nature writing: *The Adventures of John Muir* and William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground*. I sat on the wooden bench and thumbed through Cronon's, 'The Trouble with Wilderness,' opening on a passage in which Cronon describes the onset of wilderness tourism following the Civil War.

> Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them, wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer.[44]

I was struck by the suggestion that the human role in the landscape was limited to that of producer or consumer. This is the dualism which Cronon suggests is created by the binary division made between wilderness and civilisation, and arguably is systemic, arising from the oppressive forms of neocapitalism, rather than from human nature. The suggestion that urban folk were unconnected to the land seemed particularly ludicrous given my present companions, each formidable in their knowledge of growing, foraging, and wildcrafting. If ever there was a group who defied distinction between consumer and producer, it was the seed gatherers.

[44] William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature' in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 69-90

Uags to Toscaig

A song hummed between us as we started walking again, one of us ducking off the path to investigate the potential windfall from each clustering of trees we passed along the way. The Atlantic oaks surrounding Uags grow in great variation of form, wind sculpted and resilient. However, hardly any acorns could be found, just an occasional one or two. Last year had been a mast year for acorns— our bags would have easily filled— but this year, on this part of the peninsula, there were none. The use of local seed is an important part of ecological restoration, as they are thought to be better adapted to local habitats. Understanding and predicting the masting patterns of different species and their subsequent years of rest, and the geographical areas of each collective response, would require intricate pattern recognition. To those who depend on the seed, the implications of a rest year or a mast year, greatly impact the populations of small mammals the following year, with a subsequent ripple effect on larger mammals, and apex predators.

Beyond the deer enclosure, there were no further trees visible from the path. On a flat plain halfway, stones were piled into domes. Marked as shielings on the map, it was as if the stones were waiting, inviting their next construction.

Taking turns to lead, instead of having a designated guide or singular authority, we shared the leadership like geese, 'stepping forward, falling back, labouring, resting'.[45] In turns we could offer knowledge, caution, wisdom, or encouragement to another, pooling our noticings together. At times we were a chorus. Refrains and harmonies of the same song passed through the group, meeting intermittently. At other times we were more distant from each other, and that too was accepted. Together, apart. A human chorus, seemingly so distinct in our moods and knowledge, but surely seen as a unified group by the

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[45] Karine Polwart, *Wind Resistance*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780571347421.00000002

other beings who witnessed us. As we approached Toscaig, a stag stood high on a rocky outcrop, bellowing, making use of the natural acoustics of the land.

There was no human settlement near the beach we stayed at that night. A strip of birch trees was our shelter, their low-lying boughs offering a dry side to a wetly rushed glen. There was a feeling that human shelter had rarely, if ever, been taken here. Between hummocks of boulder and moss, there was barely enough flat ground for a body to lie flat. This shelter could only ever be temporary. We excavated a huge stone by hand, asking permission to rock it to the surface, the mossy ground opening and the tent laid out and pegged in its place for the night. Ida spread a tarp between the diagonal growth of wind-blown birches, lying on it to test for flatness of ground. We cooked on a driftwood fire, and sat against smooth rocks of the shoreline. Dusk fell against the striations of seaweed, washed up into long lines that stretched and disappeared into darkness. We ate by firelight, munching into charred corn-on-the-cob, as the waves crashed behind us, creeping ever closer. Brightly intense, the flames were our focus against the black inky night, gathering us closer to dry out our socks before bed.

We packed up in the morning, returning the stone back into its hole, and left the wild edge to its own company. We were pushed back to the road by the wind, reminding us that our human presence was never entitled to settle.

Càrnach

As we walked the asphalt road towards Shore Street there was a sense of heading back towards civilisation. The single-track road was a highway in comparison to those partial footpaths and now there were cars, and a steady flow of tourist and local traffic to navigate. Just behind the terraced cottages of Shore Street and Applecross Inn, up the hill, through the campsite, and past the restored Hebridean barns, is the fourteen-acre woodland of Càrnach: one of the richest regional habitats for lichens and mosses and the largest hazelwood of the region. Even the lane was festooned with the presence of vigorous, multi-stemmed hazel trees, each mottled with new growth.

We ducked under the trees to approach a glade and spread out our tarp. Estate maps dating back to the early nineteenth century indicate that this may have once been managed as woodland pasture for grazing cattle, with the hazel supplying fuelwood and raw materials to local townships through selective coppicing. Red deer are currently excluded from the woods, shut out by a new fence which was erected when the woods were in danger from being over grazed. Just two years later, the tree stools have regenerated, becoming tufty with new growth. As we sat eating our lunch, there was a steady trickle of people testifying to its longstanding community usage: dog walkers and families passing through; a young boy holding a basket for collecting nuts.

Without communicating a plan, one by one we finished our food and slipped into the trees. The ground was a mossed sea of boulders, concealing the geology, cloaking the feature which gives the woods their name, Càrnach, translating from Gaelic to a rocky or stony place, or a location abounding in cairns. Overlying an archaeological landscape of field enclosures and clearance piles, the woodland history suggests a sequencing movement between stone, and the succession of trees and people.

I began to search, bending low across the leaf litter and was immediately reassured. Searching was not necessary. Hazelnuts lay thickly across the ground. Abundance lands somewhere deep within the body, within the psyche. There is an immediate sense of being heartened towards the task that has begun. Of

being aligned: in the right place at the right time. To meet these tiny clusters, linked together in pairs, or joined in a collective, is simply a matter of receiving. Fingers gather, hands empty into the bag.

From tree to tree, a nutter does not need to linger for longer than their attention holds, for their footsteps have led on to the next tree before they've even noticed moving. Stooping low to collect, a tree stops me mid-motion, with its spread of lungworts and dripping lichens demanding full frontal appreciation, full recognition that this is temperate rainforest. Whatever the beginnings and subsequent degrees of disturbance, the relationships here are verdant and biodiverse, and include the human community.

We passed each other occasionally, one tipping a full bag into the bigger bag of another. I called Ida over to meet a tree, a giantess of a birch, who swirled with a helter-skelter form down her trunk, the rim of which was seemingly shaped so that a fairy or perhaps an elfin child, could slide all the way from crown to root.

The bags filled and our footsteps wandered over hilltops and glades, still more and more hazel trees opening before us. As if waking from a trance, I headed back towards the tarp, aware of checking the time. I had no idea from which way I had come. Each direction had avenues of hazel abundance. Eventually, I found the helter-skelter tree and made it back to the tarp, to empty my bag and catch my bearings. Later, we sat together again as a group, processing our mountain of gathered hazelnuts. The others shared their experiences of similar disorientation. Each of us had entered a dwam of sorts, a kind of euphoric trail of abundance wherein the hazelnuts were our only line of sight, leading us ever deeper into the woods, emerging back at the tarp with relief and with an incredible thirst.

Our hands cracked nuts, rock against rock, in the red glow of a head torch. One person stirred a panful of bubbling, oozing risotto with a stick, while another sifted and sorted the hazels, removing their bracts until the bagful was close to the brim. My hands, filming the scene, recorded the rhythms of these unspoken procedures. Clunky at first, the technique of nut cracking steadily evolved, learning to judge just the right angle and force that was needed. A nut was

positioned with fingers onto the rock beside the fire: a sacrifice laid waiting to meet the blow from above.

Once shelled, the nuts were small and pale. Unsheathed, they were just a dot of fat and protein. A life-giving, life-sustaining drop of inspiration and nourishment. Revered within Celtic treelore as the tree of wisdom, the Gaelic word *chno,* or *cno* means hazelnut, while *cnocach* means wise.[46] Dry roasted and sprinkled on top of the mushroom and seaweed risotto, they found their way into our bodies. Eaten in the dark, the fire flavour intensified the steaming mixture spooned into our mouths. Through the nuts, we imbibed the life force of the woods that surrounded us.

The near ubiquitous sound of the rutting deer was side-lined that night, excluded as they were from the woods. Instead, the sound of tawny owls took centre stage. At first, it was a tentative reaching between two individuals, experimental in form for a long time before reaching their signature call. We humans sat silently between them, clutching our bowls in stillness. The soundscape unfurled over our heads in the darkness. I held my breath between each refrain, until the response came once again, their sound touching a distinct place inside a listening body. The owls filled the woods with their presence suggested by their Gaelic namesake: *Cailleach oidhche,* Old Woman of the Night. They spoke of us, surely, discussing the wood smoke and our occupation in the woods. Were we being assessed for our taking, for our caretaking? Did we pass the test that humans must be continuously assessed for, of not being a threat to the forest?

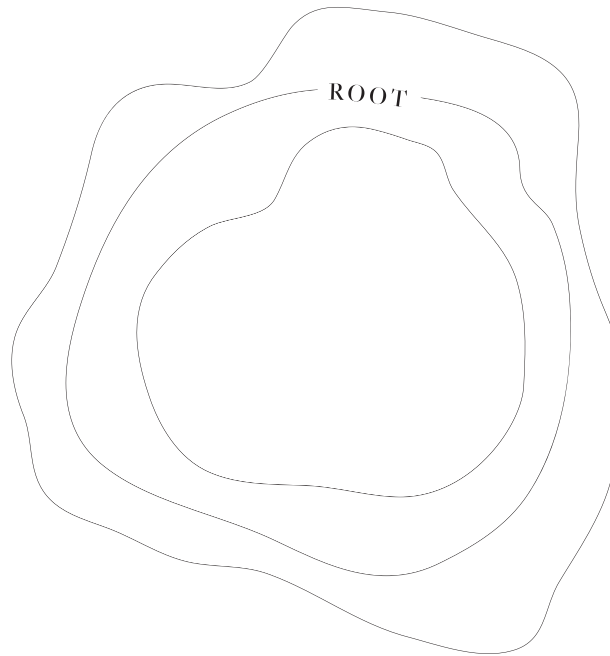
The following morning, we packed for the last time, and stood around the covered ashes of our final fire together. Meeting each other's eyes, we recognised the journey we had shared. We'd moved across the bare bones of the land, taking shelter in the tiniest fragments of woodland before meeting with this abundance. The path we'd walked was a connective corridor for humans and animals of the past, present, and future. Perhaps it had also been a connective route for us walkers, attuning to the presence of the distinct habitats and communities of this land, and meeting ourselves within it, newly changed from

[46] Hugh Fife, *The Lore of Highland Trees*, (Gartocharn: Famedram Publishers, 1978), p. 77

the conditions of lockdown. Now each of us held a short length of hazel wood. A bag of hazelnuts was passed around, and we each delved in to take ‘one for growing, and a handful for sustenance’, repeating the phrase in spontaneous affirmation.

I would deliver the huge bag of hazelnuts to the primary school, where they’d be left to stratify in a mix of sand and compost until next year. And with that, this small band of seed gatherers dispersed, each returning to the responsibilities of our individual lives, carrying within us the embodied stories of scarcity and abundance, separation and belonging.

ROOT: Becoming Woodland



Dàir na Coille

I'd been watching the weather closely since winter solstice. The north winds came first. Cold and dry, the pressure travelled from Siberia in a movement that slowed to a suspension of breath. Stillness. Ten consecutive days of frozen ground, the air held a quality that almost squeaked with clarity. The bright stillness was so welcome, so distinctly 'other' from what a Highland winter usually brings, I felt almost ungrateful for my preoccupation of whether the west wind would make an appearance.

Easterlies interrupted the stillness, ripping down Loch Kishorn in a succession of breakers. Then came the snow which joined the white of the hilltops into coherence with the rest of the land, cloaking the contours right down to sea level. The hillside behind the cottage iced over and the waterfall puckered at the edges until only the most determined water could run over the persuasion of ice pools.

Ice outlasted the snow, resilient in sheets over boulder faces, opaquely encasing the mineralled matter. Slowly, dark tadpoles of liquid began to move beneath ice, seemingly shy, then bold in their bid for release, knowing the weather was turning in their favour.

The return of the prevailing south-westerly brought the snowmelt, the hilltops releasing with an immediacy that swelled the waterfall six times over. The wind changed direction each time that I checked the forecast, but the following day, the direction of the waves confirmed without doubt. A west wind had arrived.

I set off from the cottage, taking a deer path high across the land to watch the woodland from afar. Mild but exuberant, the wind pushed in unpredictable moments, forcing me to pause across the tussocks of deer grass which were beset with motion, blown like the pelt of a beast. A strong wind claims the woods as its own, cautioning creatures away from the loose limbs of veteran trees. It scoured across the woodland as I watched, skimming the stiff crowns of the tallest oaks, and whipping through strandlines of purple birch.

A woodland is an archive of all the encounters it has ever known, from wind to humans and animals alike. Patterns of presence and absence can be read from its edges, just as the shaping powers of long extinct animals might be observed within the profile of a tree. Observing this fragment of woodland surrounded on each side by moor grass, I was struck by the impression that the trees have been herded into this enclosure once utilised to grow crops and manage the grazing of the cows. An inversion has occurred. The trees are now benefitting from agricultural practices of the past, the soil fertility enriched by seaweed and manure, and these trees stand as the tallest and fullest along the coastline. Should this be considered as restoration—the trees reclaiming habitat from human land management— or as abandonment— the area of pasture now lost from productive means?

The place name of Airigh Drishaig, translating from Gaelic to *Thorny Shieling*, tells something of the dynamics between woodland ecology and the human stories of the land.[1] It suggests an entanglement that complicates any easy distinction between wild and domestic, human settlement and woodland. The spellings, translations and pronunciations of the place name slip and snag within each iteration, spelt variously across maps and records as English-speaking officials struggled with the particularities of Gaelic. *Driseag*, is a 'wee thorny plant', most often connected with *Dria*: the bramble. *Driseach*, forms the adjectival 'thorny'. *Airigh* gives direct denotation of the place having once been a shieling— a seasonal practice of cattle grazing— which then evolved into a more permanent settlement, whose daily tasks and activities remain etched within the ecologies of the land.[2]

At the edges of the woodland, where peaty ground has been worn away, gaps in the stonewall reveal the points of entry for the deer and now for me. Each of us are making the same daily rounds of inspection, seeking out any tree seedlings that have established. Tiny oaks, hollies and rowans emerge but then vanish— preferentially browsed by the deer. Periodically, I dig up a few seedlings and transplant them to a nursery bed in the garden. With its inner ring of an additional fence, the garden is the only place fully protected. But the woodland

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[1] William John Watson, *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty,* (Inverness: The Northern Counties, 1904), p. 216
[2] Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World,* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), p. 174

has tactics of its own. Furzed with gorse and bramble, the stone wall has become a nominal boundary from which the treeline seeks to transgress. Among disparate pockets of gorse that punctuate the moor grass, the occasional birch tree or rowan peeps over the top, revealing their success at having utilised the natural protection of the gorse as a nursery. The thorny edges of this land have long enabled the proliferation and succession of these trees and offer the best chance for regeneration. 'The thorn is the mother of the oak', so goes the ancient proverb that speaks to the natural processes and interrelations of woodland succession.[3]

The thorny scrub that encircles the cottage is rich habitat for biodiversity, the mass of gorse needles thickly embroidered by the quick dashes of songbirds, and underlaid with the intricate pathways of mammalian societies. A hawthorn sapling growing near the cottage reveals a strategy of resilience, co-shaped by the attention of grazing deer. From the ground level upwards, a thorny skirt completely conceals the internal trunk, growing in such density of spikes that it is impenetrable to grazing mouths. High above this thicket, with the advantage of a good couple of metres of vertical safety, a single elegant stem now emerges, finally able to become a vertical tree. This hawthorn demonstrates both what is possible and the extent of current grazing conditions which make growth impossible for other, thornless trees. I often stand to face her in awe: this thorny maiden who has created the conditions for her own flourishing, and the future flourishing of others, despite, or rather in relation to, the prevailing deer population.

After a year in which many conservation activities were suspended, the planned repair of the deer fence was still on hold and there was a feeling of treading water. Due to the pandemic, the deer cull had been suspended across Scotland, and numbers had exploded in an unsustainable surge to an estimated population of one million.[4] As well as collecting tree seed, I've been monitoring tree regeneration and the grazing habits and deer numbers to report back to the trustees of Applecross Trust, but it was nothing they didn't already know. It was

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[3] Ancient woodland proverb from New Forest, as referenced and utilised by Franz Vera, *Grazing Ecology and Forest History,* (Cambridge: CABI Publishing, 2000), p. 141

[4] John Muir Trust, 'Deer Management FAQ', available at: <https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/resources/943-deer-management-faq-july-2021> [accessed 2 May 2023]

apparent that although the increased scrub provided the means for species such as birch to recolonise and spread through grassland and heath, the regeneration of oak, holly, rowan and hazel was continuously suppressed by the population of red deer. Perhaps I'd reached my capacity for monitoring within the Age of the Broken Deer Fence. I wanted to feel the latency of this woodland which given the right conditions, would make a resurgence of its own accord.

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The first reference to *Dàir Na Coille* appears in the *Old Statistical Account* for Kirkmichael Parish in Banffshire, 1791, written by the Reverend John Grant who translates it as 'the night of the fecundation of the trees.'[5] It later appears in Armstrong's mid-Perthshire dictionary of 1825. I came across these references through the work of Gaelic scholar Michael Newton, who translates the term as 'the impregnation of the forest'.[6] Detailed as occurring on the last night of the year, when it was thought 'that a wind from the west would plant new life-forces into the trees and forests',[7] *Dàir na Coille* hints at a folkloric understanding, and possible custom, concerning ecological renewal.

Newton traces a connection between this Gaelic tradition, and the universal symbolism of the primeval forest as the ultimate source of life, through which the life-force that returns to each individual tree of the forest is renewed within the eternally self-regenerative Tree of Life.[8] Recognising the unusual nature of the notion of 'the fertility of the forest,' Newton points to similar tree connections that were bound with the turning of the year and its association with *Coille*; forest.[9] Recorded within Duncan Campbell's proverb collection, the expression '*Fàs is gnàths is toradh*', 'Growth and custom and fertility'[10] was apparently spoken on New Year's morning, when the head of a household

[5] Michael Newton, *The Tree in Scottish Gaelic Literature and Tradition,* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1998), p. 170
[6] Newton, 2000, p. 178
[7] Ibid, p. 178
[8] Newton, 1998, p. 171
[9] Ibid, p. 171
[10] Rev. Duncan Campbell, *The Campbell Collection of Gaelic Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings*, ed. by Donald Meek, (Inverness: Gaelic Society of Inverness, 1978), no. 462

brought in a twig of a tree which had life, belonged to the land as a native growth, and bared fruit in its season.'[11]

Elsewhere, *Dàir na Coille* is enigmatically translated as 'The Rutting of the Wood,' which reverberates with a visceral quality at odds with scientific arboreal terminology.[12] Here, the forest becomes imbued with a hormonally charged, antler clashing agency that disrupts any easy categorisation of organism or ecosystem. Another translation, 'The Imbuement of the Forest'[13] offers poetry, and a sense of the colour and life-force returning to a winter washed landscape but is perhaps more ambiguous than the Gaelic perhaps intended. The word, *Dàir*, is given to mean rutting, or heat, suggesting an animalistic action of breeding, commonly used for cattle.[14] A Gaelic speaking friend— a scholar of onomastics— put it more bluntly when I asked for a translation: 'that would be the fucking of the forest.'[15]

It was both disarming and alluring to comprehend a custom that encapsulated ecological renewal, ancestral veneration, and the sex lives of trees. I felt compelled towards marking it in some way, or at least being outside when the west winds blew. As this custom pre-dated the Gregorian calendar, the practice would likely have fallen between winter solstice and the subsequent waxing crescent moon, in the incubative darkness of deep winter. Within this window of time between cycles of the sun and the moon, and patterns of changing wind, I hoped that this sudden appearance of the west wind could be taken as an adequate indication. A mark of intention. Although how one might go about marking it, remained as mysterious as the name itself.

Occasionally, if we listen carefully enough, we might hear the stories of renewal that the earth has always told. Over winter, the point of difference between life and death can seem barely perceptible. At this darkest point of the year, it can be an act of faith to perceive the continuation of the living world. What does Dàir na Coille reveal about a world view in which the earth and elements are

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[11] Newton, 2000, p. 193

[12] Robert Archibald Armstrong, *A Gaelic Dictionary*, (n.p: London, 1825)

[13] Brian Walsh, 'Dàir na Coille: New Souls Coming in the Darkness', *Hearth Magazine* (2005), available at: <https://songofamergin.wordpress.com/> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

[14] Dougal Buchanan, *Gaelic English Dictionary*, (New Lanark: Lomond Books, 1998)

[15] Personal email correspondence with Gemma Smith.

imbued with animate qualities, with ancestral and ecological forces intertwined? Whilst rewilding is often understood as the most contemporary take on restoration science, processes of ecological renewal have long been understood within folklore, with appreciation of our absolute reliance on these life-sustaining relationships with the more-than-human world.

Recorded within accounts made by churches, references to Dàir na Coille give tantalising evidence to its existence but offer no further details to flesh out the custom itself. This singular fragile thread of reference links to a much larger body of traditional ecological knowledge, wherein the interdependency between woodland and human community has long been understood as a foundation of mutual wellbeing. The cyclical nature of death and renewal, and the attribution of the wind with the transformational powers to restore life, reveals a kinship with the living world that our ancestors knew well: that within ecological renewal is carried our own survival.

The period of winter stratification for tree seed is essential for their chances of germination. Was Dàir na Coille a reference to this process, and to the possibility of the wind spreading the seed further afield? While the autumn mast of acorns and hazelnuts are dependent on mammal and bird dispersal, and by winter are long since eaten or tucked into caches beneath ground, the seeds of Scots pine are wind dispersed and are released from the cones over the winter period. Their wing shaped propellers are carried by the wind and travel around 175 metres from the parent tree.[16] With a propensity to regenerate and thrive in poorer soils, Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris var. scotica*, is an early successional species and is one of the most widely distributed conifers across the world. In Scotland, it was the main species of the once extensive wildwood, named by the Romans as the Great Wood of Caledon, which was thought to have once grown in near contiguous cover across the Highlands, but was since much depleted, leaving only fragments of Caledonian pine forest behind.

Dating from the same period that Dàir na Coille was first recorded, another cultural source attributes the west wind with the same restorative, metaphysical

[16] Trees for Life, <https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/habitats-and-ecology/ecology/seed-dispersal/> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

qualities of renewal. 'Ode to the West Wind', a poem written by Percy B. Shelley in 1819, is considered a prime example of the poet's passionate language and symbolic imagery. The ode invokes the spirit of the West Wind as both an agent within woodland ecology, 'Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed/ The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low/ Each like a corpse within its grave, until/ Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow,' and the force of creative vitality, 'Drive my dead thoughts over the universe/ Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!'[17] With a rhyme scheme that emulates the processes of dormancy and renewal, the poem enacts a seeding process of its own.[18] Invoking the forces of the wind on a subject-to-subject basis, the element is appealed to directly by Shelley for the purposes of imaginative and cultural revolution, rendering the animacy of the earth as a shaping power for both poetry and society.[19]

Faced with the onset of the industrial revolution, Shelley and his contemporaries wrote with keen awareness of the effects of the Enclosures, the ensuing loss of folkloric customs and practices, and the mechanised demands of Progress. Yet perhaps it is also possible to read within 'Ode to the West Wind,' the influence of a seismic climate-related event. In 1815, Mount Tambura exploded into the greatest volcanic eruption in recorded history, spreading a plume of dust around the globe and causing several years of climate disruption. Crops failed around the world, and in many parts of the world, 1816 came to be known as the 'Year without a Summer.'[20]

In his work to trace the presence and absence of the climate imagination throughout literary history, *The Great Derangement,* Amitav Ghosh affords a particular significance to the gathering of Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley, who, together in Geneva during the eruption, watched the thunderstorms of this event encroach over the mountains. Ghosh suggests that the works produced by the writers during this time reflects the disorientation

[17] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', *Poetry Foundation*, available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45134/ode-to-the-west-wind> [accessed 2 May 2023]
[18] Paul Rowe, 'Transformative Apostrophe: Astonishing Effects of Assimilation in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind,"' *Literary Imagination*, 19, 1, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 40
[19] Luke Donahue, 'Romantic Survival and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"', *European Romantic Review*, 25:2, (2006), 219-242, (p. 223)
[20] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 66

and desperation that even a few weeks of abrupt climate change can cause and pinpoints this endeavour as a moment in which writing of the nonhuman was separated from the literary mainstream, into science fiction.[21]

The onset of climate change is producing a climate weirding of unpredictable, extreme weather events across the globe. In his book, *Is Wildness Over?'* environmental scholar, Paul Wapner argues that as wildness has been increasingly controlled and contracted by human activities, a kind of displacement has occurred. 'Climate change represents its own kind of wildness— a type that is not only more ferocious but ultimately more extensive and terrifying owing to the concentrated and accumulative dynamics involved.'[22] The planet itself has gone into spasm, and the calving glaciers, wildfires, mass extinctions, rising oceans represent the new face of wildness. This coastline of Atlantic woodland— as across much of Scotland— will be increasingly exposed to wind strengths which may well deviate and devastate beyond current patterns, with each individual tree tested and potentially compromised.

Ghosh draws attention to the correlation that within these last couple of centuries: the period in which humans have taken the earth to be inert, is exactly the time in which human activity has been changing the earth's atmosphere, and incidentally the time in which the literary imagination became radically centred on the human.[23] Disorientation and desperation, species loss and aseasonality are now increasingly prominent in literary representations of relationships with the living world, as we grapple with the entanglements of environmental crisis. As climate change demands an urgent cultural reckoning with the agency and animacy of the planet, an accounting with the impacts of colonisation will also transform understandings of ecological restoration.

Some environmental historians believe that legend of The Great Wood of Caledon was an exaggeration used by the Romans to justify their retreat from 'the impenetrable forest' of the Highlands.[24] If so, then this military testimony

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[21] Ghosh, p. 68
[22] Paul Wapner, *Is Wildness Over?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), pp. 46-47
[23] Ghosh, p. 66
[24] Simon Ingram, 'How Scotland Lost the Great Wood of Caledon', *National Geographic*, April 2022, available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/environment-and-conservation/2022/04/how-scotland-lost-the-great-wood-of-caledon> [accessed 4 April]

and enduring legend contributed towards a mythic baseline, which influences aspirations for a Scotland-wide restoration of the Caledonian forest. In contrast, Dàir na Coille, with its entanglement of relationality and autonomy, creation and destruction, reveals a cultural aptitude, and the imaginative disposition, towards recognising, naming, and honouring the self-expression and agency of the forest. And yet it remains mysterious: a resurgence that we must trust in, but cannot command, or even fully predict. It necessitates the regeneration of ecological knowledge, and the awakening of imaginative responsibility.

The lifespan of the trees in this woodland stretches across the time in human history in which the animacy of the earth was— in the industrialised world— largely forgotten. Without human intervention to decrease browsing pressure and allow the next generation to establish, these remaining veteran oak trees— many already marked with crown die back— could be the last generation here, losing the genetic library which ecologists believe help species to better adapt to climate change. Perhaps our ancient trees hold the key to the future. Trees that have survived the 'little ice age' and the 'medieval warming' of the past must carry genes which enabled them to cope with change and have passed their genes onto other trees currently in our landscape.[25] By understanding the woodland as an ecosystem, Gaelic tree-lore revealed the life-sustaining, ancestral significance of woodland to the human community. Human actions are entangled within the agencies of the forest. As the effects of climate change become ever more pronounced across the world, new understandings of ecological renewal and animacy set seed beneath the deadwood.

[25] Woodland Trust, *Ancient Tree guide 5: Trees and Climate Change*, (December 2008), available at: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/2008/12/ancient-trees-and-climate-change/> [accessed 6 May]

Hibernacle

At night, the cottage does not sleep. There is a succession of clunks, and the sucking sound of water pressure adjusting, as the immersion tank slowly refills from the water pipe filtered into the house directly from the burn and the bog above. The walls are alive. Creatures in half hibernation utilise nooks and crannies of the stone walls.

Some nights, the sound of a deer behind the cottage is distinct. There's a steep bank that comes down behind the cottage, and a level terrace below a thicket of gorse. A well-worn deer bed is situated there, the grasses curled at the edges and worn away in repetition. Just metres away from my bed, the deer makes her own. The sharp scuffle of stones tells me that she's up and moving along the back passage of the cottage, edging along the gravel back towards open land.

The walls contain multitudes of life that I can only guess at. A deeply situated rummage moved through the base of the wall. Far bigger than a mouse, its bodily form and route of inquiry remained a mystery. The house is interpreted as shelter in ways beyond my own understanding of the space. The labyrinth of interior passages through the stonework are concealed from my sight behind the wooden panelling. When used as a windbreak by the deer, the interior realm becomes an irrelevance to her own needs, simply a useful feature within the landscape.

I imagined the bats under the roof slates, flatly shielded from the weather, their slow breathing bodies taking just a couple of breaths per minute, tucked between slates and the original horsehair insulation of the roof. In the height of summer, I'd opened the skylight at dawn to watch huge numbers of them methodically scanning the roof, feasting on the midges who gathered close to the slates for the first warmth of the day. I'd hoped that this warming of the house was subtle enough to keep the bats in their deep torpor, but as I wrote at the desk tucked beneath the eaves on the landing accompanied by the electric heater, I heard a sequence of clicks and whizzing from behind the panelling. I paused to listen, and then continued typing in fits and spurts, the tapping of the keyboard in sonic collaboration with the half-slumbering colony.

The cottage is an ecosystem: a moving, stirring landscape of habitats, filled with multitudes of life. The slow perseverance of food moths in cupboard, the grubs always certain to find the one packet that had been opened and but not stored within an airtight container. Only their tell-tale debris, finely clustered around the seams of the packet, give due caution to their presence.

The sea air seeps through the breathing walls. The lime render has worn away at the east facing gable end of the house, revealing a blocked off window and the former roof shape of when this was once a single storey building. Past iterations revealed.

The cottage demands a new winter coat. Rain has soaked through the stonework and onto the floorboards of the twin bedroom, mouldering the rug and staining the wallpaper. The building is threadbare on the exterior, and I am unable to do anything right now except make plans towards restoration and attempt to dry it from the inside out. The cottage needs a new coat, and it will be made from sand and seashells, the lime slaked and mixed to be slathered and pointed before curing slowly. I measured up for new sash windows, sourced a larger stove and planned towards the possible restoration of the barn. The months and years ahead were beginning to be shaped not only by seed collecting and tree planting but by these tasks of restoring the buildings, as determined by the materials and their methods, the effects of long-term weathering and by the practicality of tide times and difficulty in transporting materials.

But I trusted the house, for it had stood through so many winters. During the driest period of the coldest month, I made contingency plans for if the water flow which feeds the house was to freeze over, filling water bottles and reassuring myself with the continuous flow of the much bigger burn further afield, where I could break ice if necessary. There was a gas camping stove, left by John, whose thoughtfulness was a reassuring presence. I found extra blankets, a gas lamp, and all the wintering accessories necessary. Dominque, my housemate back in Glasgow, sent a parcel to my friend in the village, that I would pick up along with my fortnightly supplies, left at the footbridge.

An eight mile walk there and back to pick up supplies. I tried to coordinate with the weather, finding gaps within the snow forecast. On the way I passed the rock

shelter, Uaimh Mhic an t-Stalcaire, *Cave of the Stalker's Son*, where the boy would apparently be left as the stalker went to the townships for his messages.[26] I stopped along the way to watch the lochans which were frozen over with a light covering of fresh snow. Dark circular patterns adorned the surface, and as I watched, they appeared to be slowly oscillating in size, almost as if breathing.

These tricks of the cold. Only for one moment was there anything close to a whiteout whilst walking. I was high on the pass, beyond the cairn when the snow blew in with an intensity that made me glad for the continuous sight line of the telegraph lines, like handrails that guided my way. In my mind, contingency plans were already forming, figuring that I'd take shelter in Toscaig until the weather had passed. But as I rounded the path to curve back towards civilization, the weather completely changed and other than an icy path downhill, there was no such inclemency. As I reached Toscaig, I greeted the colossal boulder face that the footpath starts from— the guardian of the path— and in my usual ritual of gratitude for safe passage, I placed my forehead against the rock face. As the coolness of the rock met with the flushed heat of my face, my internal vision swam and morphed into patterns of swirling, animate matter.

I retrieved my bags from Toscaig bridge, kindly left there by my local friend, Kirsten, who'd picked up our orders from the nearest supermarket some two hours' drive away in Kyle of Lochalsh. She'd double bagged the food so that the sheep weren't able to munch the vegetables inside. Still, they were sniffing curiously at the bags as I approached. With my rucksack once again fully loaded, I turned back, and trailed the journey in reverse, touching the stone guardian as I passed, and headed back up the icy footpath, finding my footprints in the snow were already melting. The dark spots on the lochan had transformed into a pattern of waveforms.

Back in the cottage I opened my rucksack and spread the supplies on the table. Among the packets and vegetables, candles, and bags of flour, came the parcel posted from Glasgow. Fresh coffee and an emergency foil blanket, along with the two books from my bookcase I'd been thinking about. Aldo Leopold's, *A Sand*

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[26] Applecross Placenames, available at: <http://www.applecrossplacenames.org.uk/map/> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

Country Almanac and *Conversations with Landscape*, a series of essays by Icelandic scholars and artists. A letter from Dominque, and another from Graham, were tucked inside the books. Each told me how the duck pond in Queens Park had frozen over and become an ice-skating rink, thick with human skaters.

I moved myself into the landing place above the stairs to read, positioning a small chair and desk beneath the Velux window which looks over to the hills on Skye— the Skyelight as I think of it. I started with Leopold, delighting all over again in his observations of the animal communities with whom he shared his own winterscapes.

> The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack: supply, demand and transport all neatly organized. To the mouse, snow means freedom from want and fear.[27]

Situated on degraded farmland in Wisconsin, the vessel for Leopold's thinking-through was the 'Shack': a simple structure renovated from an old chicken coop. I wondered whether he had shared his shack with mice and found myself looking for clues of the shape of the dwelling which he inhabited as he wrote. There were references to the hearth-space, the fire relit in the cold pre-dawn, and always the unspecified 'we': the stoic but undetailed presence of his family.[28]

I'd recently read an interview with Nina Leopold Bradley, Aldo Leopold's daughter, where I learnt more details about their family life at the shack. Bradley shared an undated extract of her father's writing: 'There are two things that interest me; the relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land.' Bradley told of how their frugal shack was an embodiment of that sentiment, filled with games and great humour, guitar-playing all night, and of how Aldo's writing equipment was brought along but never touched. 'He didn't write at the shack. He thought. […] But this was a place of action.'[29] It felt liberating that this situatedness within his thinking-place had been partially

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[27] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 4
[28] Leopold, p. 7
[29] Stephanie Mills, *In Service of the Wild: Restoring and Reinhabiting Damaged Land,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p.110

reconstructed for the purposes of the text; that place-writing always belongs to more places than the one in focus. Leopold himself belonged to more than one geography, and his work has been described by agricultural ecologist and ethnobotanist, Gary Paul Nabhan as an artistic expression of rooting, wherein Leopold was 'desperately trying to psychically root' into place.[30]

As I paused from reading to take a break and stretch, I moved in relation to the architectures of the space, folding myself into a front bend beneath the eaves of the sloped roof, and then unfurling to meet the panelling against my spine, vertebrae by vertebrae. Enclosing myself within this small space of the landing was a welcome juxtaposition to the vast landscape and the stark reality of being here alone. How many years had it been since a woman spent a duration of time alone in this cottage? Was I the first woman here to attend only to my own needs of food, washing and firewood, without children? I wondered about the agency I had within the architecture of this cottage, or within the writing of it. What was already suggested in the way that I moved through it or in relation with it? What other agencies shaped my experience? How does my own agency begin to shape this interior, and the land?

Thinking of the human lives that have lived here brings an awareness of a lineage stretching in both directions. For the first two years of being tenant, there has been a feeling of passing through. Always ready for the next move, never quite settling into full inhabitancy. Yet through the consistency of being here for these long weeks of winter, something shifted. It was impossible to say when I first felt it, but at some point, without quite noticing the moment, I became a resident.

When I had first heard of the tenancy going here at Airigh Drishaig, my mind had immediately gone to the type of person who would take it on. The image of the person— the man— for whom this opportunity suited had been so strong in my mind, that I didn't immediately consider that my own skillset, interests, and disposition would be suitable. In the years that have passed since, the thing that has served me the most, and one that I would not have guessed at being so

[30] Gary Paul Nabhan, 'Restorying the Land', in *Thinking Like a Watershed: Voices from the West*, ed. Jack Loeffler and Celestia Loeffler, (University of New Mexico Press, 2012), pp. 190-191

crucial, is that of relationality. For as often as I am the only human out here, a steady web of interconnectivity has grown, linking with friends, community, and projects for the good of the cottage, and the land, just as it must have always been for each generation living here.

It does not have to be a solo endeavour of one person having each of the necessary skills required. Indeed, it could not happen as a solo endeavour. During these winter months, my dependency is absolute. But each act of dependency deepens as a reciprocal relating— tickets to an online storytelling festival that I can share by way of thanks for the shopping drop-off. The heritage of crofting communities has long been based on ethics of interdependency. Within each interaction and new friendship, my knowledge of Airigh Drishaig, and a sense of how it connects to the larger community deepens.

I kept in touch with the teacher Tom, checking in on the tree nursery we established in the school garden, and made plans for planting the hazelnuts we'd gathered. I spoke regularly with John, who told me the story of how, for fifteen years, he'd walked out here to restore the cottage, carrying in the materials needed for odd jobs between caring for his elderly aunt. John's twinkling eyes and years' worth of local knowledge shared over Skype calls gave assurance to my own capabilities to care for this place. He told me stories of how he'd managed to get the items of furniture out here; the food cupboard that he bought from an antique shop years before, which was hefted up from a boat to the cottage.

On a weekly basis, a group called 'Wild Womxn of the West' meet online. As writers, performers, and creatives who either lived in Applecross, or had a connection to the place, we gathered virtually to share our work and planned towards creating a performance together. Some lived on the opposite side of Loch Kishorn, others further afield. As I looked at the gallery of faces, it struck me that I was the first resident of the cottage to have internet access, albeit hot spotting from my phone. My sense of connectivity in this winter landscape was utterly distinct from anyone who lived here before. We shared stories of the wild women of these lands, through researching female crofters, protestors, local witches, and early explorers. I could see the snow falling in the window behind

Kirsten on her screen, and guessed that within the hour, it would reach this side of the peninsula.

Not Only

The first snow revealed the existence of a previously unnoticed figure on the horizon. The cottage is oriented towards a mountain, *Beinn na Caillich*, situated over the Inner Sound on south of the Isle of Skye. On waking each morning, or whenever I finished a task outside, I would look over to it. With a profile of two conjoined hills, its conical point attracts the eye first, tracing the smooth dip before rising again to follow along the next bump downwards with its long, sloping formation. In the larger flood of making acquaintance with the placenames on this side of the loch— the area within the remit of my OS map— the name of the mountain over the water was ignored. Yet the form became solidly familiar. A focal point on the horizon, a harbinger of weather from the southwest, the mountain was a steady, ancient witness to my often-solitary antics. It was on the last day of the year, just after it had snowed for the first time, that my perception of the mountain shifted entirely.

I'd spent the day walking over to see the stand of aspen trees that grow protected in the refugia of particular steep-sided bay at the east side of the deer enclosure. The only aspens along this stretch of coastline, aspen is a relatively uncommon tree in the region. With its ability to clone itself, aspen can stretch over distance and time. One cluster of 40,000 cloned aspen in Utah— a single male organism— covers forty-three hectares. It is estimated to be over 80,000 years old making it, as Richard Mabey notes, 'the oldest mass of connected tree tissue.'[31] I love this sense of a continuous rope of connection through time. If any tree could climb back up the cliff, and re-establish as woodland, it would be aspen.

Although notoriously hard to grow from seed, there is a steady kind of magic within their method for regeneration. They send out suckers from the roots, spreading horizontally with new saplings emerging behind the parent tree. These suckers can be propagated to grow trees which can then be planted out in other places, widening their range. With my penknife, I gently sawed a couple of root cuttings. It was an experiment really, with the proper time for this later in the

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[31] Richard Mabey, *The Cabaret of Plants: Botany and the Imagination*, (London: Profile Books, 2015), p. 42

spring. By planting the root into a propagation tray, an emergent sucker would hopefully establish as a new tree, albeit as a genetic clone.

As I walked back towards the cottage along the coastline, I was still marvelling at the tenacity of the species. With a handful of these gathered roots, and a collection of beach-salvaged oyster bags strapped to my back (their stiff netted plastic form ideal as a protective mouse-proof cover for the fish crate nursery), my thoughts were enmeshed around the processes and possibilities of woodland restoration. The means for regeneration were carried within the roots and tides of this very place. As I neared the cottage, my feet staggering across the obstacles of frozen tussocks and slippery boulders, I looked up at the dusting of snow on the horizon, and saw the mountain, *Beinn na Caillich* properly for the very first time. There she was. Lying prostrate to the sky, hair streaming back behind her, the dazzling white of the fresh snow revealed the form of an enormous, contoured woman.

The point of her head,

the dip of her clavicle and neck,

the long continuous rise of breast,

down to belly, thighs, and feet.

Her body rested horizontally on the darker throws of bedrock.

In that moment it became obvious. Within both the form and the name of the mountain, lies the Cailleach: The Wise Crone, the Old Hag. The Wise Old Woman of the land.

In both Irish and Scottish Gaelic cosmologies, the figure of Cailleach is her namesake given to specific land formations. She appears as a colossal figure within the landscape, embedded within the landscape and cultural place-lore, with numerous mountains, springs and rock formations taking her name.[32]

[32] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), p. 29

Recognised for her powers of world-making, her mythic presence is renowned as shaping the formation of the very hills themselves.[33] In one such story, the Cailleach is said to have formed the mountains as she walked with her creel, dropping rocks into positions that would become islands and hill ridges.[34] Her presence seems to shift through multiple scales, variously understood as an omni-present wilderness deity; appearing in geological form within specific landscapes; or to take form as a human or supernatural figure within folktales.

The Cailleach emerges in relation with the vast mythopoetic imagination— the Gaelic Otherworld— into which environmental values and ecological epistemologies are enfolded. Conceptualised as world maker and embedded within the landscape, the Cailleach was understood to be the protector of wildness. With a particular guardianship over wild herds, in Scotland she was most closely associated with deer.[35] It is said that she oversaw the care of deer and would chastise or bring harm to any hunter who treated the herd unfairly. In many legends, she exists as a Deer-Goddess, a personification of the life and fertility of these creatures.[36] As she is also associated with wolves, it could be suggested that she oversaw the relational dynamics of the woodland.[37]

Ruling over the dark months of winter, the Cailleach governs the weather, responsible for storms and the winds. Winter is her reign, giving her the title of Cailleach Bhéarra. Folklorist Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, whose collection *The Book of the Cailleach* gathers the oral narratives and cosmologies, observes how within these myriads of tales, 'nature is renewed eternally in the recounting […] of how Cailleach Bhéarra impressed herself onto and expresses herself within a landscape made both vital and sacred by association with her divine and sovereign presence.'[38] That it was the snowline that first revealed her to me seemed entirely fitting. Governing this time of scarcity, she was seen as the preserver of resources. Winter was a time of responsibility, safeguarding and conserving.

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[33] Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted, The Journey to Authenticity and Belonging,* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2016), p. 305
[34] Blackie, p. 306
[35] Ó Crualaoich, p. 15
[36] Ó Crualaoich, p. 124
[37] Donald MacKenzie, *Scottish Folk Lore and Folk Life*, (n.p: 1935)
[38] Ó Crualaoich, p. 29

Realising her presence was like the sudden revelation of a magic eye illustrations, the form was unmissable. She had been there all along; I'd just needed to notice. Stretching four kilometres from Skye bridge at her ankles, to the southeast reaches of the island where her hair trails behind her to meet the sea, she was a colossal figure across the landscape. As I sat behind the tumbledown barn on an upturned fish crate with a mug of whisky infused coffee to watch the last sunset of the year, my thoughts were with the generations before who had worked and known this land and who had possibly seen her in this way. By living alongside her, recognising her presence as a world making deity, the land would have been perceived as lively matter: a personable sentience held within the geological earth.

Colours thrown from the sunset traversed the horizon above her recumbent body, painting the sky yolk yellow and a throbbing magenta. The feeling that this colossal figure could stand at any moment, perhaps even in response to human actions to admonish or assist, felt innate within the experience of perceiving her. I found myself trying to estimate where the water of Loch Kishorn— the second deepest loch in Scotland— would reach on her body should she rise and step this way. Surely not higher than her knee. At midnight the tugboat from Kishorn Dry Port sounded its horn, and a splattering of fireworks went off first from Plockton, then minutes later across the water from Broadford.

I could imagine how accountability would come in response to living alongside this animate, mythical presence in the landscape. Through the presence of the Cailleach, there would be a feeling of interactions with place and the more-than-human communities being witnessed. It would feel instinctive to make offerings, beseech favours, ask for agricultural fortune and the wellbeing of the community, or for the season ahead to be blessed. Witnessed within the tasks of daily life, and yet held within the larger flow of deep time, a decentring of an individual life is performed. Offering an evolutionary scale far vaster than the human, the legacy of her presence from one generation to the next forms a connective thread to her world-making origins. Within her name and form was a direct, continuous link to a cosmology that long predated any ontological separation between human and nature. Like an aspen growing from a cutting,

something resilient, and reverential took root within me. The landscape had transformed. That most ancient form of anthropomorphism— recognising human self within the wider landscape— felt as revelatory, and animating, to my own experience as it must have to all those who had come before.

In the Gaelic language and place-lore, along with so many indigenous languages, topography of the landscape is named through the perceived correspondence human body parts.

Ceann- head, end

Aodann- face, surface

Gualann- shoulder, mountain ridge

Braigh- upper chest, uplands.

Cioch- breast, pointed hills.[39]

The attribution of human characteristics to the more than human world played a vital part within this cosmology: a mode of sharing agency. More complex than a singular anthropomorphisation of a mountain, embedded as she is into the cosmologies and oral epistemologies of Gaelic culture, Newton perceives the tradition as a practice of making the landscape understandable in human terms and reinforcing the sense of the landscape as a living entity.[40] Natural features of the landscape commanded awe, and were engaged through poetic dialogue, where bardic passages suggest that features in the landscape were occasionally requested to be witness to significant moments within human history.

I began to wonder at the ways in which the mythopoetic informed ecosystem thinking, and whether the Cailleach offered a way into perceiving landscape as part of an animate whole. As guardian and protector of both deer and wolves, the Cailleach could be considered a custodian of ecological balance, in a role which extended to keeping human actions in check. There was once a time when every Highland village would have had its own, localised presence of a hag, or

[39] Newton, p. 216
[40] Newton, p. 216

Cailleach.[41] These extraordinary beings would be renowned for lurking in the wildest, most solitary parts of regions where drovers, packmen and travellers would occasionally pass. While some hags were considered inimical— particularly to members of certain clans— others were known to be friendly.[42] Perhaps the Cailleach's presence, both foreboding and protective, worked to caution against anthropocentric behaviours of taking too much, or not giving due respect to the living world.

Aldo Leopold's foundational essay, 'Thinking like a Mountain,'[43] served to conceptualise ecosystem thinking for the emergent environmental movement. Leopold's primary unit of care and concern was the biotic community, including human cultures. Nabhan notices the irony that shortly after Leopold's death in 1948, the word 'community'— as commonly used in Leopold's writing— began to be replaced by 'ecosystem' in ecology, a more mechanistic term from systems engineering to replace a sociological term that implied interrelation between biotic members.[44]

Nevertheless, *Thinking like a Mountain* became shorthand for ecosystem thinking and was embraced within the deep ecology movement as a transformation beyond the short sightedness of human lifespan into a far greater appreciation of temporalities and multi-agential relationality.[45] 'Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf,' wrote Leopold.[46] In a time when hunting wolves was commonplace, Leopold shot one of the last in a particular bioregion and witnessed its death. Watching the green fire die from her eyes: a fire that was known 'only between the wolf and the mountain,' he understood how predator-prey dynamics determine the ecological integrity of an ecosystem, which later came to define the conservation movement.[47]

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[41] Newton, 2000, p. 197
[42] Newton, 2000, p. 197
[43] Aldo Leopold, 'Thinking like a Mountain' in *A Sand Country Almanac*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968)
[44] Nabhan, 2012, p. 191
[45] John Seed and others, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988)
[46] Leopold, p. 130
[47] Ibid, p. 130

Icelandic scholars, Katrín Anna Lund and Karl Bendiktsson seek to explore approaches to landscape through the metaphor of conversation.[48] As an attempt to avoid the dualism between human and nonhuman that has been perpetuated within the predominantly visual framing of landscape, they instead emphasise the mode of conversation as pointing towards an alternative, two-way process. They propose that a successful conversation— that is, one which results in increased understanding, albeit not necessarily agreement— involves what has been called, a 'fusion of horizons.'[49] On the human side of the conversation, such communication involves processes of attention and action, with an openness to being affected.

The concept of the horizon denotes not a fixed limit to perception, but an invitation to go further. They emphasise that how one is situated within the conversation will have a bearing on what point of views, and what understandings are brought about by the process. With its implication of movement and constantly shifting position, the horizon takes landscape away from any romantic or static association with place. Lund and Bendiktsson propose that by thinking of human-landscape relations as conversations, we can also appreciate the diverse interests and challenges of power which are inherent in these relations.[50]

The reciprocity that is suggested within this conversation approach, seems particularly pertinent to understanding landscapes of ecological restoration: a shift from Conservation to Conversation. Instead of the subject- object ontology of conservation science, perceiving a conversation with landscape instead suggests a subject-to-subject interexchange, wherein each participant could be changed by the encounter and a fusion of horizons could occur. Icelandic scholar Edda Waage, extends the provocation of the collection further. Waage considers that as a creative process, conversation can generate a new perspective, a new meaning of the topic under discussion. In these terms then, landscape can be conceived *as* a conversation, rather than an independent reality that is

[48] Karl Benedicktsson & Katrín Anna Lund (eds), *Conversations with Landscape*, (London: Routledge, 2016)
[49] Benedicktsson & Lund, 'Introduction: starting a conversation with landscape', 2016, p. 1
[50] Ibid, p. 2

conversed *with*.[51] This perspective implies that whoever speaks of landscape is essentially a constituent of the topic, enfolded within.

As a wilderness deity and primordial goddess, the Cailleach could be understood as holding resonance with the Greek goddess of Gaia, the personification of earth and ancestral mother of life, albeit in a mode more akin to a wise, haggard, and sometimes fearsome crone. The mythological name of Gaia came to be utilised by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis for their Gaia hypothesis: a mode of perceiving the earth as a totality of living beings and materials that were made together, that cannot live apart, and from which humans can't extract themselves.[52] The earth is understood as a self-regulating organism. The hypothesis evolved into what is now Gaia theory, and the conventional wisdom into Earth System Science.[53]

Philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood suggested that to build an ecological consciousness, we do not need to roll the agencies of the earth into one, humanized whole such as Gaia or Earth Goddess. 'But we do need to question systems of thought that confine agency to a human or human-like consciousness and refuse to acknowledge the creativity of earth others, whether organised into a single system or not.'[54] Perhaps this is what the presence of the Cailleach still inhabits most effectively: not only the decentring of the human subject, or the instigation to converse with land subject-subject, but a healthy disruption that exposes the modes of empirical thought we may have settled upon unquestioningly.

The concept and model of Ecosystem Services was published within the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, and defined as provisioning services (food, water, timber, and fibre); regulating services that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes, and water quality; cultural services that provide recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits; and supporting services such as soil formation,

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[51] Edda R.H. Waage, 'Landscape as Conversation', in Karl Benedicktsson & Katrín Anna Lund (eds), *Conversations with Landscape,* (London: Routledge, 2016). p. 46
[52] James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia,* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p. 208
[53] Lovelock, p. 208
[54] Val Plumwood, 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land', *Ethics and the Environment,* 11, 2, (Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 117

photosynthesis, and nutrient cycling.[55] While highlighting the dependency of human wellbeing on the ecosystems, positing that 'people are integral parts of ecosystems and that a dynamic interaction exists between them and other parts of ecosystems, with the changing human condition driving, both directly and indirectly, changes in ecosystems and thereby causing changes in human well-being', the language of the report relies heavily on economic metaphors: 'Humanity is experiencing an ecological credit crunch.' Through this framing, ecosystems, processes, and landscapes can be given a monetised value which allows planetary health to be understood as natural capital.

In 2021, Gaelic scholar and Applecross resident, Roddy Maclean produced the report, 'Ecosystem Services and Gaelic: a Scoping Exercise,' for NatureScot to explore the potential for how an understanding of Scotland's Gaelic language and heritage might inform a wider appreciation of Ecosystem Services nationally.[56] With a particular focus on toponymical evidence, the report explores the scope of cultural references, oral histories, and literature to identify gaps in knowledge and make twenty recommendations towards further areas of research. The Cailleach is mentioned, with Maclean emphasizing that she is at the core of the Cultural Services that form part of the Ecosystem Services. Maclean suggests:

> For many women, in particular, in the modern era, the concept of the Cailleach and her presence in the wildest parts of the Highlands, in both oral tradition, and also in toponyms, informs their sense of belonging to a landscape which, despite its overt rugged masculinity, runs, arguably, to the beat of a feminine heart.[57]

The report, as with Maclean's other writings, is a thing of beauty, grouping habitats and areas of ecological knowledge through place-lore, mythologies, and cultural heritage. Yet as I read, I wondered if the intricacies of Gaelic culture should be shaped around the reductive framing of Ecosystem Services, or if there

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[55] Walter V. Reid and others, MA (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment), *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: a Framework for Assessment,* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003). Available at: <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/document.356.aspx.pdf> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

[56] Roddy Maclean, (MacIlleathain, Ruairidh), 'Ecosystem Services and Gaelic: a Scoping Exercise'. *NatureScot Research Report No. 1230* (2021) available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1230-ecosystem-services-and-gaelic-scoping-exercise> [accessed 18 Jan 2023]

[57] Maclean, p. 64

was a different way of holding both ontologies. Val Plumwood suggests the term, 'collaborative' or 'interactive' landscapes, as a means of crediting the multiple species and creative agencies of land, over the notion of a cultural landscape or biocultural approach.[58] The Gaelic heritage of Scotland holds the roots of ecological relationships between people and the land. Perhaps this notion of collaboration is essential too within the necessity of holding multiple ontological possibilities and perspectives: a collaboration between modes of perceiving the earth both through unitisation *and* relationality.

Just a couple of weeks later, perhaps a month after I had first recognised the presence of the Cailleach mountain on the horizon, I was part of a group conversation with the Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena.[59] Marisol's research concerns multispecies perspectives, politics, and indigeneity, and seeks to draw attention to how we think thinking. Her book, *Earth Beings, Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*, collates over a decade of field work in thinking alongside the conversations that she shared with two shamans, Quechua people: a father and son called Mariano and Nazario Turpo.[60] She shared with us some of the most significant understandings she had arrived at within their presence, sharing these stories with the utmost care to not uproot their knowledge, but to convey how her own thinking had been exposed and transformed through the experience of relating with them.

One day, whilst Marisol walked with Mariano and Nazario through the Andean highlands, they told her that they considered the mountain, Ausangate, to be a person. Marisol told us of the significance of this moment within her thinking. Born within the same country, they shared the same notion of history and other contextual shapings of a worldview. Yet, she explained, 'I was surprised by the idea that a mountain can be a person. I had to fight the need to translate that phrase into a cultural belief. I was searching for a different relationship, different from the regular anthropologist who occupies a different world from

[58] Plumwood, p. 125
[59] Marisol de la Cadena [Lecture], 'Thinking Not Only', *Foresta Collective*, (Online, January 2020)
[60] Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Being: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds,* (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015)

the subject of research, wherein the anthropologist is aware of the cultures of others.'

Marisol explained how she met with a blockage in her capacity to understand: faced with the notion that the mountain was a person, she had only the option to translate this either as a cultural belief, or to that of religion. As translations, these options would have served to equate the truth of their perception to a secondary order from the material 'reality' of the mountain. 'I didn't want to obligate that normal coloniality. I was left not knowing how to think.' The mountain as a person became a condition, or a tool which made Marisol think about how she knew the world.

Her Quechuan friends, the two who she had now researched alongside for over a decade, wanted to help her. 'It is not only a mountain', they offered, and kept repeating: 'Not Only'. In this moment, Marisol explained to us, thinking 'Not Only' became for her a tool which enabled an ontological opening into understanding the world. With Not Only, Marisol suggests, we are invited to see the world in a different way, without the need to conquer through a definitive knowing. Not Only opens respect both to the sense of needing to order the unknown, and to the mystery of the world. Thinking Not Only includes others, and opens different possibilities for articulating, knowing, and making the world.

Ecosystems, like bodies, are not units, but relational. My time here so far had been just the briefest of growth rings in the lifespan of these trees, growing here since pre-industrialisation. As the age of petrochemical dependencies faltered, the Gaelic placenames— embedded with stories of habitats— revealed not only a baseline of past ecologies, but an expression of ecological relationships. To align oneself with this wisdom in a non-extractivist way, I realised, could begin with the Gaelic placenames. Training my tongue, my ear, and my perception to keep learning. Not as a translation but as a way of thinking. For us to be multi-lingual in our relationships with place. The language of ecosystem services could never be adequate alone, for we have long related with the land through song, poetry and stories.

Not Only ecosystem services. Not Only a mountain. When we consider landscape as conversation, or as a collaborative act within the intentionality of the living

world, the idea of both restoration and ecosystems begins to shift in meaning. The presence of the Cailleach invokes a questioning of whether our predominant systems of thought adequately acknowledge and open towards the agency of earth others. She is a visual reminder of how a landscape, or ecosystem, could be understood in relational form. The integrity of the living planet could be maintained; harmful impacts of industrial existence and resource use could be limited; biological systems, wildlife and natural processes could be recognised as creative agents, not as unitised *services* of the ecosystem, but as a collaborative, relational act of life tending life.

Firewood

Firewood warms three times over: the gathering, the cutting, the burning.[61] In this instance the burning is possibly the least warming part of the exchange, so limited is the capacity of the old stove. But the gathering and cutting are whole body undertakings. Each day requires firewood time, the warmest point of my day. The woodland closest to the cottage is a reliable source of fallen branches. As much as I would love to leave the deadwood in situ, the wood supply for the stove is essential to raise the temperature of the living room space a few degrees each evening.

On each return, I seek out a suitable branch. Anything that has already started to rot, turning first to spongy cork then becoming almost weightless in microbial alchemy, is left to the collective life force of the forest floor. Anything too recently fallen is noted for another day, to come back to in the following months once it has seasoned in situ. On this occasion, a perfect branch had fallen in possibly the most difficult of places. Down on the shingle beach, a huge bough had ripped from an oak tree that grew defiantly from on a boulder ledge. Looking up past the vertical plane of mosses and single drip waterfalls, teared twists of fibre showed the point of separation. The branch, heavier than the tree could withstand in the stiff south-westerly winds, had dropped into the cavity it once grew above.

Tapping the bark with my bowsaw, it sounded back: almost fully seasoned. First the kindling, snapped off underfoot. Twigs gathered in piles thick with noduled growth and leaf stalks and bound with rope into an armful. Immediately a robin joined the task, watching inquisitively and darting forward to the newly exposed ground between my movements. The branches were hand sawn at their turning points between zigzags of growth and then strapped into wayward bundles to be shouldered back uphill.

Finally, the thicker branches: a solid core that must be sawn into liftable sections to hoist back up to the cottage. Each load necessitated a steep

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[61] Henry David Thoreau, *Waldon; Or, Life in the Woods*, (Boston: Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1854; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1995)

scramble up a rocky bank, into the moss lined woodland, where I'd take pause, looking up to the trees steamy eyed and panting. Then a long, slow, uphill slog through tussocky bog back to the cottage. Stage by stage, the bundles moved their way up the steep bank, sometimes resting there for a day or two, before moving them the final furlong to the saw bench whenever I had a next burst of energy, or the need for a warm-up.

Positioned on the saw bench, cutting a thick log with a bowsaw is an endeavour that for me, never fails to cultivate frustration and heat. My mind prickled with unresolved memories and irrelevant annoyances, until, on shedding layers of clothing, I came to remember the physical strength that calmness of mind brings with it. I took a deep breath. What is it about the action and effort of sawing that reveals the unresolved, jagged depths of my subconscious? A smear of candle wax is applied to the blade, one side, then the other. The blade glides through the wood for a long moment, long enough to remember what effortlessness might feel like. Sometimes I imagine that there is someone helping me saw from the opposite direction. An invisible partner. Sometimes I forget myself and the task takes care of itself, unhindered.

Once, I forgot myself in the other direction, and began to saw with too much effort, straining through the knotty sinew of the log with such a force, the blade of the saw jumped from the groove and snagged into the flesh of my thumb holding the log. From the tear along the skin, red blood swelled to the surface, oozing readily into drips across the snow-covered flagstones as I opened the front door. The warmth of the blood perforated wide circles through the crystalline structure of the snow. My thumb, my hand, my body: my entire physical safety as a body of blood alone in this landscape was made apparent.

By the time I was inside, thumb in mouth, searching for the first aid kit, the white blood cells had kicked in and the half-moon shaped nick stuck back into position, sealed by the internal saps of my body. The cautioning was enough to make me leave the task until I had greater presence of mind. I returned to that gnarly log later in the day and called on the powers of oak to help me finish sawing through it. Imagining the strength of its fibres running through my own muscles, harnessing the determination of growing into the forceful winds of the land, it taught me the steady strength that I needed to meet with it.

As the sun set and the last of the wood for the day had been sawn, split and stacked away, I grabbed my jacket and the old shortbread tin to venture back down to the oak trees above the shoreline. The ground was still partially frozen as the last of the sun disappeared beyond the dark headland. The oak trees, so various between angles and curves, stood before the gentle ingress of the sea loch. With the tin open, I squatted beneath a tree and began to gather up a couple of handfuls of cold leaf mulch, tossing away the sticks and layering the rest over a batch of the hazelnuts collected and stored from autumn. My hands mixed them together like the ingredients of some sumptuous forest floor cake. The oak leaf mulch apparently serves the hazelnuts particularly well within their germination, inoculating them with mycelium which will enable mycorrhizal connections, knitting them into the forest.[62]

As I stood and eased the lid of the tin back into place, I saw her again, this time in wooded form. Silhouetted against the pink light reflected on the mountains behind Kishorn, an upturned root plate had taken on the appearance of the Cailleach riding a chariot through the woods. She faces the sea, branches uplifted like antlers and wild appendages. Her mouth is determinedly set, her back hunched over in a hard-won wisdom. Stones and clods of earth form her flesh, held within the structural bone work of roots and branches. Holding the reins of the woodland, she takes a slow ride through the land, travelling at the speed of mycelium, the hyphae forming, splitting, and spreading like underground lacework. The root plate connects onwards to the new life which stems from the fallen trunk, and to all the new life of the rotting branches surrounding her. She travels in both directions. 'She' is not singular but collective, not an individual being but a connective node within something far vaster that runs through the woodland.

The tang of sour, seasoned oak wood percolated through the living room from the tower of logs in the corner, stacked next to the bookcase. The warmth from the stove, combined with the low, steady persistence of the electric storage heaters, allowed me to stay up long enough to write. Was it a fair calorific exchange? The clicking of the metre, counting kilowatts, kept the score on the

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[62] Fi Martynoga (ed.), *A Handbook of Scotland's Trees*, (Glasgow: Reforesting Scotland, 2013),

cost of keeping warm. In the Highlands, where most homes are heated by electricity, fuel poverty is the highest in the whole of the UK.[63]

It soon became apparent that my bowsaw would not be enough to keep me in supply of firewood. By that point, I had sawn off the outer branches of the fallen oak. Only the thickest trunk remained, like a giant's body had fallen from the sheer rock face above. My capacity for continuing with the job had been curtailed: my sixty centimetre saw blade and I were outmatched. It was time to reach out to a person with the skills and the motorised tool for the job.

I went back to the fallen trunk— still resplendent with lichens— that sat high on the bank which was well scuffed from the action of branch removal. I walked the course of the trunk's length to estimate its size and placed my foot against its girth to give scale to a photo that I'd send to the local tree surgeon, Chris. Feet measured human body against tree body, estimating the job at hand. How is it to survey a fallen tree for the firewood that you think it will provide you with? Does this lens of perception negate the respect and awe that you also hold for the tree? Or can these two modes of perceiving co-exist, creating a workable hybrid, or a Not Only?

I wanted to ask Chris these things, and I could hear his baby in his arms as we talked on the phone, the gurgles of baby chat mixing with the advice that oak is best split soon after being sawn. We timed the job between dates of my presence in the cottage and his commitments. The money that I made from a short film for a storytelling festival was passed to Chris for this job, making a circular economy between the woodland as a source of creative inspiration, the firewood which enables my human presence to be here more comfortably, and the collaboration with the woodland towards further cycles of renewal. I began to plan for planting a firewood copse, to better enable whoever might live here next.

[63] Highland Council, 'Members react to the concerning prevalence of fuel poverty within highlands', (Nov 2021), available at: <https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14169/members_react_to_the_concerning_prevalence_of_fuel_poverty_within_highland> [accessed 13 march 2023]

Caceralazo

The triad of relations between deer, trees and disturbance shaped my thoughts as I walked through the patchy woodland. Stretching like elastic bands in ever-changing sequences, I wanted to visualize the herbivore dynamics and disturbance that define this woodland. Maybe it started from the tracks through the snow, where daily movements were frozen into traces of who shapes and shares this land; the footprints of yesterday overlaid by a different form today. Who is tracking who?

The feeling accompanied me as I cut across a rough terrace of snow-covered moor grass, noticing the places of preferential deer browsing and their fresh droppings. At the edges of the birch trees, where regeneration was thickest, patches of secret rubbings stood out brightly among the thin saplings, the frayed fibres a testimony to the summertime urges of antlers.

An oak sapling, already perhaps a decade old, stayed low to the ground. It's up-reach of last season's growth was mostly inconspicuous below the twists and turns of dried heather which partially protected their conjoined vegetal bases from the snow. Newly leafless but still with tender shoots, the sapling could not help but offer itself skywards: an imminent sacrifice. In the likelihood of soon being taken between warm lips and molars, the larger investment remained below ground, where its roots quietly stacked towards a wider longevity.

Sunk deep beside the heather, deer trods left indentations through the snow that I followed, trusting their choice of path. The deer were more present than ever before. In these winter conditions, instead of being high on the hills, they favoured the protection of woodland. Tucked behind the protection of the gorse bushes that surrounded the cottage or clattering across the shingle to access pockets of trees that edged the shoreline, we encountered each other in a different place each day. Heads seemingly magnetised towards each other. Neither knew what to expect from the other.

Out walking one afternoon, the sky turned yellow grey and thick snow began to fall. A dark bank of cloud gathered behind Beinn na Caillich. Lighter cloud partially shrouded her body, giving her the hood, or veil of her namesake, before

moving to expose a sudden whiteness that gleamed in contrast to her foreboding backdrop. An excitement bubbled at setting out in the snow under this darkening sky, but the Cailleach cautioned me. Now would not be the time to fall, she warned. With the snow falling thickly but the ground no longer frozen, now was the time to favour known routes. Stick to the rocky contours across the land, seek harder footing beneath the snow.

Last winter, I witnessed the aftermath of a deer who died after becoming stuck in a bog. Just a metre from the footpath, the hind had misjudged a step and a life loosing struggle had played out, thrashing a circumference around the depths that held her legs so securely within the mire. By the time I approached, she was long dead. Skeletal, she had collapsed across the peat in defeat, flesh largely taken by scavengers. Coarse hairs, and tiny fragments of fatty skin were scattered in circles across heather and grasses, dissipating from the central axis. Over the months that followed, each time I passed, the bones were further dislocated into a radial disarray until finally, all that remained was the long curve of spinal vertebra submerged within the peaty water. Eventually, that too was claimed and just the site of the struggle remained, the peat bearing the marks of this double-edged story: desperation and death versus abundance and opportunity.

Winter is full of such cautionary tales. When the energy of most prey— humans included— is at its lowest ebb, risk taking behaviour becomes ill advised. I listened to these tiny intuitions as part of my practice of being here alone and of holding responsibility for my safety. Whiteout conditions blanked out the hills above. My walk reduced in scope, tightening into a smaller circle around the holding point of the cottage, safeguarding my presence without curtailing appreciation of this transformation.

There was no fear of losing my way, walking back above the coastline through the strandline of Atlantic oaks that stand facing the sea: some alive, others dead. Those already dead hold a such a distinctive stance. Without the furze of smaller branches and coverings of bark, their smooth limbs loomed incredulously long, pointing in angles that seemed uncommon to the act of being alive. Their dimensional drama was intensified by the chiaroscuro effect of the fallen snow, gently lining their sky-facing surfaces. It was a quiet graveyard to pass through.

In this slow act of dying, an oak tree doubles the biological contribution of its life.

Past the waterfall, the snow fell in urgent frozen pellets, rebounding from my shoulders and announcing the timeliness of my return to the cottage. There they were. Their ears, cupping the vibrations of the forest air, had already caught the breaking bracken of my approach. Their pelts were winter dark, and their heads, turned in my direction, surprised me again with their largeness. We held each other's gaze. These deer were instantly recognisable. A pregnant hind, whose belly bulged with an angular load was followed by her offspring: a darkly furred calf. This mother had barked indignation at my presence near the cottage earlier in the year: an insistence of her right to be here without fear.

Breaking the gaze first, they retreated with hoven speed up against the rocky seam of the waterfall. Tucking his head behind the cream rump of his mother, the calf shouldered his efforts into the incline, not needing to look beyond her for the route ahead. In the shelter of the woodland, it was just the two of them now. The herd was no longer a priority, security was theirs alone. She would show him the places of consistent vegetative growth, the pockets of survival and the tenacity of belonging to this land. Within seconds, they disappeared.

In the old Gaelic calendar, January was named as the month of the wolf, *Am Faolleach*. It marked the time when those creatures would follow the deer down from the hill, utilising their advantage over the snowy terrain for hunting, and coming into closer proximity with human settlements.[64] Wolves, red deer and humans once shared these woodlands and moors, with the Northwest Highlands a stronghold for wolves until their eventual extermination in the seventeenth century. Their presence in the ecosystem would have prevented red deer from lingering in any one place, creating what is termed a 'landscape of disturbance'.[65] With herbivores kept moving through the landscape, enough tree seedlings would reach maturity for woodland regeneration.

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[64] Roddy Maclean, 'Winter Solstice Gaelic Compendium', *NatureScot*, 21 Dec 2022, available at: <https://www.nature.scot/naturescot-celebrates-winter-and-solstice-gaelic> [accessed 13 March]
[65] Franz Vera, *Grazing Ecology and Forest History,* (Cambridge: CABI Publishing, 2000)

That night I participated in a group call with wildlife conservation scientist, John Linnell who talked of the current situation of wolves across Europe.[66] Working for Norway Institute for Nature Research (NINA) as a researcher into the relationships between wildlife and people, he told us of what he considers the under communicated success story of the return of large mammals across Europe, where their long decline is now at a turning point for the first time. In the space of a hundred years in Scandinavia, from a landscape as degraded as Scotland, the return of deer species and a high wolf population has transformed the landscape. As these large iconic species proved to be adaptable in relation to the human landscape, re-inhabiting densely populated countries across Europe, Linnell framed the central question as being, could humans now adapt to them?

On the British Isles, where geographical constraints prevent wolves from returning of their own accord, the legacy of absent predator-prey dynamics is a contentious point within conservation and rewilding. The legal status of deer management remains a grey area within Scottish government policy, where deer culling operates on a voluntary principle. The suggested quotas permit landowners to decide whether to manage for biodiversity by reducing deer numbers to the recommended number, or to keep the population higher and operate for economic gain as a sporting estate. In the Highlands, were red deer move freely from estate to estate, shooting rights fall to the landowners, who, according to their land management strategy, set a quota for each annual cull. Ascertaining an accurate deer count is critical to their management but is a complex undertaking, usually estimated using either direct observation counting or indirect counting methods either on foot or by helicopter. However, even with an accurate count, and a stringent annual cull, the remaining deer are free to graze without predatory influence and without deer fences, will preferentially browse many tree species.

In 2016-17, Trees for Life trialled Project Wolf on their Dundreggan conservation estate in Glenmoriston.[67] From spring to early summer, small teams of

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[66] John Linnell, [Lecture], ‘Predator Prey Dynamics across Europe’, Foresta Collective, (Online, January 2020)
[67] Richard Bunting, ‘Project wolf helps restore Highland Woodland’, *Trees for Life*, available at: <https://treesforlife.org.uk/project-wolf-helps-restore-highland-woodland/> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

volunteers were enlisted to become a human wolf pack for period of one month. The intention of the project was to monitor the effects of using human intervention to create a landscape of disturbance, by preventing deer from habitual patterns of overgrazing. By establishing a practice of walking through the woodland at unpredictable times, mimicking the crepuscular behaviour of wolves, it was hoped that deer would be kept on their toes. The volunteers experimented with practices of noise making, alternating their sleeping locations, and urinating in different spots throughout the woodland.

Through GPS recordings of deer sightings and longer-term monitoring of the patterns of new growth in the woodland, the project could begin to assess the ecological value of the increased landscape of disturbance. Ecologist and operations manager, Doug Gilbert, who conceived and oversaw the project, explained that in many ways, the fear that the presence of predators generates in prey animals is just as important as their direct impacts of hunting.[68] For the participants, their experiencing of the woods and the wider territory, perceived through broken sleep cycles and deep immersion into terrain, climate, and intimate community, was transformed by the ecological role they performed.

It was partially for the deer dynamics that my own tenancy and caretaking role of the cottage and land was needed. The trustees felt that it would be beneficial to have a human presence here not only for the upkeep of the cottage, but also to report back on the deer numbers, and the deer fence. In name, the Old Stalker's Cottage remains freeze-framed in reference to the crucial role that the stalker once played within this landscape. The current stalker, David, has worked with the estate for many years, and has no need to live in such a remote setting for his employment. The geographical and topographical freedom that comes from the boat and quad bike, combined with the telescopic vision and rifle power, allows access to the land, and his responsibilities take him around the peninsula.

I first contacted David with an update on the deer numbers that I'd seen over winter. Three stags, six hinds, and two youngsters. The individual characters that I'd begun to recognise become a tally of approximate figures within an

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[68] Ibid

email. David wrote back to tell me that his boat was out of action, delaying his scheduled visit to Airigh Drishaig this season. In the meantime, he suggested, I could attempt to move the herd from the land. He informed me that in a couple of days, just after the full moon, there would be a '0.9': the lowest tide of the season. His suggestion was that if I was to walk the land from west to east, making noise as I went, then I might be able to flush out the deer from the land, who could escape from the east side of the enclosure, where the deer fence finishes on a high cliff, with tide dependant access on the beach below.

The notion enticed me immediately. The combination of the low tide, the Wolf Moon, and the opportunity to move the deer coalesced into an action that felt appropriate and exhilarating, purposeful. I had one hundred bareroot hazel saplings to plant out as a trial and intended to plant them into the gorse for natural protection, but the chances of their long-term survival would be increased if the grazing habits of the deer were disrupted. I texted my good friend Lynda, to see if she fancied walking over from Kishorn to join for a day of tree planting and deer chasing. The plan was set.

The ritual of disturbance began from the most domestic of settings. I tested the saucepans after washing up that evening, banging on their sides with a wooden spoon, sounding out these culinary vessels for the scale of alarm that they'd be able to raise. When twacked against the side, the lightweight stainless-steel pots were the loudest, verberating in a shifting tone around the kitchen walls, sharp and dull both at once.

This instinctive choice of noise making instrument placed me within the context a much larger lineage of women's fights for social and land justice. Long utilised within political action, the noise making action of *Cacerolazo* was first used in 1848, when French housewives took to the streets to protest high rents, unemployment, and starvation wages. Taking the name from the casserole pot, the action was embraced as a tool of political dissent and came to be widely used across the world including Morocco, Iceland, Lebanon, Venezuela, Mexico, Ecuador and Chile. In October 2021, Chilean-French rap artist, Ana Tijoux released a video compilation of recent Chilean protests with a new song called

'Caceralzo'. The theme of overcoming of fear is central to the movement and evident within the lyrics: No tenemos miedo/ We are not afraid.[69]

Protests of noise barrage has its own history in Glasgow, where in the rent strike of 1914 when the pressures of insufficient housing were confounded by profiteering landlords, organizer Mary Barbour and her army of women used rattles, pots and pans to warn other women of an eviction. Glasgow's population had increased by almost seventy thousand people, mainly immigrants from Ireland and the Highlands. The protests eventually resulted in the successful implementation of the 'Rent Restriction Act' in 1915.[70] The banging of kitchen pots as a form of social protest demonstrates the ferocious immediacy in which these domestic implements can become tools of political protest, or in this case, a method of ecological disturbance.

A multitude of significances were held within contemplation of this act as a form of *Cacerolazo*, not least the inevitable connection to be made between the deer and the casserole pot. Despite the high prevalence of red deer, venison remains a premium product, often not reaching the food supply chain even for local people. It stirred a questioning, as to whether this planned disturbance was a protest or ritual. Was it personal or political? Social or ecological? What would it make us, I wondered, giving fright to the deer to disturb their routine occupancy of this habitat that they are so much a part of? My own presence within the woodland began to take on a new meaning. An intermediary role between stalker and deer.

With her cheeks flushed red from the exhilaration of a long walk under a bright sky, Lynda arrived at Airigh Drishaig to join me the next day. Her house could almost be seen from this land. We'd known each other for years, so the chances of us ending up as near neighbours along this coastline never ceased to delight. After such a long time in my own company, looking into her face felt like an exercise in remembering the beauty of the human form. My smile responded to

[69] Andrea Alejandro Gordillo Marquina, 'The Art of Protest in Latin America: A Media Review of Ana Tijoux's Cacerolazo and Other Protest Art in Latin America's 2019 Uprisings, *Comparative Education Review*, 64, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020)
[70] N. Gray, 'Spatial composition and the urbanization of capital: the 1915 Glasgow rent strikes and the housing question reconsidered' in, Gray, N. (ed.) *Rent and its Discontents: A Century of Housing Struggle,* (London: Rowan & Littlefield International, 2018) pp. 49-67

hers as if connected by the same muscles. As Lynda swung her rucksack— strapped full of recycled vole guards— to the ground, we stood in an easy mirroring of each other, sharing our news in an excitable exchange.

I filled Lynda in on the plan for the day. Living in a region where deer numbers are kept artificially high— with some estates even feeding the deer to maintain the population— there is little sentiment held towards deer by locals. With a familiarity grown through a long-running attempt to keep deer away from her garden— so destructive can they be to vegetable and ornamental plants alike— Lynda understood the plan perfectly, and graciously held back from any comment on its possible futility.

The tree planting came first. After planting a couple in the garden, we ventured down from the cottage into the woodlands. These trees were to be a trial for what might come. Utilising the natural slopes and protective alcoves formed by rocks and gorse bushes in addition to the vole guards, we planted into the bracken, upending squares of peat and slicing down into the dark crumbly earth to slip the roots into place, positioning the largest of their root strands to face the prevailing wind.

Once the trees were planted, we took stock at the north westerly corner of the woodland closest to the cottage, holding pots in hand. We'd traced a long route across the land from the west edge of the deer fence back towards the cottage without any sighting of deer. All bets suggested that the deer were right here, in the woods where we had begun the day. We established a plan: I'd take the high route through the gorse and Lynda would trace down the side of the gorge coming round into the large oaks at the bottom, where we'd meet again near the trees we'd planted out, hoping to flush the deer towards the east side of the fence.

Stepping away from each other, we launched ourselves into the woodland, hollering voices and thrashing pots with wooden spoons. We split into our separate routes, our sounds veering between rhythm and discord. Flashes of greenery and gorse whipped past me as my vision oscillated, the presence of ivy just registering, then the soft grey tips of a rowan tree, before spinning my head to see four deer rising, startled from the wet meadow, and breaking for the gap

in the gorse. I yelled to Lynda they were coming in her direction, and her distant voice shouted back. Seconds passed before they bolted again, this time towards the east as we had hoped. I ran to the edge of the woods, startling the presence of woodcocks whose pointed panicked wings uplifted from their camouflage, flying in low trajectories beyond the canopy.

Out of the woodland and onto the path, something of the chase flooded through me: would my position prevent the deer from turning back into the woods? Woodcock after woodcock launched in new protest, alarm-calling the rupture of their ground dwelling peace. I called out my apologies, promising this action would not be repeated any closer to nesting season. Thundering down the path, banging my pot, flashes of partial understanding raced through me. Was this a ritual of care within a broken ecosystem? Was my excitement a sense of ecological belonging, or an expression of my latent political fury? Was this pot banging best directed towards the deer, or the landowners?

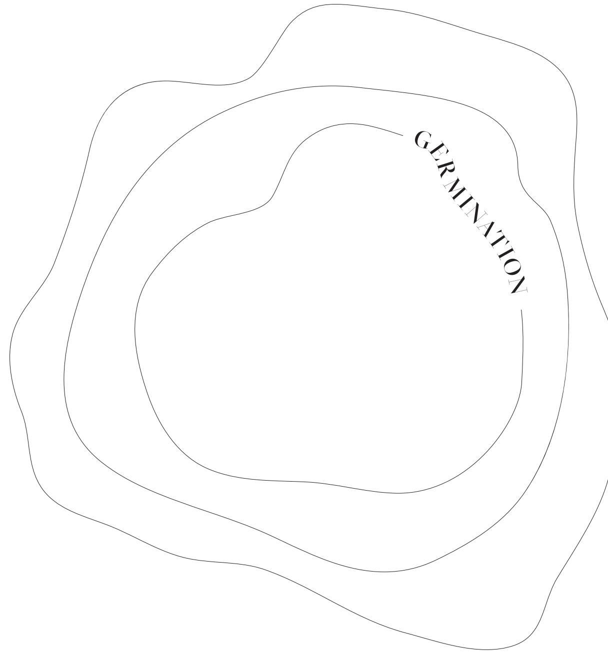
Long after darkness fell, and the saucepans settled back on their hooks, the story of disturbance continued to reverberate. Lynda and I talked for hours into the night, discussing the possibility for bringing small groups of people here for programmes of ecological immersion, combining tree planting with story-telling and contemplative practices. Lying in bed I wondered if the deer had already returned to the woods, and whether they would linger for as long as usual. Had the tips of the newly planted hazel saplings already been munched? What was the nature of this intentional disturbance within a much-disturbed ecosystem? Was the action a flash in the pan, or could this role be repeated, using my embodied presence and capacity to disrupt, as means to stretch new dynamics between the trees?

On the cusp of sleep, I imagined the Cailleach uprising from her horizon, brushing off the snow from her body. Pot in hand, she strode through the depths of Loch Kishorn, stepping onto the shoreline to gently admonish the deer herd away from the woodland, stirring them from patterns of overgrazing. As she urged them onwards, she took up tree-seed from the forest floor and broadcasted them uphill, beyond where the wind alone could ever disperse them. Tightening her shawl around her, and clasping her pot in hand, she made

for the long road towards the city, where the powers of the Deer Commission could benefit from some healthy disturbance.

In the reality of living and relating within broken ecosystems, our individual and collective responsibilities oscillate between acts of caretaking and acts of protest. There is an integrity and hope within these holding actions, but they will be futile without systemic change. As an ecological ritual for these times, this instance of *cacerolazo* must also signal a rallying call in the face of much the larger political injustices of land and power. Applecross Estate, and every other sporting estate, must be urged towards and held accountable for responsible deer management. Patterns of growth and disturbance, and the stretching dynamics between vegetation and animal continue to pulse through the woodland, where land ownership, power and politics co-shape this ancient dance towards an uncertain future.

GERMINATION: Making Sanctuary



Notice to Leave

The clattering of sharp footsteps above my head startled me out of deep sleep. A deer was on the roof! In the drag of split-second comprehension, my mind already risk-assessing the situation, reality slowly revealed itself. I was not below the low eaves of my bedroom at Airigh Drishaig. The deer hooves were my neighbour's high-heeled shoes ricocheting down the concrete stairwell. I was in Glasgow.

The first few days back in the city were always surreal. On the long train ride, accompanied by the smells of the woods and the cottage, Airigh Drishaig travelled with me, enshrouding me for the journey. The hills between Strathcarron and Garve were encased with snow, the glacial glens open saucers which the wide curves of River Bran meandered through as if still a primordial landscape. Only the repeated prefix within the station names, Achnashellach, Achnasheen, Achanault, showed these had once been fields, or agricultural holdings.[1] Hundreds upon hundreds of deer were down from the hills, seeking sustenance within the mesotrophic grasslands of the river valley flood plain. A huge herd clustered beside the rail track, intent on grazing until the noise of the train jolted them into alarm and they peeled back in seamless continuity.

My own immersion within the landscape peeled away too. The water bottle which I had filled from the burn halfway along the footpath to Toscaig was empty by the time the train reached Perth. With each change of platform, the sensation of hard, asphalt surfaces became more normalised. By the time I reached Glasgow city centre the sodium glow of the streetlights illuminated the pavements, bustling with glammed up couples and groups clutching bottles, some staggering with as much difficulty as I had moving through the headwinds earlier that morning. 'Where are you from?' inquired an amicable but inebriated man, as I waited at the bus stop with my rucksack.

In the stairwell of my tenement flat beside the door, there was a chipped pattern within the flaking gloss paint that I imagined to be a map of Scotland.

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[1] *Achadh* meaning field or agricultural holding, 'The Gaelic origins of place names in Britain', *Ordnance Survey*, available at: <https://getoutside.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/guides/the-gaelic-origins-of-place-names-in-britain/> [accessed 15 March 2023]

Before turning the key, in a ritual of arrival I touch the two geographical points which my life moves between with my fingertips. Applecross and Glasgow. Twelve hours door to door. Inside, I dropped my rucksack to the floor and unlaced my walking boots. It was the height of the ceiling which always newly surprised me. This was the exchange. What was lost in terms of external horizon was gained through an increased elevation of internal living space. A different sort of headspace.

A handful of days after I arrived, clothes washed, rucksack packed away and city routines newly established, a letter landed on the doormat. A Notice to Leave. With all kindest wishes, she wrote, the owner of our flat had decided to move back in, and Dominique and I had been given a period of three months to relocate. This was the reality of renting. At any given moment, regardless of duration, circumstances can change and the 'home' that you have established— the container for the books, objects and textiles that have journeyed with you through decades of moving around— is revealed as a stage-set. The non-permanence of the arrangement is unavoidable. You were only ever borrowing the right to call this home. The walls pass on their inhabitants in seasons of occupancy, depending on property markets and the disposition and strategy of landlords. Furniture and belongings move between neighbourhoods and into the next flat which might hold you for a while, in a new set of imperfect circumstances.

In those same weeks, my relationship with Graham upended and cracks of uncertainty spread through my city existence. Questions of children, family and how our lives might grow together, or not, loomed over us. My throat crawled with grief, hollowing my insides, and rinsing me in endless cycles of sadness. Airigh Drishaig was a distant but steady anchor, surfacing in my awareness like a far-away friend who offered compassion and watched me break without judgement. A chasm had opened where nothing was solid or certain. Nothing ever was, it's just that now the veneer had shattered, and I could see backstage.

Sanctuary

Since holding the tenancy of the cottage at Airigh Drishaig, the question of living there full time would cross my mind. In the moment that the tenancy of my flat was terminated, the option of moving resurfaced. Could I strip down my books and belongings, pack them up and load them into a borrowed boat to move my life out there? Could I handle the reality of my nearest human neighbour being a four-mile walk? Would the continuous endeavour of solo living serve my life and the land? Despite the strong allure of committing to the land as my home, I always reached the same conclusion: I didn't want to put undue pressure on the place to support me. I didn't want to put pressure on myself. I wasn't a recluse. This wasn't solely a project of homemaking, or of homesteading. My commitment was towards playing a part in the ecology of the place. And if I was to leave the city now, I sensed it would be the end of my relationship with Graham. It was a delicate, uncertain time, as if the fabric of my life was fraying and I didn't know which threads, if any, would hold.

With each turn of the wheel, with each change in my life, I come to think again about what Airigh Drishaig is, both in terms of its place identity, and how I relate with it. As if by understanding Airigh Drishaig, I would be able to understand the rest of my life. How do I hold it, orbit around it, bringing it into relation with the other parts of my life? How could the place best be understood to benefit its more-than-human communities and habitats? There was a sense that if I knew how to define it, if it was named as a 'project' then it would be possible to proceed with a sense of purpose. For in truth, my tenancy there was as tenuous as in the city. I would never be the owner of that land, nor perhaps of any land. I was permitted to be the tenant for as long as the Trust found the arrangement agreeable, but there was no assurance that one day they might decide to turn it into a hunting lodge or develop it as tourist accommodation. There was an undercurrent of wanting to frame it within a project to protect it, and to protect myself.

When I'm not there, but thinking about Airigh Drishaig, there's a particular scene which resurfaces in my mind. Just downstream from the footbridge, after the slide of black rock where the water widens and shallows, there's a ridge of

land which faces the corner of the woodland. It's always exactly here that I enter the imagined scene. Last night, for the first time, I realised that I could move. So, I entered the woods, stepping over the corner of the dry-stone wall where deer, and other wildlife pass through. I moved towards the big oak who grows straight up, its trunk pale with grey rosettes of lichen. The blaeberry foliage was perfect, interspersed with star mosses and leaf mulch, and with non-footsteps I drifted towards the waterfall gorge. My spatial memory was precise to the point of hyperreality where I could almost uplift from the ground to observe the woodland from the cool air currents above. Instead, I relaxed, and let go of any expectation. Slowly my torso opened wide into the depth of the gorge. Ivy tangled up oaks that sprouted with filmy ferns and fleshy lobes of lungwort. And below me, the sea, taking this flow of tumbling thoughts and falling water into its holding.

The Applecross Placenames project, coordinated by the Applecross Historical Society, worked to digitally map the vernacular placenames of the peninsula collected over the past twenty-five years.[2] From my desk in Glasgow, I could hover over the satellite map and zoom close to the placenames recorded by those who have known the landscape and its mosaic of microhabitats. The placenames were plotted thickly across the terrain, with the details holding the clarity, colour and possible contradictions that characterise living memory, oral histories and the *beul-aithris*, or folklore of the landscape. I traced the route of the footpath to the huge bend of the river Toscaig, where on foot, I would stop to appreciate the cascading water which cuts through the bedrock and then turns, as if changing its mind. *Lùbadh na h-Abhna*. The bending of the river. According to the map, the bend had once concealed a whisky still which had been hidden there, with smuggling something of a tradition in the area. For each placename, and each intimacy recorded, many others had been lost.

Thinking about Airigh Drishaig from the city, I wondered again what it would mean for this place— or for any previously inhabited place— to be designated as a site for rewilding, or for conservation. How would the act of naming a place as a nature reserve, or a wildlife sanctuary, come to shape its identity and the

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[2] Applecross Placenames map, *Applecross Placenames Project*, available at: <http://www.applecrossplacenames.org.uk/map/> [accessed 23 Jan 2023]

understanding of its past, present and future relationships? Does the act of formulating a conservation project, or designating a site with protection, benefit a place and its more-than-human communities? Or is a place such as Airigh Drishaig best left undesignated, under the radar, unwritten?

The placename of Applecross is thought by some experts to be Pictish, derived from Aber Crosan, or 'the merging of the Crosan river'.[3] Gaelic speakers refer to being *on* Applecross— *air a' Comraich*— using the preposition most often used for islands, perhaps a reminder of how for many years the peninsula was more easily approached by sea than by land. The Gaelic name for Applecross, a' Chomraich, or in modern Gaelic, Comraich, means 'Sanctuary'. Stemming from the legacy of Maelrubha, the Irish monk who established a monastery at Applecross sometime close to 673 AD, the Gaelic placename reveals the enduring significance of its religious history.

> The parish [..] in Gaelic is always spoken as 'a' Chomraich,' the girth, from the right of sanctuary, extending, it is said, for six miles in all directions, possessed by the monastery founded by Malruba. […] Ecclesiastically there is no spot in Ross, nor, indeed, with the exception of Iona, in Scotland, more venerable than the churchyard of Applecross, which contains […] the site of that monastic settlement which was founded by Malruba, and from which he laboured as the Apostle of the North. Malruba's grave is still pointed out, marked by two low round pillar stones […] Nor has the belief […] died out, that the possession of some earth from the saint's tomb ensures safety in travelling, and a return to Applecross.[4]

An Irish chronicle states that at the age of thirty, around 672 AD, Maelrubha set off from his monastery in Bangor, in the north of Ireland, to Scotland, although the true identity of the historical figure remains a mystery, with various interpretations.[5] Taking two years for this treacherous journey by sea, he arrived on Applecross where he established a significant monastery, within the grounds on which were agricultural provisions, accommodation, and a Scriptorium. The religious laws afforded the monastery grounds with the medieval protection ordinarily bestowed to churches, and extended to a six-mile radius establishing

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[3] Iain MacLennan, *Applecross and its Hinterland: A Historical Miscellany,* (Glasgow: A'Chomraich Publishing, 2013), p. 10

[4] William John Watson, *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty*, (Inverness: Northern Counties, 1904), p. 201

[5] Archibald Scott, 'Saint Mael Rubha', *The Scottish Historical Review*, (n.p, 1909)

the peninsula as a place of sanctuary.[6] Etymologically, *Sanctuary* relates to a sacred place, shrine, or private room, with the extended meaning of Sanctuary as a place of refuge or protection, especially a church or building in which a fugitive could take refuge, immune from arrest, first recorded in English by Chaucer in 1380, borrowed directly from the Late Latin, *sānctuārium*.[7]

For over one hundred and twenty years the monastery flourished. Maelrubha travelled far and wide, spreading the Gospel into the Northern Pictland. Historians have traced his probable routes and influence by the twenty churches and multiple places named after him.[8] The Scottish Place Name Survey 1971, suggests that the Bealach na Bà might be better translated as Bealach na Aba, Pass of the Abbot, a reference to the route being used by Maelrubha.[9] Around 794 AD, shortly after Maelrubha's death, Norsemen of Scandinavia made their first visits to the monasteries, attracted by the riches they held. By the turn of the eighth century, the Iona monastery was burned, and the Applecross monastery was destroyed, with the materials of the Scriptorium and the carved stones demolished. Tradition apparently had it that as the Norse ships sailed away from the raid, their boats sank in the calm waters of Applecross Bay, purportedly by divine intervention.[10]

In Applecross Inn one afternoon, wedged between friends on the table for locals where a fisherman called Guts had just shown me how his fingertip had been bitten clean away by a conger eel, someone mentioned that depending on your perspective, Applecross could be a sanctuary or a prison. I hadn't fully appreciated before then that for locals, the distinctive geological landmass might also create a sense of geographical confinement. In the winter months, the snow gates of the hill pass could sometimes be closed for weeks, necessitating the use of the longer coastal route, and in the summer months, the throng of cars and motorhomes made a bottleneck along Shore Street and turned the Bealach into an exasperating obstacle course.

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[6] Applecross Heritage Centre, 'History and Culture', available at: <https://www.applecrossheritage.org.uk/applecross-history-culture/> [accessed 15 March]
[7] Robert Barnhart (ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology,* (New York: Chambers, 1988), p. 955
[8] MacLennan, p. 10
[9] Applecross Placenames map, ibid.
[10] Applecross Heritage Centre, ibid.

The passing comment put me in mind of a scene from the historical murder novel, *His Bloody Project: Documents Relating to the Case of Roderick Macrae* by Graeme Macrae Burnet. This fictional account of a brutal triple murder is told through the pretext of gathered statements and court testimonies and is set in the townships of Applecross in 1869. Following a raucous drinking session in Applecross Inn, the protagonist Roddy Macrae rides his horse to the top of the Bealach with the intention of leaving Applecross. But when he reaches the top of the hill pass it is as if he is magnetically restricted to the geographies of his existence, and he turns back to Applecross. He is only released from the bounds of his locale when sentenced in Inverness, where he is eventually hung.[11] *His Bloody Project* catalysed a niche tourism circuit of its own, with readers seeking out the townships and houses detailed within the text, and even asking locals if they had known of the characters.

When the proprietor of Applecross Inn, Judy Fish, heard that I was the new tenant of Airigh Drishaig, I was passed a folder of newspaper clippings with an article which referred to Airigh Drishaig. John— the previous tenant of the cottage— was well known to the community having once worked in the inn, and Airigh Drishaig was known to many by his association. Settling in beside the open coal fire, I read how prior to the construction of the coastal road in 1975, the most reliable access to the peninsula had been by 'The Puffin' ferryboat, which once chugged back and forth between Kyle of Lochalsh and Toscaig. The article told how 'long ago, foot travellers were guided according to the season of the year [...] The wary followed the shore-path by Airigh Drishaig.'[12]

Airigh Drishaig might well have once been a stopping off point along a familiar, well used route. Some local historians even thought that it might have been the most logical route by which cattle were driven round the peninsula. The landscape was thick with different iterations of connectivity and the shifting patterns of human habitancy, routes and habitats. Although fixed within the placename, the sense of sanctuary within this landscape was malleable, entirely dependent on each person's position and perspective.

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[11] Graeme Macrae Burnet, *His Bloody Project: Documents Relating to the Case of Roderick Macrae,* (Glasgow: Saraband, 2015)
[12] Allan Little, *Out of the Clouds and into Applecross*, (n.p. 1973)

The religious premise of Sanctuary influenced the emergence of nature reserves, with some of the earliest examples of reservations linked to a religious underpinning. The designation of protection given to reserved areas is a concept dating back to antiquity, with King Devanmanpiyatissa of Sri Lanka in the third century BC, who, having converted to Buddhism, came to the realization that all beings had equal right to the land and created what is understood to be the world's first wildlife sanctuary.[13] The world's first modern nature reserve was Walton Hall in West Yorkshire, created in 1821 by the naturalist and explorer, Charles Waterton. Creating a three-mile long, three-metre-high wall around the site to deter poachers, Waterton experimented with making nesting boxes to support bird populations and attempted a translocation of small owls from Italy.[14]

This first example of a modern nature reserve emerged within the industrial period, from a distinctly colonial legacy. With an education that entwined a predisposition to natural history and naturalism with a flair for hunting vermin, Waterton travelled to Guyana where he oversaw his uncle's slave plantations for a few years. He then walked to Brazil barefooted, where he met and married an indigenous woman before returning to Yorkshire. His written documentation of this journey, *Waterton's Wanderings in South America,* would later be read by and influenced the ideas of Charles Darwin. David Attenborough described Waterton as 'one of the first people anywhere to recognise, not only that the natural world was of great importance, but that it needed protection as humanity made more and more demands on it.'[15]

In Scotland there are forty-three National Nature Reserves, which are defined as areas of land set aside for nature and are managed to protect specific species and habitats, and to enable opportunity for people to enjoy natural areas. Just inland from Applecross, near the village of Kinlochewe, Beinn Eighe and Loch Maree Islands National Nature Reserve was the first to be established in the UK.

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[13] Kokila Konasinghe and Asanka Edirisinghe, 'Follow thy old wisdom', *The Association of Commonwealth Universities Review* (2021), available at: <https://www.acu.ac.uk/the-acu-review/follow-thy-old-wisdom/> [accessed 23 Jan 2023]

[14] Philip Gosse, *The Squire of Walton Hall: the Life of Charles Waterton,* (London: Cassell, 1940)

[15] Yorkshire Reporter, 'Charles Waterton- Naturalist & Explorer', available at: <https://www.yorkshirereporter.co.uk/charles-waterton-naturalist-explorer/> [accessed 23 Jan 2023]

The reserve encompasses forty-eight square kilometres from loch-side to mountain and focuses on woodland restoration including montane habitat and ancient Caledonian pinewood. It is thought that Maolrubha spent the last period of his life here, living on one of the islands. The reserve is actively managed through reduced herbivore pressure, growing and planting local provenance saplings and supporting areas of natural regeneration towards a vision of 'large, continuous connected woodland supporting wider biodiversity and more able to withstand change.'[16]

The concept of the natural world requiring protection from humanity has been foundational to conservation globally through the designation of 'Protected Areas'. In their book, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*, Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher explain how Protected Areas were originally understood and globally enforced through an approach which has come to be known as 'fortress' conservation, which 'in its ideal form sought to enclose a piece of wild terrain and prevent human disturbance therein.'[17] Fortress conservation has been controversial for the enforced removal of human inhabitants and the infringement of indigenous land practices, enacted through an exclusionary politics. While Büscher and Fletcher point out that in Western Europe, conservation is more focused on the sustainable management of cultural, often agricultural landscapes, and that on both sides of the Atlantic sustainable land use has long competed with dominant preservationist approaches, they concur that it is the North American form of wilderness areas that stood out as the main model for the global expansion of protected areas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which still influences conservation policies.

In 2014, a new designation of 'Wild Land Areas' (WLAs) were determined by government agency NatureScot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage), and through a process of consultation and mapping forty-one areas were determined. The criteria specified these as 'core areas of mountain and moorland and remote

[16] NatureScot, 'Beinn Eighe and Loch Maree Islands NNR', available at: <https://www.nature.scot/enjoying-outdoors/visit-our-nature-reserves/beinn-eighe-and-loch-maree-islands-nnr/beinn-eighe-and-loch-maree-islands-nnr-about-reserve> [accessed 2 May 2023]
[17] Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving nature Beyond the Anthropocene*, (London & New York: Verso, 2020), p. 14

coast, which mostly lie beyond contemporary human artefacts such as roads or other development.'[18] National planning policy states that planners should identify and safeguard the wild land character of these areas. 'Wild Land Area No.25' encompasses a vast uninhabited core of the north and east part of the Applecross peninsula. The 137 square kilometre area of WLA 25 extends from the highest point of the Bealach and its neighboring mountain range —also designated with a Special Area for Conservation— down to undulating hills of peatland and ends abruptly above the townships and houses which edge the coastline of Loch Torridon. The land is used mainly for deer stalking, stock grazing, fishing, nature conservation and recreation, and is managed by Applecross Trust. In describing the attributes of wildness held within this WLA, the report outlines the physical and aesthetic qualities of the mountain ridge, which gives a perception of '*high risk*'; holds an '*awe-inspiring*' quality, and notes that some faces are so steep that they seem impenetrable, but this also contributes to the '*sense of remoteness*' and '*sanctuary*'.[19]

The Wild Land Areas initiative proved to be highly divisive, with some environmentalists objecting to the prioritization of landscape aesthetic, rather than ecological significance. Likewise, while the report positioned wild land as an important national recreational resource, some critics claimed this prioritised an urban perspective, where recreation is seen as an escape from the city to the wild. The binary framing which valorised wild land as uninhabited and separate from cultural landscapes damaged relations with some local communities, who argued that sustainable land use was made invisible by this designation. Although the Wild Land Areas aimed to protect and place value on these landscapes, it offered no legal protection, nor any targets to increase biodiversity. Since designation, a recent report concluded that overall loss of wild land appears to be increasing, encroached upon by development of energy generation or commercial forestry.[20]

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[18] NatureScot, 'Assessing impacts of Wild Land Areas- Technical Guidance', (September 2020), available at: <https://www.nature.scot/doc/assessing-impacts-wild-land-areas-technical-guidance> [accessed 23 Jan 2023]

[19] NatureScot, 'Applecross Wild Land Area' (July 2016), available at: <https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2021-06/Wild%20land%20Description%20Applecross-July-2016-25.pdf> [accessed 23 Jan 2023] p. 3

[20] Wildland Research Ltd, 'The State of Wild Land in the Scottish Uplands', *Scottish Wild Land Group*, (February 2020), available at: <https://www.swlg.org.uk/pdfs/SWLG_-_WLA%20Study-report%20Final_low_res-24_Feb_2022-combined.pdf> [accessed 23 Jan 2023]

The Wester Ross Biosphere was initiated with UNESCO status in 1976 and was recently expanded to include the Applecross peninsula. The biosphere is envisioned as a regional 'landscape for learning' in which monitoring, research, education, and training are encouraged to support sustainable conservation of natural and managed ecosystems.[21] Divided into distinct management zones, Beinn Eighe makes up the 'core zone', strictly protected for conservation, and is surrounded by 'buffer zone', while the majority of the area— including the entire Applecross peninsula— is designated as a 'transition zone', where it is intended that communities foster socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable economic and human activities.[22] The zoning applies to such large areas that any nuance of habitats within the Applecross peninsula, let alone within Airigh Drishaig, are left out of the picture.

Perhaps Airigh Drishaig was best left as an unofficial nature sanctuary. Although undesignated, it offers a core area of habitat. I was making my own guidelines of relating with it, and writing about it, guided by continual observations within the growing relationship. There were lives and stories here which were not mine to tell, and I honoured these. It was a sanctuary for other humans too. Graham, who was training to be a play therapist, came here for respite and reconnection with the living world, which strengthened his ability to be present for the children he worked with. Others came to Airigh Drishaig for solo time, their stories and private rituals adding to my understanding of the power of this landscape. The risk of designating a place as sanctuary is that sanctuary can be undone through the naming, but the practice of *making* sanctuary is different.

Poet, philosopher, and post-activist scholar Bayo Akomolafe draws on the medieval origins of sanctuary which once offered fugitives protection to articulate a contemporary practice of 'Making Sanctuary.' Describing this as a cartographical project of losing one's way, Akomolafe suggests that it is only by straying from the pattern that a kind of generative incapacitation takes place, and we might allow ourselves to be changed. Every time we speak of solving the

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[21] Wester Ross Biosphere, 'Wester Ross Biosphere Strategic Plan 2018-2023', available at: <https://wrb.scot/10-year-plan> [accessed 2 May 2023]

[22] UNESCO, 'Biosphere Reserves', available at: <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/about> [accessed 2 May 2023]

climate crisis, Akomolafe contends, we are getting it all wrong. 'What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?'[23] Questioning the politics of restoration, with its language of healing, regeneration, and justice, what we need instead is to shapeshift: to be informed by fugitivity and different differences. 'Modernity is like a slave ship. Why would I want to repair a slave ship? What I feel instead is an affinity with the cracks. I want to spill and explore.'[24]

Throughout Akomalafe's writings and talks, he urges us into the cracks, asking, 'what if the crack itself is the site of sanctuary?' The crack can be used to restore the usual, the familiar, the business as usual, *or* by going into the cracks, we might enter new grounds of experience, where politics and practices can accommodate the monstrous, and where decoloniality gives rise to difference. Akomalofe contends that in this time of climate chaos, wherein the global population undergoes the effects of displacement, disruption and devastation, home itself has become a contested subject. We, our human family, are now refugees from permanence and stability. In the Anthropocene, it is not easy to situate home. He urges inquiry into this act of perpetual homemaking, recognising it as a colonial project of striving into the unknown and then flattening it into a neighbourhood of certainty. Bodies and permanence enact each other in settlements. But in the view of climate collapse, which dislodges the assumed permanence of any settlement, we are all migrants.

In recognition that the foundations of the modern project are not stable, we come to touch larger aspects of ourselves that exceed modern conceptualisation. What kinds of relationship might emerge from this understanding? There is a tension between the idea of fugitivity being *useful*, and yet it is the most vulnerable, the first displaced, the least resourced, who are most immediately at risk within climate chaos. The property owners, the western population, the settled, those who have benefitted most from the status quo are often the least effected. Is there a danger of idealising, or appropriating fugitivity when the ones who benefit most from economic systems stand as the

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[23] Bayo Akomolafe, [Lecture] 'Making Sanctuary', *The Posthumanities Hub and the Eco-and Bioart Lab*, (10 March 2022), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5xQqP_w84k&t=2177s> [accessed 3 May 2023]

[24] Ibid

most secure? But perhaps it is only by going into the cracks that we might recognise that this project of security and protectionism— even restoration— might trap us into certain arrangements of power. Processes of colonial mastery have shaped the way in which we understand wild places. Akomolafe speaks of a need for us to lose our way to unlearn these processes and make new relationships.

The roots of extractivism are embedded within the valorisation of the wild and are further concretised by the politics of offsetting. Within the Platationocene, as Tsing and Haraway name this epoch, the protection of one place affords the exploitation of another.[25] As Bayo Akomolafe describes, Making Sanctuary is not about any one fixed site, but an ongoing activity of research. Not a place of safety, or a singular destination, but a rift in the fabric— a crack— wherein we might meet animals, ancestors, and democratic electives of a post-anthropocene inquiry, and be changed.[26] In a practice of slowing down and meeting the world anew, there comes not a recycling of what has already been, but the grounds for transformation. As the layers of personal and planetary grief cracked me open, I realised that this practice of making sanctuary was a way of holding all the pieces at once, without seeking resolution.

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[25] Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6. 1. (2015), pp. 159-165
[26] Akomolafe, ibid.

Packing up

I stood in the box room, assessing the stack of my material possessions. A crate of crafting kit, packaged away until the next making project, was wedged alongside my camping kit. A bag of clothes awaiting repair. A repertoire of my brightest textiles, barely worn, folded alongside an archive of my past: old notebooks and files that created a patchy testimony to years of education and self-employment. Between the shelves, it was apparent that things had changed. Woven threads of pupae were clotted intermittently within fabrics. As I shook out my belongings, tiny, winged bodies, fled. Flashes of pale bronzed, lightly haired wings uplifted around my periphery, scattering into the sunlight of the living room. *Tineola bisselliella*. Common clothes moth.

My possessions had transformed. The seams of the juggling balls were split open, seeds spilling from the box. The deer hide I'd tanned with Róisín was scalloped into loose hairs. Delicate holes were corroded into the underarms of wool jumpers. The *Tineidae* family are fungus moths, feeding mainly on detritus, fungi, and lichens. Uniquely adapted to feed from keratin, a protein found within natural fibres, the larvae of the clothes moth preferentially seek wool, silk and fur, with cotton as a last resort. In staggering half-flight, the adult seeks a dark, undisturbed place to lay her eggs. A master of disguise, the larvae hatch from their eggs and weave silken tunnels across the fabric, grazing their way across textile landscapes.

Common clothes moths create an unnerving sense of disrupted temporalities. Although we might conceptually know that anything made of natural fibres will eventually decompose to the earth, the larvae enact a deterioration which alarms the human subject, as our material reality is denatured. English Heritage suggests the Common clothes moths spread through expansion of the Roman Empire.[27] The larvae travelled within woollen garments, tucked within the fibres of the marching lines: the legion was more-than-human. As the Roman Empire transformed the societies of western Europe, the common clothes moth spread in equal accordance, successfully broadening its range, and colonising each new

[27] English Heritage, 'Understanding Clothes Moth infestations', available at: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/conservation/clothes-moth-research/understanding-clothes-moths/> [accessed 26 Jan 2023]

home it arrived to. Now spanning across the world, the clothes moth is ubiquitous within human dwellings. Like many other species who have utilised the advances of human conquest to arrive to new lands, the common clothes moth established a reputation as a pest. With a tenacity that can devour tapestries, taxidermy collections, antique carpets and entire museum collections, an entire industry attempts to control their assault.

There seems something entirely fitting about common clothes moth having spread through the conquest and movement of the Romans. It seems to suggest, that however fast or resolute in the march of progress and the pursuit of dominance, the human subject will always be accompanied by communities who by their own nature, shape and affect our materiality. Possessions are but habitats for another, and endeavours to preserve or dominate will always be thwarted by the continuous transformations of the living world, which tug and fray the edges of our certainty.

> The 'human' isn't a fixed thing at all, ready, sure, already there; it's a Euro-American vocation replete with loss and disappearances and monsters and secretions and microbial transgressions. 'It' is an undiscovered continent with an outline that is markedly different from the shape we are used to.[28]

Processes of transformation were always taking place, whether we acknowledged them or not. As the concept of the 'human' reveals itself to be non-discrete, intimately bound as we are with multitudes of ecological lives, our identity is transformed, inviting different relationships with the things and beings with whom we co-inhabit.

That evening I sat in bed with my laptop to participate in an online Glasgow Repair Café darning session.[29] Deirdre Nelson, an artist and crafter, demonstrated the method of stitching in one direction, and then the other—effectively weaving a warp and weft over the hole with thread. Visible mending offers a different relationship with a site of damage. A way of drawing attention to the site of mending, the reparation itself becomes a stylistic embellishment

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[28] Bayo Akomolafe, *I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist*, (2020) Available from: <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/writings> [accessed 26 Jan 2023]
[29] Repair Café Glasgow, available at: <https://repaircafeglasgow.org/> [accessed 15 March 2023]

of the garment. We each began our own project of darning a damaged garment. The eight windows on the screen showed eight bodies and eight needles, each carefully picking a path across textile surface with colours bright and intentional.

As we darned, we chatted about moth damage, and ways of preventing it. Someone had heard of wasp eggs available by mail order which, once hatched, predate on the common clothes moth. A trophic cascade in the most domestic of contexts. The most prevalent method of prevention was to seal possessions up, and use strongly fragranced wood or essential oils, with cedar apparently working well. Deirdre had other advice. She keeps her garments moving throughout her house. The regular displacement discourages the moths from laying eggs there. The trick is, she told us, is to not store more than you can use. She showed us a scarf which had been undergoing a long-term 'collaboration' with the moths, darned with a light-reflective thread in a playful enticement and recognition of her collaborators.[30]

After a day of shaking out fabrics and endless cycles of washing and drying, folding, and storing, my possessions were whittled down, with slip streams of resources piled in separate categories. I'd finally found a new room to move into and was down to the last dregs of belongings to deal with before the move. I ordered new zip-lock storage bags for my woollies and folded them away in some semblance of taking adulthood seriously. My notebooks from the last three years of research surrounded me: pages of field notes, conference notes, research papers. The things I had once been certain on were disturbed by the process of moving and this shifting into the unknown.

The acorns, awakening from their winter dormancy, could no longer contain themselves. They began to poke with their exploratory taproot. '[S]omething is moving/ up through the dark and down through the dark/ with a creaking you wouldn't believe how loud/ surely it must hurt'.[31] With the boldness of new-born ancients, they discarded their flimsy seed coats and reached towards the light.[32]

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[30] Deirdre Nelson, available at: <https://deirdre-nelson.co.uk/> [accessed 15 March 2023]
[31] Katherine Towers, *Oak,* 1. (London: Picador, 2021), p. 5
[32] ibid

Back at Battlefield community compost, I made my offerings. Graham and I turned the compost over last week, almost exactly a year to the day. In the same week we renewed our commitment to each other. Our questions were not yet answerable, but our relationship had re-emerged, tender and strong. With sharp scissors I snipped through seams of clothing deemed beyond repair. Small squares of fabric fluttered down to land on top of teabags, eggs shells, and a bunch of wilted chrysanthemums. This was confetti cut from the cloth which had protected, cocooned, limited, and inspired me over the past decade. Pages of recycled notes no longer relevant to my thinking were scrunched into balls, my handwriting shaped into new formations to layer across the compost bay like displaced sediments. Loose threads and thoughts of my former selves were ready be woven back into the soil.

As I snipped, I thought of Akomolafe's call for the necessary composting of our practices of mastery and arrival. He contends that unlearning mastery is a matter of embarking upon decolonial pilgrimages, in a steady unravelling of how we might perceive ourselves. Only by drawing ourselves back to the humus, to Mother earth, to 'the loamy bacchuspheres and queer worlds beneath our feet', would we germinate.[33] This need to make humus from excess materials, to shed layers of belongings and limitations and to compost former pages of my life, was as critical as anything I could do for Airigh Drishaig.

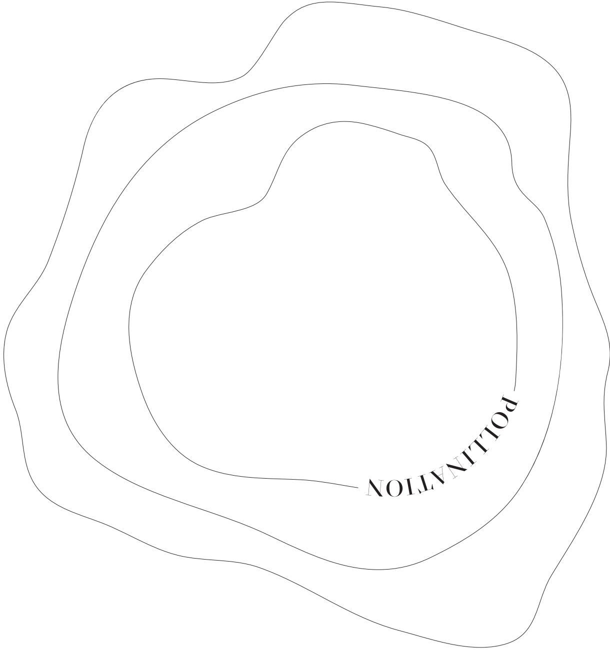
Later that evening, I sat up high on the flood prevention wall of the White Cart where it passes through Battlefield, waiting for the bats to appear. On the other side of the riverbank, a tumbling interplay between a vixen and her two tiny fox cubs entered the scene. I watched them roll and nibble each other on the sandy bank, her playful cuffs both affectionate and instructive to their explorations. As the light faded, the vixen slipped into hunting mode and disappeared through the undergrowth, leaving the cubs to experiment with wetting their paws. At that moment, a raft of ducks and ducklings drifted downstream, looking for safe mooring along the riverbank. While I sat, straining my eyes through the gloaming

[33] Bayo Akomolafe, *I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist*, (2020) Available at: <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/writings> [accessed 26 Jan 2023]

to see where the flotilla might choose to land, a woman scooted back and forth along the passageway of the river, exercising her dog by mobility scooter.

Transfixed on the unfolding scene, I could scarcely breathe, waiting to see if the vixen would make her move, but darkness fell, shrouding the riverbank from sight. The woman and dog— the dog's collar now illuminated like a glow stick— pulled up alongside me and apologised for any disturbance caused by her motor. I assured her otherwise: that her presence had given me confidence in the night. I shared with her the drama I'd witnessed, and she told me how otters had been known to come this far up the river. For a moment, the spark of our multispecies kinship lit up the dark. I would not find absolute certainty, for my relationship, my home, nor for Airigh Drishaig. But there was an aliveness among the burry thicket of the unknown, and there was new trust in the holding of continual transformations.

POLLINATION: Patterns of Return



Cuckoo

> *Latha Buidhe Bealltainn, thig a' chuthag às a taigh geamhraidh*
>
> On the lucky day of Beltane, the cuckook emerges from its winter home.[1]

On the eve before Beltane, just as Ida and I approached the deer fence of Airigh Drishaig, we heard the first cuckoo. We stopped to listen. With our two rucksacks stuffed to the brim with as much as we could possibly carry, the momentary pause was welcome. Ida had offered to help with the garden for a couple of weeks, and I'd welcomed the opportunity for company. The ladder over the stile gave a final thigh-burning obstacle to our long walk in. At the top of the steps, I looked out across the land. It would be my first time here for the month of May. The vegetation was tinder dry. Pale flattened grasses, crispy lichens and the ghost-stems of last year's bog-asphodel seemed to drain the land of colour. However close to the surface spring might be, however latent the green, we could not yet be certain. The cuckoo called again. Cuckoo was certain.

Beltane, the first of May, was once considered the most important celebration of the Gaelic calendar. It heralded the return to outdoor life, and was marked by the renewal of fire, with cattle led between the smoke of twinned fires in a ritual of purification and protection, before being driven to their summer pastures. In the time that the surge of life force returns to the land, the festival honours the energy of the living world. Beltane was considered a liminal time, with rituals made in attempt to redefine and reassert boundaries between worlds.[2] A ritual recorded in the Highlands detailed how herdsmen went out to summer pastures prior to the cattle moving, to offer oatcakes to the land with the incantation: 'Here to thee, wolf, spare my sheep; there to thee, fox, spare my lambs; here to thee eagle, spare my goats; there to thee, raven, spare my kids; here to thee, martin, spare my fowls; there to thee harrier, spare my

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[1] Roddy Maclean, 'An Litir Bheag 834', *An Litir Bheag*, Radio Nan Gàidheal, 9 May 2021, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000vy3f> [accessed 26 Jan 2023]

[2] Michael Newton, *A Handbook of the Scottish Gaelic World*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 181

chickens.'[3] The preparation indicates the deep significance that was given to this seasonal practice of mobile grazing, known as transhumance.

Transhumance, derived from the Latin words, *trans* 'across' and *humus,* 'ground', is practiced in varying forms across the world. In Scotland, where it is thought to have been widespread by the 10th century, it took the form of a seasonal collective movement to pastures and simple dwellings known as *shieling.*[4] In the Gaelic speaking parts this was, *Airigh,* with the placename associated with dairy and suggesting a 'milking-place.'[5] Airigh Drishaig—*Thorny Shieling*— was likely used as seasonal grazing for hundreds of years prior to becoming a permanent settlement in the eighteenth century. Common across the Highlands and the Borders, shieling practice continued into the early twentieth century, where on the Isle of Lewis accounts of the practice are held within living memory. Michael Newton describes how this symbiosis of agriculture and pastoralism informed land use of the Highlanders and was woven into the fabric of life, establishing patterns of settlement and activity throughout the calendar year.

> The agricultural and pastoral practices were not merely an economy which provided sustenance to them: it defined their seasonal calendar and customs, related to their values and worldview, suited their love of freedom and the outdoors, sustained their health, and nourished their sense of pride.[6]

The timing of the move was carefully aligned to the greening of the hillside. The first-hand accounts of Duncan Campbell of Inverness, who experienced shieling life as a boy between 1837-1841 and shared a lineage of experiences passed down to him, are drawn on by historian H. Wallace to vividly portray the processionary entourage to the shielings, after the first flitting insured that the green shoots of grass had emerged:

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[3] Newton, 2000, p. 181
[4] Emma Wood, *Climate Change, Peatbogs, Plague and Potatoes: How Climate Change and Geology Shaped Scotland's History,* (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2009), p. 117
[5] Ryan Foster, 'The Use of the Scandinavian Place-Name Elements -Sætr and -Ærgi in Skye and the Outer Hebrides. In Traversing the inner seas: contacts and continuity in and around Scotland, the Hebrides, and the north of Ireland', in *Traversing the inner seas: contacts and continuity in and around Scotland, the Hebrides, and the north of Ireland* ed. by C. Cooijmans and others, (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies), 2017
[6] Newton, 2000, p. 206

> The second flitting was when the women and children, with all their plenishings and main stock of animals, migrated, and it was the occasion of universal excitement. Then was packed, in the light peat carts which looked not unlike big baskets on low wheels and hauled by small, hardy, and sure-footed native horses, such things as milk vessels, churns, cheese presses, pots, pans, meal bags, salt arks, rennet apparatus, blankets, clothing, shoes and stockings (little used), spinning wheels, spindles and distaffs, flax and wool. The men accompanied this flitting to the grazings, but when the women and children were settled in their sheiling huts, and they had all enjoyed a feast of cream and crowdy, the men returned to the homestead.[7]

Sustained by the pastures of these wilder terrains, the cattle would be tended and milked by the women and children, with a production line of cheeses making an essential economic contribution to the subsistence of the whole community. As a female led practice, the shieling community held a social order unique from village life. Female specific traditions of work and leisure were seasonally reproduced with minimal interference from men, with the knowledge of milking, and cheesemaking passed through the matriarchal lineage.

Shieling culture and its associated freedoms are well documented within songs, ballads, and poems across the Highlands, but not much remained in oral histories or written records about shielings in Applecross. When I spoke with Duncan 'Whatty' Murchison, a crofter who had grown up here, he remembered one story that was told by the elders in his youth. The story goes that one particularly warm year, a wheelbarrow had been loaded up with belongings for the shielings, including a basket of chicken eggs. By the time they arrived, the eggs had hatched, and their multispecies entourage were multiplied.[8]

Going by the placename of Airigh Drishaig and the wider geographies of shieling practice, it seemed a fair assumption that our walk might well be aligned to the exact time of year when the cattle, women and children would be approaching their summer life. Climbing down the ladder on the other side of the fence, I felt the weight of our own supplies. Bags of lentils and oatmeal, a gigantic red cabbage, and a two-litre plastic bottle of olive oil were wedged alongside my laptop, a bivvy bag, a new electric drill, and a packet of sprouting seed

[7] R.H. Wallace, 'Highland Shellings and Norwegian Soeters', *The New Century Review* 3, 14 (1898), 84-92, p. 88
[8] Interview with Duncan Murchison, 9th December 2021

potatoes. Deliberations between protein or fat, taste and longevity, the planning of food was a critical task for each stay at Airigh Drishaig. The food lists were similar each time, with slight variation according to the change of season, or to how much I'd managed to carry out previously. Our plans for sustenance were dependent on variabilities of the season, on which wild plants might be ready for foraging. What could be sprouted, or grown? What could we do without? Had we remembered the chocolate?

For once, the footpath was dry. Even through the usually boggy patches, our feet met with a newly firm iridescence of sand. After a period without rain, the sphagnum mosses either side of the path had shrunken to a tightly woven mat. Each time I returned there was a sense of meeting the land anew. The primroses were out, lining the side of the dried-up burn, as if keening for its return. The flash of unfamiliar pink hooded stems and dots of deep violet-blue attested to the fact that I did not yet know the intricate succession of wildflowers. There would be multitudes of new encounters, opening ever more terrain within my knowledge of this place.

The cuckoo called insistently from the edge of the woodland. This patchy edge between heathland and scrubby woodland was once again it's 'home', as inadequate, or temporal as that word might be in relation to its long migration. We staggered the last stretch of the footpath towards the cottage, rounding the contours of the hillside to be faced once again with Loch Kishorn. The view stopped us in our tracks. Beneath a vertical chunk of rainbow, a red oil rig squatted on the water. Our mouths dropped open as we comprehended this newly arrived mechanical giant. Backdropped by pink cumulus, the rig was a surreal interruption to this familiar scene. The cuckoo called again, and we descended between the yellow passage of gorse down the rocky path towards the cottage, stopping to inhale the pudding-like fragrance. I fumbled with the keys to the front door— we had arrived. The latest in this assemblage of temporal migrants of sky, sea, and land.

The cuckoo flew low over the footpath, deftly picking off the large hairy caterpillar we had carefully stepped over just moments before. Having arrived back to this shoreline before any other, he perched high on the electricity pylon,

tail down and wings flared, and called again. As our bodies and bags filled the hallway of the cottage, he uplifted to swoop low over the heather and moor grass and take up a new position in the woods. We unpacked our food supplies onto the kitchen table, and he made his last calls for the evening from the perch of a wind-sculpted oak. Turning on the tap to fill the kettle, we realised that the burn closest to the cottage had dried up, and with it, our water supply. The cuckoo skimmed a silent survey over the gorse, completing a last lap of his newly familiar range.

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The arrival of the cuckoo has long association with practices of pastoral and agrarian movement across Europe. In Scotland, folkloric belief predating knowledge of migration held that the cuckoo spent winters underground. Its first sounding was its emergence, or return, which heralded the lighter half of the year. Known as the harbinger of spring, the first diatonic call of the cuckoo is eagerly awaited and recorded. The oldest phenological record in the UK, dated to 1703, refers to the cuckoo.[9] Although folkloric references long predate this, it seems fitting that it was the cuckoo who initiated the official records of keeping time with the natural world.

As the study of recurring plant and animal life cycle stages, particularly relating to timings with weather and climate, 'phenology' stems from the Greek word, *phaino*, 'to show or appear.' Observations such as the timings of sprouting, flowering, bird migration and nesting, insect hatching and hibernation, M.D Schwartz contends, began 'soon after farmers began to continuously dwell in one place— planting seeds, observing crop growth, and carrying out the harvest year after year— they quickly became aware of the connection of changes in their environment to plant development.'[10] Reading the cues of the living world gave vital information for the timings of agricultural activities and determined patterns of nomadism and pastoralism, wherein the arrival of a species such as the cuckoo would serve as an indicator to act.

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[9] T. Sparks and others, 'Birds' in *Phenology: An Integrative Environmental Science* ed. by M. Schwartz, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), p.452
[10] M. Schwartz (ed.), 'Introduction', ibid. p. 1-2

The endeavour to understand the cuckoo has taken a wild path of guess work, observation, and discovery. Knowledge, speculation, and superstition surrounding the cuckoo is embedded within folklore. How could people ever have guessed the extent of the journey the cuckoo had undertaken to arrive to their village and pastures? Theories surrounding the migration and breeding habits of the cuckoo based on scientific enquiry and close observation, are now enabled by GPS tracking. Through the work of British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), it is known that cuckoos spend just 15% of their time in Britain, compared with 38% of their time in migration, and 47% of their time in Africa. The map of their migratory routes across continents reveals a clockwise loop, which thickens and coagulates in colourful streams of preferential paths. [11]

The successful arrival of these individual birds to this shoreline was contingent on the weather fontal system of the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone as they departed from the Congo rainforest, for the long, dangerous excursion to these northern climes. Only within the past five years, through international tracking research methods involving satellite tagging of specific individuals, has the migration path of the cuckoos, and the fact that they make a last stop in West Africa along the way to Britain, begun to be understood. BTO have been monitoring the flight paths of specific individuals to try to understand why the population of cuckoos has plummeted in the UK. Since the 1980s, over three-quarters of the population has been lost.[12] In many places across rural England, the once common sound of the cuckoo has all but disappeared.

In the same timeline, agricultural land usage within England has changed dramatically. The loss of the European Union agricultural scheme which formerly took surplus land out of production for set-aside, served to decimate habitat and insect populations and contributed to the steady decline of meadow pippet and dunnock. Forced out by modern agriculture, cuckoos have increasingly sought out the upland heath and wetland habitats more prevalent within the Highlands. Some ecologists draw accordance with the prevalence of macro-moth species in

[11] British Trust of Ornithology, 'Cuckoo Tracking Project', available at: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/cuckoo-tracking-project/about-project> [accessed 27 Jan 2023]
[12] RSPB, 'Understanding the decline of Cuckoos', available at: <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/biodiversity/posts/understanding-the-decline-of-cuckoos> [accessed 27 Jan 2023]

these habitats, the larvae of which the cuckoo predate have shown the sharpest declines in grassland, arable and woodland habitats and has increased in the semi-natural habitats of heaths and rough grassland.[13] As land use shifts and weather patterns change throughout Britain, this area of Wester Ross has become a cuckoo, and macro-moth hotspot.[14]

Field philosopher Thom Van Dooren calls attention to the fact that what we name simply as 'species', is in fact an incredible achievement. Recognising the arduous processes, obstacles and risks encountered by a species of long-distance migration, persisting through the vastness of evolutionary time, Van Dooren uses the term 'flight ways' in an endeavour to come linguistically closer to recognising the embodied intergenerational achievement of a bird such as the cuckoo.

> We often do not appreciate— and perhaps we cannot truly grasp— the immensity of this intergenerational work; the skill, commitment, cooperation and hard work, alongside serendipity, that are required in each generation to carry the species through.[15]

Whilst evolutionary theory afforded an understanding of a species as a historical lineage— from the initial speciation to the eventual, inevitable extinction—'flight ways' encourages species to be considered as a line of movement, whereby each lineage is not a static set of genetic conditions but an intergenerational process of becoming: a continual adaptation and transformation. An individual bird is thus a single knot on an emergent lineage: a vital point of connection within generations, or as Deborah Bird Rose so beautifully puts it, 'knots of embodied time' through which each individual creature is connected to the broader, emergent flight way of species.[16] The risk of extinction is therefore also the loss of future evolutions within this knotty lineage, wherein future forms of this flight way are also lost.

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[13] RSPB, ibid.
[14] BTO, ibid.
[15] Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 27
[16] Deborah Bird Rose, 'Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time', *Environmental Philosophy,* 9, 1. (2012), pp. 128-31

In the case of the cuckoo— an obligate brood parasite— the work that knots the generations together is performed not just by the cuckoo, but by the songbirds in whose nests the cuckoos lay their eggs. A complex double lineage of inheritance and nourishment, trickery and care are necessary for the continuing flight way of the cuckoo. Parasites utilise their hosts by timing their emergence and reproduction to the annual cycle of the host. The arrival of the cuckoo to its breeding grounds has evolved to coincide with the ensuing breeding season of the songbirds: the synchrony is essential for their success. Recent climate change has prompted a hypothesis that biological interactions between species and environment are now at risk of being mistimed, because the phenology of one partner has changed more than the other and is thus sub-optimal for reproduction or for survival.[17]

In a study of breeding populations across Europe, it was observed that residents and short-distance migrants are now less commonly used as hosts than other long-distance migrants. This change in host use appears through the common resident and short distance migratory hosts of cuckoo such as robin, dunnock, and meadow pippet being less represented as hosts, while long-distance migrants like the reed warbler are increasingly utilised. As temperatures increase, this mismatch in phenology will impact the populations of host species. Although current climate change is dramatic, such phenomena occurred previously, for example, following repeated past glaciations. In their evolutionary history, cuckoos have probably experienced repeated climate-induced phenological shifts of some host species to the point of bringing these to extinction.[18] Even now, the cuckoo continues to call time through increased aseasonality as climate change and habitat loss intensify.

I was struck by the sense that the flight ways of cuckoos have kept habitats as diverse as this heathland and Congolese rainforest in relation with each other, across epochs of shifting land use and patterns of global deforestation. In her book, *The World We Once Lived In,* Wangari Maathai writes of her experience of being the goodwill ambassador for the Congo Basin, an area of 700,000 square

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[17] A. Møller & others, 'Rapid change in host use of the common cuckoo Cuculus canorus linked to climate change' in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* (2011) 278, 733–738, <doi:10.1098/rspb.2010.1592>
[18] ibid

miles, some fifty million people and tens of thousands of species of flora and fauna. Described as the world's 'second lung' after the Amazon because of the sheer volume of carbon dioxide it absorbs, without the Congo forest, Africa would be one huge desert. In 2005 Maathai visited a so-called sustainable logging company, where primary forest was being felled to produce charcoal to fire bricks and described it 'as an adequate definition of hell'.[19] The environmental destruction, poverty and dehumanization resulting from the trees being cut to supply timber for people far away 'whose tastes and desires had expanded to such an extent that they had created the capacity to infiltrate the thick forest and remove these resources', led Maathai to understand that for the local people, the forest was no longer a blessing but a curse.[20]

At each end of its migratory journey, the habitats of the cuckoo were at risk from human resource use. In the UK, through the intensification of agriculture and loss of set-aside, cuckoos rely increasingly on heathland, a habitat in global decline. Resulting from millennia of deforestation when forest clearance was followed by grazing and burning, heathland is classified as a semi-natural or humanmade environment providing important habitat for hundreds of species and is maintained by traditional land practices of grazing, and often controversially managed through moor burn. In places where upland grazing has been discontinued, heathlands have shifted towards species-poor acid grasslands or returned to tree cover. Others were 'improved' through draining for agriculture and peat extraction or afforested with conifer plantations. Due to over-grazing, inappropriate burning, industrial scale peat extraction, and quarrying, widespread reductions in the extent and quality of surviving areas of upland, heathland is now designated as a protected habitat rarer than rainforest.[21]

The restoration or prioritisation of one habitat inevitably impacts or reduces another. As lowland agricultural land use continues to intensify, and the importance of tree regeneration takes greater precedence in the practice of

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[19] Wangari Maathai, *The World We Once Lived In*, (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 18
[20] Wangari Maathai, p. 22
[21] RSPB, 'The range habitat is rarer than a rainforest', available at: <https://community.rspb.org.uk/placestovisit/southstackcliffs/b/southstackcliffs-blog/posts/the-range-habitat-that-is-rarer-than-a-rainforest> [accessed 16 March 2023]

upland rewilding, heathland is at risk of vanishing altogether. But how do we comprehend the relationships bound up within planetary health? Even if one habitat could be safeguarded for a particular species such as the cuckoo, its migratory patterns would necessitate a planetary approach. The collaborative conditions which made this heathland, and the sustainable systems it once supported, encourage an understanding of how this landscape is implicated in both local and global interactions. Listening to the last calls of the cuckoo from my bed, I realised that my perception of this landscape had been entirely focused on the remnant of woodland. Yet the surrounding intricate mosaic of blanket bogs, heatherscapes, mires, grassland, bracken, scrub, freshwater and rock habitats had an intrinsic value and culture of its own.

Offshore

Early on Beltane morning we were awoken by a blast of noise. DING DOOOONG. DING DOOOOOOOOONG, followed by a muffled announcement across the water. As I leapt out of bed, Ida called through from the other bedroom, 'What the hell was that?' Peering with binoculars out of the skylight, the oil rig came into focus. Two giant cones, some sort of mast, and a jumble of mechanical piping surrounded the flat space of a helipad on top. The coral-red of its paintwork faded to a barnacle-grey where the sixteen column legs had met with the water. Poised like an oceanic pond skater, it seemed quite at home on this still water, far from the rough conditions it must have weathered in its working life. Its name, NORTHERN PRODUCER FPF, was emblazoned above the cab from where the workers were testing the tannoy, which was apparently still in good working order.

Northern Producer FPF arrived just days before us. I learned this from the walker's logbook, as recorded by a group who had made use of the porch on their walk.

> 25/ 4/ 21. Ridiculously hot day and we are basking in this sunny garden. 9/10th blue sky looking out to sea and watching the next enormous oil rig being towed in. Wonderful to have a cup of tea—except now we are out of water.

Flicking back through the logbook, I looked through the entries in search of references to oil rig activity over the years:

> 12/2/02. Came on motorbike to let water off path and check the fences. Lovely spot– I can imagine summer would be good. However, the weather is good today. A break in the monsoon season. Last time I was here was 25 years ago when I worked at Kishorn on the Ninian, saw the house from the rig. Best wishes, good luck.

> 10/2/19. Came over to photograph the Ocean Great White from a different angle. Beautiful sunny winter's day and sat on porch step for my lunch. Shame the cottage isn't used more! The path was very boggy. Good to see tea still available—though I didn't have any! [22]

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[22] *Walker's Logbook*, (Airigh Drishaig: 2000-2023)

That last entry had stung on first reading when I'd arrived at the cottage just a day after it had been written. Something in the phrasing upset me, the implication that I wasn't doing enough; my presence wasn't permanent enough, nor productive enough. Seeing it again now, in the flow of daily tasks, I could just about shrug it off. Our mission for the day was to prepare a bed to plant potatoes. Removing armfuls of geranium roots and various ornamental flowers to transplant over in the far edges of the garden, our gardening was an act of reprioritising edibility over aesthetics.

The rig held a steady presence on our periphery as we hopped across the boulders on the shoreline in a mission to collect seaweed. Sandpipers flitted in accordance with our approach, alternatively resting— tucking their biscuity brown heads above their distinctively hooked plumage— then uplifting into a low, erratic flight to resettle further away as we worked our way along the beach. Strandlines of dried seaweed, orange bladderwrack and green-black kelp, were entangled with stray lengths of plastic rope. Separating plastic from vegetal, we coiled rope into one sack, and filled the others with seaweed which would add micronutrients to the soil. After working our way along the shore, the bags were full, and their lightweight mass strapped to our backs, reshaping our bodies for the slow walk uphill.

In the changing light of the day, as we dug long trenches into the garden bed, sifting out fragments of pottery and examining them for possible antiquity, the presence of Northern Producer FPF shifted in mood. Part spider, part carousel, it then seemed to take on the distinctive form of a temple. A temple to this age of petrochemical dependence. Throughout the day, I began to piece together the story of the rig, with maps of North Sea oilfields and the planning applications for Kishorn Dry Dock left open on my laptop. Originally a drilling rig built in Norway in 1976, Northern Producer was converted to a floating production facility (FPF) in 1991. It was last located in the Northern North Sea, where it

provided an export route for oil from various fields and operated on West Don oil field, before taking anchorage here.[23]

According to the planning proposals for the dry dock, Loch Kishorn might soon hold a number of these rigs, for maintenance or decommissioning. It was not yet disclosed whether this rig would be redeployed or decommissioned. Energy production infrastructures have shaped this coastline. Local geographies of repair, and production tie this shoreline to global patterns of resource use, extraction, consumption, and climate change. The dry dock had recently disassembled an enormous boat and recycled the materials within a circular economy, and there were numerous scoping studies for how the dock could soon become focused on infrastructure production for wind energy. In the stillness of the day, as we dug in the garden, we heard snatches of conversation and whistling coming from the fish farm and the oil rig, the sounds of the working landscape amplified by the water.

The blast of noise from the rig reminded me that today was not only Beltane. May Day was also International Workers Day. In the words of Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, May Day was ‘the only unquestionable dent made by a secular movement in the Christian or any other official calendar’.[24] Beginning from 1889, May Day commemorates the violent struggle that workers went through for the eight-hour day to be created, and for Saturday to be recognised as part of the weekend. Had the noise been a mark of May Day solidarity? I was reminded of the human rights issues of energy production: the dangers and dissociations of working offshore. In this liminal space between the UN having declared that no further fossil fuel extraction should take place, and the UK government still proposing new oil fields, the need to prioritise a just transition that met the rights of workers and enabled their re-employment within the renewable energy sector was vital.

That afternoon Ida and I walked to the nearest burn, *Allt na Fraoch*— stream of the heather— to fill the water containers. Although shallower than I’d ever seen

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[23] Kishorn Port, ‘Kishorn Port Welcomes Northern Producer’, available at: <https://kishornport.co.uk/> [accessed 9 March 2023]
[24] Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Birth of a Holiday: the First of May’ (1994), available at: <https://libcom.org/history/birth-holiday-first-may> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

it, the water still flowed strong. It was the first time that water availability had been a concern, other than in the frozen depths of winter. Standing in the pool of bright amber water, holding the mouth of a five-litre bottle against a bubbling spout of white, I experienced an intense gratitude for the continuity of this water source. Gratitude too for these ancient plastic bottles, which had been stored under the sink by John. Passing each bottle up to Ida on the footbridge until all six were filled, it was a reminder to never take water for granted. Even in this land of waterfalls and mountain lochs, erratic dry spells could cause intense disruption to land based activities— including tree planting. We crouched to wash our faces. I thought of the cattle, the sheep, and the crofters. The eyes that would be watching for rain anxiously, rationing the last of the winter feed and waiting for the hillside to turn green.

Carrying the bottles back along the footpath— two in each rucksack, one each in our arms— Ida mused, 'Do you think any of the oil that that rig processed has been used by us directly? Like, maybe it's in the neoprene of our boots?' 'Ha!' I responded, 'Maybe it made these water bottles', holding the heavy plastic form a little tighter. The presence of the rig, an extractor of deep time viscosity which is then processed, contributing to the irreversible warming of the living world, to create items that will exist into the far reaches of time ahead, was making us think differently. Just as this disruption to the water supply had swelled our appreciation and awareness of our daily water consumption, contemplating the end of petroleum production revealed how this resource was implicated within every aspect of our lives.

Petro-subjectivity, as Brett Bloom names it, influences our sense of self and the world, and shapes who we are and how we think.[25] The way in which we utilise resources informs the way we understand ourselves, and the environment, and so the separation between resource production and resource use has inevitably changed our psychology. Derrick Jenson argues that our current sense of self is no more sustainable than our current use of energy or technology.[26] As we walked back to the cottage, we passed alongside the contoured ridges left by

[25] Brett Bloom, *Petro-Subjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self*, (London: Breakdown Press, 2018)
[26] Derrick Jenson, *Endgame, Vol. 1: The Problem of Civilization*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006)

the peat cutting which would once have fuelled the houses on this hillside, and which would have been cut, stacked and dried in annual cycles of collective, embodied labour. In contrast, the rig appeared to float like a spectre above the woodland. It struck me that petro-subjectivity shaped and influenced our contemporary perception and articulation of wild places. Environmentalism was a reaction to extractivism, and yet was entangled within its oily grip. Was rewilding a product of this industrialized perspective or a continuation and resurgence of pre-industrial ecological relationships? Could it be both?

When two walkers arrived later that month, we stopped to exchange pleasantries along the footpath, and they expressed some disappointment that there was only a cottage here. Perhaps they'd been hoping for a café, or a signposted woodland trail, I wasn't sure, but I found myself filling in the gaps of their expectation. Gesticulating wildly towards the oil rig and the fish farm, I insisted, 'there are sights a-plenty around here!' I realised only later my comment was an unintentional echo of an iconic scene from John McGrath's 1970s political stage play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, where crofters had been forced to reorientate themselves and their livelihood to accommodate for the tourism which investors dubiously speculated would spring up around the oil rig industry.

Wife

You'll have come to see the oil-rigs – oh, they're a grand sight right enough. You'll no see them now for the stour, but on a clear day you'll get a grand view if you stand just here –

Crofter

Aye, you'll get a much better view now the excavators digging for the minerals have cleared away two and a half of the Five Sisters of Kintail.[27]

The play was widely acknowledged as a significant cultural moment in reflecting back to communities in the Gàidhealtachd their own history and culture and

[27] John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil,* (London: Methuen Drama, 1981) xxix–74. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781408163085.00000004

connected the roots of land agitation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the modern story of community land ownership.[28]

Oil infrastructure on this shoreline began with the Ninian Central Platform in 1974, when Kishorn Dry Dock and Port was created to accommodate its construction. Howard Doris Ltd started the contract in August 1975 for Chevron Petroleum with a team of engineers and several hundred workers. Constructed in a clockwise pattern to allow for a sequential progression of tasks, the 140-metre diameter concrete base was divided into eight by vertical diagrams and strengthened with reinforcing steel. Watching the archival footage, the workers in a uniform of 1970's leisure wear and cigarettes, I was struck by how similar its construction was to the weaving of a giant basket.[29] The 157,000-tonne structure was then floated out into the deeper waters of Loch Kishorn and was anchored in a wet dock site at Airigh Drishaig, where it was worked on for a year. At a depth of 110 metres, the anchor system utilised on shore support to a purpose build pier on a shingle bay just west of the cottage. Workers and materials were transported to Airigh Drishaig by a support fleet of boats to work on the platform in a marine operation.

The tenant of the cottage at that time, Dougie Truman, worked on the platform for its duration. Previously a ticket conductor on London buses, Dougie was apparently a strapping figure well over six feet tall and walked the footpath to fetch his weekly messages with a gait twice the length of any crofter. He stayed at the cottage periodically over a decade, and engineered a water powered generator and several innovative growing projects with one such project attracting the attention of the police who walked out to caution him. The former schoolteacher, Catriona McGowen, told me how Dougie had collected up hard hats washed up on the shoreline which had fallen from the side of the platform to utilise as storage containers for the kitchen. [30] Pasta, a bag of rice: I

[28] Mairi MacFadyen and Raghnaid Sandilands, 'On Cultural Darning and Mending: Creative responses to Ceist an Fhearainn/ The Land Question in the Gàidhealtachd', in *Scottish Affairs* 30.2 (2021), pp. 157–177, DOI: 10.3366/scot.2021.0359, p. 161
[29] *The Ninian Central Platform*, (Moving Image Archive: National Library of Scotland, 1978), Available at: <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/5973> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]
[30] As detailed in interview with Catriona McCowen, (25 Nov 2021)

imagined the food neatly contained within these castoffs, the salvage of the industry.

In 1977, the completed concrete base, 156 metres in height, was towed from the wet dock of Airigh Drishaig to Loch Toscaig where it was semi-submersed, enabling a prefabricated steel deck to be towed over the structure and conjoined, or 'mated' as the engineering terminology has it. In May 1978, the 600-tonne concrete platform was towed from Toscaig 925 kilometres by a team of eight tugs, to the oil field it was destined for by name and design. The Ninian Field is located in the northern North Sea, on the continental shelf between the United Kingdom and Norway and is named— somewhat audaciously— after the patron saint of the Shetland Islands, Saint Ninian.

From a Commemorative Volume of Oil and Gas Fields produced by Chevron UK ltd, I read how the first oil was produced from the field in December 1978, reaching peak production of 315,000 barrels (50,100 m^3) of oil per day in the summer of 1982. At the end of 1988 over 811 million barrels (129 million m^3) had been produced.[31] In August 2020, the top deck of Ninian's platform was decommissioned, and taken to Lerwick to be dismantled, with an estimated 97% of its parts recycled.[32] The submersible concrete structure still remains at Ninian's Field, as does the steel pier and concrete base at Airigh Drishaig.

I took Ida down to the pier that evening to show it to her. A hulking twenty-metre-wide concrete base emerges from the shingle bay, running along the length of bed rock and topped with a metal structure, corroded by sea-spray into crustaceous layers and housing a chain with links bigger than dinner plates. We sat on the rusted metal girders, watching the tide coming in, and tried to imagine what, if anything this structure could be repurposed as. It was in the wrong bay to be useful as a landing point, too steep sided to merit mooring a boat or dropping supplies. On the slipway beside the pier a pallet load of bagged cement had been left to concretise in form. Presumably surplus to requirement,

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[31] E.J. Van Vessem & T.L. Gan, 'The Ninian Field, Blocks 3/3 & 3/8, UK North Sea', *Geological Society*, 14 (London: Lyell Collection, 1991), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1144/GSL.MEM.1991.014.01.22open_in_new> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

[32] BBC News, 'Ninian Northern: Giant Oil Platform's final voyage ends in Shetland', 29 August 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-53961173> [accessed 16 March 2023]

this accidental monument seemed to speak to the modus operandi of the oil industry: how a place is utilised, then abandoned. Strangely, the pier is absent from OS maps— as if designated a temporary construction through its relatively short-term usage. Yet the pier, brutalist in aesthetic, was a sizable construction, and was set to be in place for hundreds of years, if not millennia to come.

Fifty years after the construction of Ninian's Platform, utilising the same sheltered holding of Loch Kishorn, Kishorn Port and Dry dock secured the contract for the maintenance of the world's largest semi-submersible oil platform, the Ocean Great White. 'The Awakening of the Beast,' the foreman of the site called the revival of the site, presumably to emphasise the significance of the contract to the local area, rather than the unleashing of increased anthropogenic global impact through the perpetuation of fossil fuel extraction. [33] In 2019, Ocean Great White arrived at Kishorn Dry Dock and Port for a period of maintenance— the first oil rig to visit this sea loch for over twenty years.[34] It created a stir within the community, dominating the water and blazing with bright white lights that shone across the villages of Achintraid and Kishorn. Residents complained that it was like Blackpool. Blackpool but with the addition of loud, grating sounds of mechanical tinkering and re-fabrication. Shinty games were played on the pitch with the rig as a backdrop; trawler boats widened their transit accordingly. Tourists driving up the Bealach stopped at the side of the road to marvel at both the mountains and the vessel: a gargantuan arachnid squatting over the water.

Ocean Great White, weighing 60,700 tonnes and over 100 metres in length, would have made Northern Producer FPF a small fish in comparison. Capable of operating in depths of 3000 metres, and drilling down to 10,670 metres, the rig could go to places that other rigs cannot.[35] A promotional video, made by Diamond Offshore, was shot while the rig was in Loch Kishorn, utilising the landscape's aesthetics. After a few long months of maintenance, it left for its journey north. On the day of its eventual departure, I stood outside the cottage

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[33] Michael Russel, 'Kishorn Goes Back to the Future', *West Highland Free Press,* 18 January 2019, p. 1.

[34] Kishorn Port, 'Ocean Great White', available at: <https://www.kishornport.co.uk/projects/recent/ocean-greatwhite/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

[35] Ocean Great White [video], (Diamond Offshore, 2021) available at: <http://www.diamondoffshore.com/video-ocean-greatwhite> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

to watch it being dragged along the water, past the headland and out to sea. As it moved, and I saw the name emblazoned across the hull, all I could think was Ecocide. Ocean Great White Ecocide.

At the end of this long day of oil research, I spontaneously checked the location of Ocean Great White on Vessel Finder. It was in transit along the shoreline of West Africa. Travelling at a rate of 8.7km p/hour, Ocean Great White was journeying from Shetland to Granadilla, performing a reversed route of the female cuckoos, due here any day now. On their final feeding stop, the cuckoos might well pass over Ocean Great White: an unintended correspondence in their routes of migration, each with specific relationship to this shoreline, each directly implicated in the scrambling of seasonality.

Across Ground

When I'd first told Ida about shielings, explaining that the practice was predominantly undertaken by women, with the men staying in the townships, she had understood that it was the women themselves who were the 'shielings.' I explained again, more precisely, the women, along with the children and teens, stayed *at* the shielings— the pastures and accompanying huts— but the misunderstanding made us smile. We imagined the skills these women would have held, and passed on, the tasks and the knowledge that grew through their specific acts of tending, making, and living. The women who carried the skills of the land and whose autonomy was in tune with the surge of the season. There was a resonance towards this female-led practice, and their transient, multispecies community.

The shieling huts were in most cases smaller and less complex than the winter houses in the townships, and so they altered ways of living, and were subject to fewer controls. Through a study of transhumance across Northern Europe, landscape archaeologist Eugene Costello contends that temporary dwellings of seasonal herding sites were sites of socio-cultural significance for the predominantly female participants of the practice.[36] Costello interprets the archaeological remains of summer grazing sites across post-medieval Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Iceland and Norway, to speculate that the emplaced practice would have afforded a certain degree of social and sexual freedom to the young, unmarried participants, outwith the patriarchal rule of the townships.

The experiential participation of the teenagers and children within shieling practice was a form of rites of passage, as the youth explored and matured through the responsibilities and freedoms that came through the apprenticeship of herding cattle within the land in which they roamed.[37] Away from the social structure of the township, the return to the shieling site each year folded layers of associated memories, skills, and intergenerational stories into the direct

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[36] Eugene Costello, 'Temporary Freedoms? Ethnoarchaeology of Female Herders at Seasonal Sites in Northern Europe', *World Archaeology*, 50. 1, (2018), pp. 165-184, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1080/00438243.2018.1472633>

[37] Sam Harrison, 'Up at the Shieling: Place-Based Action Research.' *Children, Youth and Environments* 21, 1 (2011), pp. 79-100, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.21.1.0079> [accessed 26 Jan 2023]

experiencing of the land. Alice Starmore from the Isle of Lewis is thought to be the last person alive to have taken part in the tradition. She describes the walk out to the shielings, for which they would immediately remove their shoes and walk barefoot across the heather, not putting them back on until they returned to the townships eight weeks later. 'It was as natural as anything, the return to shieling life. Like putting your hand inside a glove.'[38]

On the hillside far west of Airigh Drishaig, three small ruins with corners distinctively rounded in form, suggested the remains of shielings. Sited next to the all-important flowing burn— central to the daily tasks of life and making butter— each had its own aspect and character. Ida and I instinctively moved towards the one on the plateau, behind which grew an oak tree with branches like hair loosened from plaits. We circumnavigated the stone walls, looking for the plants which would have been utilised important for life at the shielings.

Plant lore— the knowledge of plants gained through tradition, including the common names of plants and their different uses and associations— is an intuitive entry point into attuning to pre-industrial ecological relations. The myriad of Gaelic common names, with some plants having several, attests to an intricate web of vegetal relations and herbal intimacies which informed and shaped everyday life. *Fraoch*, heather, provided for the beds making a surprisingly springy mattress, and was in abundance around the shielings, as was the cross-leaved heath, *fraoch an ruinnse* (rinsing-heath), in which a special cleansing virtue was supposed to reside and was used to make scrubbers for the pots and pans.[39] Fastidious levels of sanitisation would have been needed to make cheese in the rough conditions of the hillside.

I crouched low to look closely at the green glow of Common butterwort, *mòthan* or *badan measgan* (butter-mixer) nestled like a luminous star beneath the dried grasses. A carnivorous moorland plant which grows on poor soils of the heath, butterwort gains its nutrients by a process of entrapment. Its triangular leaves are covered with downy hairs which secrete a sticky mucilage that shimmers in

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[38] Alice Starmore, speaking on 'You Belong to the Land and the Land Belongs to You,' produced by Katie Revell, *Short Cuts,* BBC Radio 4, Available at: https://soundcloud.com/noflyposting/short-cuts-you-belong-to-the-land-and-the-land-belongs-to-you [accessed 26 Jan 2023]
[39] William Milliken & Sam Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004), p. 115

the light and attracts insects, such as the midge. The plant contains enzymes which digest the trapped prey, and across Scotland and Scandinavia, it was discovered to be beneficial within the production of cheese. Chopped and wrapped in muslin, the leaves would have been added to the milk to encourage curdling.[40] With its purple-blue funnelled flower held high on a stem above its leaves, we watched as the butterwort attracted a pollinating insect— a micro-moth— into its funnelled flower, admiring how the anatomy of the plant made distinction between attracting insects for sustenance and insects for pollination.

All around us across the heath, processes of botanical attraction were beginning to stir. As we walked through swathes of bog myrtle, a bright yellow pollen dropped from the catkins and dusted our boots, enticing us to crush the oily flowers between our fingertips and rub the delicious scent across our pulse points. Wildflowers, scarce amongst the heather and grasses but bright in colour, were emerging by the day. Accompanied by my flower ID book, I identified those pink hooded stems I'd first seen on the footpath as lousewort— *Bainne na Cathaig*, (milk of the cuckoo). All so frequently, wildflowers seem to hold an association with cattle— either a beneficial fodder crop, or to be avoided by livestock. These first flowers provided an important source of nectar for the early pollinators, being larval plants for butterfly species. Plants such as *cìob*, deer grass, and *canach*, bog cotton, served as seasonal markers which indicated it was time to move to the shielings.

I caught up with Ida, who over at the next burn, had lain her body flat beside the bank and put her face to the water to drink directly from its flow. She leapt back up to her feet, laughing and wiping her chin dry with her cuff. Ida had packed up her London life, and was now volunteering, or WWOOFing her way around the Highlands for the season, staying at organic farms and ecological restoration projects to help out in exchange for board and food.[41] Maybe this was a present-day continuum of shieling culture. I called her the 'Local Nomad', for it seemed that with each place that she arrived to, she became part of the community, sharing knowledge about plants, or passing on songs that she had learned from elsewhere. As we continued our walk across the terraces, I noticed

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[40] Milliken & Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, p. 65
[41] WWOOF: Worldwide Organization of Organic Farms, available at: <https://wwoof.net/> [accessed 16 March 2023]

a shared habit between us. Our hands trailed across long stems of dried grasses, and every so often, we'd pluck a stem and twist it around a finger. How often I ended up wearing a grass ring as I walked, as if unconsciously wedding this pastoral scene. I wondered how ubiquitous it was as human behaviour, our hands reaching for this interaction, twisting grasses into string, into rope.

Further on, the grassland ecology became intricately interwoven with that of the woodland. Cattle would have once tended these edges, foraging from branches, and fertilising the ground with manure. The delicate Common cow-wheat, with tubular pale-yellow flowers which grow in pairs up the spiralling stalk, is an indicator of ancient woodland and was flecked through the grasses. The name attests to the preferential browsing of the plant by cows, and it was thought to produce a better-quality butter.[42] Semi-parasitic, it attaches to other plants to feed. The fleshy structure of the seed apparently resembles a cocoon of a wood ant, who disperse the seed as they carry them back to their nests. These dappled edges between woodland and grassland provide a specialist habitat favoured by the rarest butterfly of Scotland, the Heath Fritillary, with Common cow-wheat providing nectar in this short window of time— two weeks in May— in which they are airborne.

The grazing habits of cattle open glades within the scrub, which benefit ground flora and wildflowers. Cattle aid woodland regeneration too, forming openings between dense thickets, and flattening patches of bracken into partial submission. The profiles of trees are shaped by evolutionary herbivore dynamics. Long extinct grazing animals such as auroch would have pushed past tree trunks and browsed low hanging branches, and their living relatives of modern-day cattle are known to self-medicate from tree fodder, grazing on the young leaves of willow, oak, birch, to receive micro-nutrients.[43] Was it possible that a renewed pattern of seasonal grazing from cattle here would enhance and reinvigorate the biodiversity of this grassland and heath?

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[42] Plantlife, 'Common cow wheat', available at: <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/plant-fungi-species/common-cow-wheat> [accessed 16 March 2023]

[43] Ted Green, 'Tree Hay: A Forgotten Fodder', *Agricology*, available at: <https://www.agricology.co.uk/field/blog/tree-hay-forgotten-fodder> [accessed 16 March 2023]

The land wasn't ready for cattle yet. It was still recovering from decades of hyper-herbivory, and some species of vegetation were only just beginning to regenerate. But one day, whether during my tenancy or beyond, there'd be opportunity to restore this thread of connection. If cattle were to return to this hillside, it was possible they could be managed without fences or walls. Through technological advances, a herd could now be managed by use of NoFence electronic collars which emit audible frequencies and an electric shock, when the cow comes to the edge of its permitted grazing territory. [44] Would the intricacies of topographical knowledge once essential to caring for livestock become redundant through this technological advance, or could it still enfold and enrichen human knowledge of the land?

All so often, when walking this landscape, I'm aware of the missing ecological dynamics of animals and the potential for them to return. The dance between vegetal and creature has been disrupted: many parts are missing; ecosystems bereft of their keystone species. One day this age-old dynamic might be pieced back together in this landscape. As a life-long vegetarian and now predominantly vegan, I had no impulse to see the return of cattle here as a meat product, only for the unique role they play within the ecosystem. Could it ever be feasible for cattle to return here, autonomous from human production? Although there were not any immediate prospects of cattle returning to Airigh Drishaig, the first step towards thinking through the possibilities of re-establishing a pattern of seasonal grazing here in years to come was to get to know the local Highland cattle.

It was the middle of the month when I received the call I'd been waiting for. It was time for the Highland cattle on Applecross Estate to be moved to their summer grazing. My friends, Floortje and Mike— the maintenance manager who had first shown me to Airigh Drishaig— were responsible for the cattle and welcomed an extra person to assist. The next morning, I set off in the dark of pre-dawn. Today was the day when this year's herd, or fold, of fifty beasts would be moved from their wintering fields out into the free expanse of the Glen, where they would spend the lighter half of the year.

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[44] NoFence, available at: <https://www.nofence.no/en-gb/> [accessed 3 May 2023]

Despite the early start, by the time I arrived up the track of the field closest to Applecross bay, the heat of the day had built and preparations were well underway. The team of four estate workers had positioned themselves strategically between the cattle, separating and moving them into their distinct groups, directing with outstretched arms and an occasional shove of encouragement. The tension was palpable as the cattle were in closer proximity than their choosing. It was hard to discern expressions under their long dossans of hair— just the occasional flash of pale eyeballs— but their long bellowing calls communicated a cacophony of anticipation. The older beasts would know that they were heading to the glen, but for the calves and yearlings, this was all new. Angela, the matriarch of the fold, held her head held high with nostrils flared, observing the events, and keeping the score. In a moment of eruption, a heifer jumped the fence, heaving herself over the bar, and continued to graze away from the stress of the situation.

Inside the walls of the holding pen, the cattle were densely packed and moving in shifting formations. Their chunky heads and wide set horns looked above to understand the situation as they entered through the gated system where Mike stood on the fence, armed with a nozzle gun to squirt a tick preventative, onto their necks. Separated by wooden bars, a queue of red, yellow, black, white, dun and brindle-coloured cattle awaited their turn. Uniquely matched to the weather conditions of the Highlands, their wavy woolly coats had a double layer of hair: an oily outer layer which is waterproof and a downy insulative layer beneath.

Floortje had the additional challenge of keeping the paperwork in order despite the pressures of noise. A mix of numerical references and personal names blended in recognition of each individual calf that had been born in the past few months. ‘This is 217— look out for Cottontail’s Mum.’ As the apprentice herdswoman, Floortje— or Flo— had been learning from Mike over the past couple years and had taken to it like a duck to water. ‘Shhhhhh’, she insisted with a finger to her lips, ‘I can’t think when you moo.’ With her flat cap and trackie bottoms, she moved between the cattle with ease. Her care and knowledge of each individual cow was evident. ‘There you go, your mum is over

there,' and for a moment, her role as herdswoman was like her other job as nursery worker at the school.

Highland cattle on Applecross Estate date back for centuries, part of the heritage and part of the landscape. In the first of the old herd record books kept in the Estate Office, Duncan McNair recorded in 1884:

> Grandfather […] came to be herd on the Highland cows to old Thomas MacKenzie of Applecross (the then Laird) in or about 1776. The fold of black cows was kept at Applecross […] since the year 1700, however long before then.[45]

Although the genetic lineage of the fold had not been continuous, the seasonal movement between fields and the glen was an old pattern. This year, Flo had been halter-training some of the calves, spending time walking with them back and forth along the beach, and hand grooming them in the field to build relationship, which would make it easier to work and move the herd in years to come. Calves and steers from the Applecross fold had begun to command high prices when individuals were sold at the market.

By now it was just the calves in the queue and the mooing had intensified throughout the pen as the mothers anxiously awaited them outside the fold. The calves faced me as they wait for their turn for the treatment, lifting their faces curiously above the bar to see me— a stranger— looking back at them. This was the sequence of their formative year: first a visit by the vet, then castration for the males, and now to the glen. Four cows were staying behind. Two to be sold, one cow with twins, and Lonely Cow, who apparently had difficulties with communication and sociability. As we stood together, Flo pointed out the details of each beast— the one with the wayward horn, the runaway horn. Silver Queen and Silver Prince. The working terminology that a pregnant cow had been 'served', and a cow who aborted had 'cast', hinted at the complex lineage of respectful animal husbandry, and the reproductive servitude that was bound within this agricultural tradition.

[45] Applecross Estate, available at: <https://applecross.org.uk/trust-activities/agricultural> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

Once the calves had been released into the wider area with the others, we were almost ready to set off. The bull needed some persuasion to leave the grassy corner. Apparently, he was more of a side-line figure, with the matriarchal order, as Flo explained, clearly taking precedent within the social structure of the fold. The line of humans edged forward, with our walking sticks outstretched. A minor tussle between two beasts had me leaping for safety behind a tractor. 'Don't do anything you're not comfortable with,' Flo reassured. The gate was opened, and the quad bike went ahead down the road to block off the route, stopping a car behind them. The cattle were already trotting down the road, and with a wave of thanks to the small queue of cars assembling, we followed. A few tourists stood with cameras poised, alongside a local who worked at the pub. A sense of occasion accompanied our entourage as we jogged down the road alongside the bay and crossed the bridge which was festooned either side with gorse flowers.

Once off the main road, the cattle walked along the track that edged the woods in a long straggly line. A couple of cows choose to take the woodland path, stepping lightly over the pine needles. There was a definite sense of return: a forward surge that was not led by the human actors of this assemblage. 'It's like the return of the wildebeest to the Serengeti,' said Ian, with a twinkle in his eye, swinging his walking stick in hand. Past the hostel, and down the final stretch, the gate was opened, and they surged, streaming through the opening into the expansiveness of the glen. Straight towards the water, their hooves clattered down the side of the riverbed to stand in the shallow water that ran over their legs, and into their lowered mouths, cooling themselves after the excitement of the day. For the calves, this was their first experience of fresh flowing water.

We shut the gate and hung back, watching the cattle slowly take their place on the hillside. The spruce plantation would be their shelter belt, and the edges of a remnant oakwood, Allt Mòr, recently deer fenced, could be explored beyond. The fold would range freely here for the summer months, slowly forming their new allegiances and patterns of habitat and social structure in correspondence with the landscape. I was curious to know how the vegetation might shift and alter through the impact of their grazing, and the knock-on effect to the pollinators, and insect life with dung beetles feeding on the deposits of manure.

Flo was keen to monitor their impact and had set up some test plots to monitor the density and diversity of vegetation over the season ahead.

'If I could live anywhere in Applecross', Flo shared, 'it would be right here, in the glen with the cattle.' She pointed to the old, ruined building in the middle of the field, where the herdsmen would once have stayed with the cattle for the summer once the shieling tradition had ended. As it was, Flo stayed nearby in a shipping container in the Hostel carpark— where she worked nightshifts for her third job. She would visit the cattle daily over the months ahead, checking particularly on one cow still to calf. The cattle would find deer antlers to chew on, tree branches to browse, and patches of nectar rich wildflowers. The river would continue to shift in shape around them, the shingle banks slowly in motion, forming new beaches and curves. As we turned to walk away, a biting salmon jumped from the darkest pool.

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Oak pollen was on the move. The leafburst was accompanied by emergence of the male flower tassels, swinging from the tips of the branches and thick with pollen. Down on the beach at Airigh Drishaig, where the oak boughs hung within reach, we harvested the tender bright leaves. Ida would teach me how to make a tea that was similar in taste to black tea, due to the tannins of the oak. Our fingers sifted through the tassels as we filled the bag with leaves. In the flowering season, one single oak stand might produce one billion pollen grains per square metre of forest surface.[46] Reliant on wind dispersal, depending on the meteorological situation, a pollen cloud might extend up to thirty kilometres from the source— meaning these oaks would pollinate with other fragments of oakwood across the region, with pollen drifting up to one hundred kilometres.

Within the fortnight we'd shared together, we harvested and prepared enough tea for the season ahead: a complex blend of oxidised bramble shoots and young oak leaves. The potatoes beds were ready for planting, and pots were seeded

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[46] S. Schueler & K.H. Schlünzen, 'Modeling of oak pollen dispersal on the landscape level with a mesoscale atmospheric model,' *Environ Model Assess* 11, pp. 179–194 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10666-006-9044-8

with heritage varieties of kale. It was food, we hoped, that would be ready for when the tree saplings were ready to be planted out over winter.

In the dusk of the evening, we lit a fire in the fire-pit below the cottage and carried our plates outside. We'd made a foraged feast. Primrose leaves, ground elder shoots, gorse flowers and nettle leaves had been dipped in tempura batter and fried. A platter of vegetal emergence. Concealed by the batter, the composition of the plants had alchemised through the process of cooking and each bite was a surprise. The beery flavour of nettle harvested as young shoots from around the outer territory of the barn. The legumey freshness of gorse flowers. Primrose flowers sweet to the tongue, while the leaves, puckered and wizened, were surprisingly substantial. The acrid tang of ground elder, whose insistent growth in the garden beds gave reassurance that we would never lack fresh greens. Accompanied by brown rice and the final stems of last year's kale, each mouthful affirmed the relative abundance of the season— that our carried-in resources would be stretched in time by plants foraged from the land. Wild food supplements to our dependency on the industrialised, globalised rhythms of the world.

The oil rig, softly illuminated by a row of headlights, was partially obscured by the thicket of surrounding gorse, and was silent in the evening dusk. The only noise came from the fish-farm: the usual thready rattle of the generator's power, on the platform staged between the eight enormous black circular cages. Instead of being surrounded by a herd of cows, we had the infrastructures of petrochemical industries and food production as our companions. In the glow of the firelight, I read Ida the story of *Covehithe* by China Mieville, a tale of an oil rig who uprises from the seabed, and ventures inland. Petrobras comes ashore at night to lay eggs, using her drill as an ovipositor to inject slippery black eggs into the shoreline. These eggs are future rigs, and a monstrous sense of agency, care and mechanical autonomy haunts the story.[47] Maybe this was an equivalent to the supernatural tales of the past once told in the shielings.

[47] China Mieville, *Covehithe,* (Guardian, April 22, 2011), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/22/china-mieville-covehithe-short-story?CMP=twt_iph> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

In the Anthropocene, a person's situated knowledge— the way of knowing that comes from direct sensory observation and embodied experience— comes to include the practices and artefacts of extractivism. It holds both the trans-national route of the oil rig and the intricate succession of wildflowers. The sense of place of Airigh Drishaig, I'd wanted to say to the walkers, rather than being pristine wilderness, or a commodified landscape, must include the contaminants of industrial aquaculture, the decommissioning of petrochemical infrastructures and the archaeological relics from a succession of generations to whom this was home.

Environmentalism has long been informed by waves of debate about notions involving rootedness in the local or the nation on the one hand and concepts such as nomadism, hybridity, and borderlands on the other. Theories of re-inhabitation are often based around a methodology of highly localised attentiveness, wherein a 'sense of place' comes to be grown through the relationship between individual, community, and place. The ecosystems that immediately surround a person come to be known through prolonged residency, sensory observation, and affective ties to place, relating to the 'ethic of proximity' wherein it is suggested that only the close ties to locality that form one's identity can engender environmental responsivity and ethical commitments.[48]

The millennia old Scottish Gaelic concept of *Dùthchas,* is a worldview and way of life which speaks to the intrinsic connectedness and inter-relationality between land, people and culture, and was written of extensively by Gaelic scholar and ethnographer, John MacInnes in his book *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal* (Traditions of the Gael).[49] MacInnes played a major part in keeping Gaelic language alive at a time when it was at risk of dying out, and was one of the first scholars to use the term 'ethnocide' for the way in which Gaelic language and culture was treated.[50] More recently, *Dùthchas* has gained renewed traction within environmental

[48] Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 51

[49] John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, edited by Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006)

[50] Phil Davison, 'Obituary John MacInnes Globally Respected Gaelic Scholar', in *Herald Scotland*, 28 June 2019, available at: https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/17736064.obituary-john-macinnes-globally-respected-gaelic-scholar/ [accessed 23 April 2023]

discourse in a movement to reject the anglo-centric epistemologies which separate humans from nature, and has been used to conceptualize a kincentric methodology of belonging to the land.[51]

Mitchell Thomashow speaks for a 'bioregional sensibility', suggesting that the only way towards an understanding of the global comes through a prior engagement with the details of the local environment, in what he calls a 'place-based perceptual ecology'. Yet, in accordance with the common and widespread phenomenon of migration in both human history and ecology, Thomashow argues that rootedness in one place cannot plausibly be claimed as the most 'natural' form of relating to place. As a concept for thinking about the kinds of mobility that characterize many species' relation to their habitats, Thomashow comes to articulate a form of bioregional cosmopolitanism.[52] Ursula Heise's examination of how a 'sense of place' ideology has played a key role within the formation of environmentalism leads to a contention for a 'sense of planet' awareness.[53] Heise suggests:

> Rather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world, and how human impact affects and changes this connectedness.[54]

Critiquing the notion that only through forms of direct sensory observation, could a sense of place come to be created, Heise calls attention to the role that technological mediation or closer examination to everyday foods and geographies of material products could play within the development of sense of planet within environmental thinking. Within Heise's imperative towards the articulation of 'sense of planet', threads of situated connectivity that link the sensory experience of a specific place towards global interconnectivity are joined by the presence of the unseen global dependencies threading back towards us: the stories of the mined resources, the globalised food supplies, and

[51] Paul J. Meighan, 'Dùthchas, a Scottish Gaelic methodology to Guide a Self-Decolonization and Conceptualize a Kincentric and Relational Approach to Community-Led Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21, (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221142451
[52] Mitchell Thomashow, 'Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism', in *Bioregionalism*, ed. by Michael Vincent McGinnis (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 121-32
[53] Heise, p. 51
[54] Heise, p. 21

the conditions of the workers. Following these lines of connection, from origin of a resource to our position as consumer of globalised products, Heise articulates how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape our daily routines.

> [I]f a knowledge of one's local place has value because it is a gateway to understanding global connectedness at various levels, then nonlocal types of knowledge and concern that also facilitate such an understanding should be similarly valuable. The challenge for environmentalist thinking, then, is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet.[55]

Transhumance, with its shifting dynamic of place relating, serves to displace continuous settlement and broaden ecological perspective. Alec Finlay employs the term, *Contemporary Transhumance,* as an umbrella term to refer to the various activities that bring people back onto the hill— tree planting, humandwolving, and hutopianism.[56] While these forms of transhumance are not necessarily long-term dwelling in the uplands, in the sense of traditional shieling, they can benefit the hill ecologically. Airigh Drishaig was long shaped by a movement of coming and going, and it was a pattern which could be continued— and shared with others. In my own short time here, a seasonal pattern of contemporary transhumance was beginning to emerge. Seed collecting, writing, gardening, tree planting.

Eventually the rain came. First just a splatter of drizzle. We stood up from planting the last of the potatoes and began to dance in greeting, just as we'd promised. Within moments, the precipitation shifted from rain to hail to sleet to snow, and we called out greetings to these changing forms, laughing as our hands sliced between the wide drifting snowflakes.

Over the following days the dried-out heath returned to a patchwork of wetland and bog: trickles then rivulets running into pools, and the flow of water swelling into the newly viscous layering of mosses. Smoothly gelatinous, the bog ballooned in response to the opened sky, and we took a miniature 'bog safari'

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[55] Heise, p. 56

[56] Alec Finlay, 'From A Place-Aware Dictionary' in *Antlers of Water,* ed. by Kathleen Jamie, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020), pp. 248-249

across the heath, crouching low in micro appreciation. The sundews on the bank had intensified in colour, their satellite receivers opening ready to guide flies into landing, and new sprouts of green began to emerge through the matting of vegetative roots, fresh arms splaying open.

In a pool of orange light free from vegetation, tadpoles flirted with exposure. Sliding into the spotlight, then darting back to frondular protection of horizontal tendrils. The light, the gloss, the easy movement of one body over another. Half clambering, half swimming, two newts slid together, then apart. Bodies momentarily elongated, then a wave form of movement propelled them forward. A tongue. A pair of watching eyes.

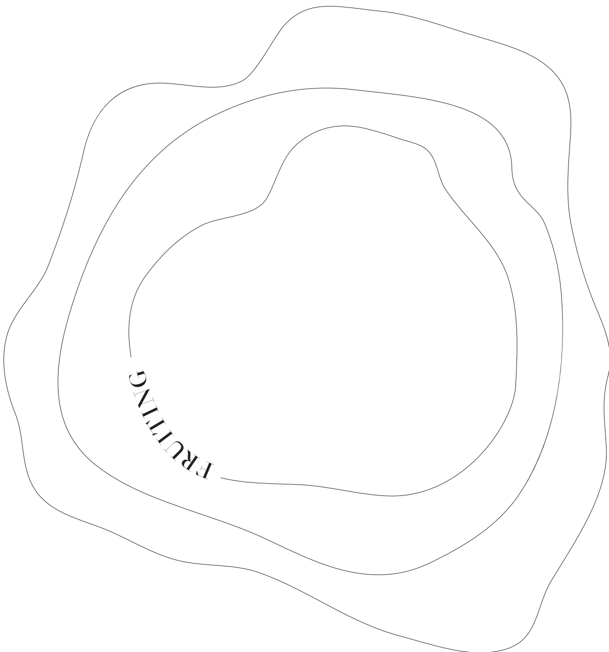
Allt na Fraoch tripled in size over night. The single spout of water from which we'd filled the bottles was now engulfed within a new height of liquid motion. Exploring the succession of waterfall pools below the bridge, I found for the first time what must have been the wash house for Airigh Drishaig. Hidden by a swathe of gorse was a deep generous pool, situated below a waterfall. The crossing of a ford, and huge, smooth boulders— perfect for drying clothes on after washing— suggested the multiple usages of this place. Easing myself into the amber water, it struck me how the form of the pool and its waterfall must have invited and informed the same embodied responses from each successive generation of community here: human and more-than-human. My first clamber up the side of the rock and under the force of the waterfall followed the movements of people who came before. For all the days in which this waterfall flows without human presence: when it continues as a ford for deer, a watery highway for grey wagtails, a hatchery for cranefly, today our bodies reinstated another usage.

It was so suggestive of human community: pots being scrubbed; bare flesh splashing and cleansing; youngsters jumping into the depths; that for a moment, we were held within the on-goingness of the shieling community. My body floated and writhed, twisting, and surrendering into the coolness as the light danced from the surface, and reflected ripples across the rock marked with half-moon shaped lichens. I was a newt, then a salmon. This water, this clear

mountain water, within minutes would be out at sea, carrying something of me with it.

The day after Ida left, the midges hatched all at once. Swimming and other outside delights would now be restricted by their presence, but for the birds and bats it was a fiesta of feeding. A rowan-scented drowsiness filled the garden as I stood outside at dusk. There was a sense of transition: a sudden realisation that this project, and my own seasonal presence here could be a mooring point for others. Standing still against the tree, the light was slowly fading when I heard the bubbling gurgle of the female cuckoo: her call announcing a successful laying of eggs. A male cuckoo shot low across the gorse bushes, calling insistently in response before the ruckus of songbird protest erupted. The chattering alarm called out the action in outrage. For years, I had been the one passing through. Now I was the one who returned, arriving to this same place again and again and being witnessed as I changed.

FRUITING: Relational Wildness



Porous

I'd come to the cottage for just a few short days, arriving in a downpour which had swollen the burn as high as I'd ever seen. For the past couple of months, Graham had been injured with a frozen shoulder, and my life had changed to support him in the city. In my absence, the pathway through the garden had all but disappeared. I teased open the gate and stepped high over the trip lines of bramble, whose new stems bowed and crept in effortless meterage of growth.

Opening the front door, I was confronted with the smell of green mould which dusted the wooden table. Instantly I was sneezing, doubled over as I rushed to open the windows and let air into the rooms. Reaching for the bottle of vinegar spray, a ritual of wiping and cleansing began. Aging wood, dampened fabrics: the moist summer created perfect conditions for microscopic lifeforms to spore and thrive. This was their season of fruiting, and my allergies were confirmed. I sifted through the ingredients in the cupboard, wiping surfaces, cleaning and sorting each room. There was mouse urine on the duvet and droppings scattered in the shower tray. That same bramble whose roots were anchored in the stone walls below the kitchen window— the one I had wrestled with to remove just two months previously— had returned with vigour, licking the glass.

Outside for fresh air, the audacious growth of purple moor grass swamped my legs, their rosettes lashing wetness against my trousers and impeding passage down to the sea. I stopped still in frustration and there, amongst the crazy internal architecture of the grasses sat a perfect Angus brown butterfly, wings held open as a harvest spider waded over it and continued onwards into the multitudes of striated shelters beyond. I eased my body around the patch, trying to not dislodge their lives.

The fish farm was back to full operation and a waft of diesel carried by the south westerly breeze pushed me further along the coastline to seek a secluded cove. The long thin waterfall almost overpowered me. I stood beneath its needles, gasping for air between plumes of spray. The knife edge between invigoration and being erased.

Afterwards, on the rocks, I wondered how it would be to hold it all. The diesel, the fecundity, the feeling of being swamped, the mould, the waterfall, the sun, the pattern of rain splash, the sound of the burn singing over the fish farm. What if I could accept this place just as it was, just as I am. And for a moment, it was possible.

As I walked up the over-grown path from the shoreline, wading through bracken, I understood why people might be fearful of this terrain. The difficulty of not having the next step clearly defined. The inaccessibility. This vegetal surge impedes human passage. Beneath the shading of my midge net, I imagined how it would be if the seasons didn't exist, if these plants were to keep growing. Bracken is perhaps the epitome of the forceful will of the plant world. Spreading both by spores and rhizomes, and harbouring ticks and carcinogenic spores, to move through it in this season was a risk to human health. We flirt with entanglement conceptually, wanting to lose our selves in some instances. But to bash a path through a thicket of bracken is a different mode of being with the land.

Summertime demands a strict regime of sweeping one's body free of ticks and removing outdoor clothing before entering the house. Hordes of them were clustered on my trouser legs and I realised that I bring them into the garden from my walks. Back inside, I sneezed relentlessly, spiking with frustration and shame. The acrid smell of bracken sap mixed with coffee grounds, and my face fizzed with one too many midge bites. The futility of never-ending tasks was too much for me to maintain this human home so intermittently. The Cailleach lay opposite, serene, having seen it all before.

Later, once the place was cleaned and the stove was lit, I slowly settled, my eyes still swollen and chest wheezing. On an evening walk along the footpath, the light caught the glen behind the footbridge, and turned the edge of each contour into a gold ribbon of land. The oil platform was illuminated: the glowing temple. The trees were dark in comparison, holding their maximum weightiness of water. Their twisted growth and a snarled trunk fallen horizontal over the gorge created a Gothic sense of potency. Life and death. The woodland was blurring its boundaries. Running beyond the neat line of the historical wall and

thickening, quickening via its tactical spread. Despite the continued over population of deer, it was happening.

If the deer were reduced in number, the core of the woodland would spread, not confined to rock ledges but free flowing, plotting and manoeuvring. The house would be no obstacle to its sweep across the hillside. The woodland at the shoreline would be next to spring up, the sheep fank surrounded, and the bracken just a guise for the determination of new saplings. The beach would reveal itself as hazel wooded coves, while single minded hollies offered their progeny seamlessly, linking and connecting these coves with other woodlands scattered along the shoreline. The woodland would surge.

By day I focus on the woodland, but at night I dream about the sea. A huge ancient salmon with a physique shaped by the depths of this sea loch. Wizened and illustrious, the contours of this salmon glow from dark depths. Salmon comes from the Latin, meaning 'to leap'. Not only are they considered an indicator species, with the health of the species directly affected by ecosystem health, but salmon are also recognised as a keystone woodland species. The spawning processes and corpses of wild salmon contribute valuable marine nutrients to upland trees, with studies in North America finding that the presence of Pacific salmon in rivers makes trees grow faster than their salmon-deprived counterparts.[1] Wild salmon have long threaded relationships between sea and forest.

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I was at my desk on the landing, awaiting the call to say when the helicopter, due any day now, would pick up the materials required for the reparations of the deer fence from Kishorn Dry Dock and drop them here. Between intense downpours the midges were fierce, and my time outside was limited to snatched moments. Looking over the map of the fence enclosure sent to me by Bruce, the woodland consultant who worked for Applecross Trust, the points of breakage were like beads on a necklace, strung intermittently in a display of transgression. As a three-sided enclosure, it would never afford complete

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[1] Tom Reimchen, 'The Salmon Forest Project', available at: <http://web.uvic.ca/~reimlab/salmonforest.html> [accessed 18 March]

protection, with the deer inevitably entering on the steep sided cliff edge, or along the beach at low tide. At twenty years old, the fence was already in the latter stages of its lifespan, but for as long as it stood, we reasoned, it made sense to repair and strengthen this barrier of protection to better catalyse the regeneration of woodland within. For although regrowth was occurring, the woodland ecology was warped by the preferential grazing of the red deer, with oak, aspen, rowan continuously supressed. The maintenance work had been repeatedly delayed over the past couple of years, first from the pandemic and then from the complex schedule of the helicopter and the labourers' other jobs.

Along with the repair of the main fence, funding had been secured from two local businesses— Kishorn Dry Port and Scottish Salmon— to construct a new, smaller, four-sided enclosure, offering complete protection from deer around an area of mixed habitat. A fence within a fence, this new enclosure would allow for natural regeneration to be demonstrated and monitored, giving us a baseline for what could be achieved through minimised grazing. Playing with the hundred metre quadrant of the new enclosure on my mapping software to see where it would be best placed inside the existing enclosure, I couldn't help but fret that this intervention was creating further restriction: the opposite of the landscape connectivity we were aiming for.

The landscape was marked by a series of redundant, or semi-effective enclosures, each testifying to a different era of land management— different strategies of which herbivore was deemed profitable, and which was to be excluded. The deer fence; the sheep fank; the rusted fence halfway along the footpath which once demarked common grazing of Toscaig from the deer forest at Airigh Drishaig. I realised that I had come to think of Airigh Drishaig as the geographical area within the deer fence. The shape of the place was easily defined by this boundary.

The seascape directly adjacent to this land was managed through enclosures too. Eight dark circles. I'd watched the surface of these open-net cages for hours over the past few years, gripping binoculars in attempt to discern the activities of the fish farm. Around one million fish could be contained here at any one

time.[2] These Atlantic salmon, *Salmo salar,* are a domesticated species, developed for commercial purposes and heavily dependent on antibiotics. Their lives begin as fertilised eggs grown in trays in the hatchery at Kishorn, before being reared as first feeding fry. When they reached their adolescent smoltification stage, they were brought to these deep-water cages until one or two years old.[3] Twice daily visitations from a rib checked on the cages, and a feed barge distributed the pork and fish-based food pellets into the cages, produced at the colossal MOWI Feed Mill Factory, situated over the water at Kyleakin on Skye.[4] Periodic visitations from either a huge well boat for their live transportation, or the boats the workers referred to as 'morties' arrive for the slaughter.

In my first year of being here, one night I had awoken to a light shining through the window and directly onto my bed. From a huge boat stationed at the fish farm, a search light passed over the woodland, up-lighting it like a stage-set, touching the trees, the roof of the cottage and then my skin as I watched from the sky light. Why did they work at night? Through binoculars I'd seen the gleam of stainless steel below the deck, and the blocks of ice. I was yet to understand the rhythms of aquaculture and these cycles of industry that held such power, efficiency, and wealth.

Undercover video footage from various open-net fish farms across the West coast of Scotland show disfigured and frayed bodies of salmon, with carcasses floating to the surface.[5] The high stocking density of the fish results in explosions of sea lice, which eat into the flesh of the living creatures. To treat the problem, pesticides, fungicides and antibiotics are pumped directly into these open nets. Sixteen chemicals are currently approved for use in Scotland, with some of these already banned in other countries.[6] A specialised fish species, rass, which feeds on sea-lice is also introduced into the cages, but the species is currently in short

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[2] Cooking Sections, 'CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones,' in *A Commonplace Book of ATLAS'* ed. by Emma Nicolson and Gayle Meikle, (Portree: ATLAS Arts, 2021), p. 186
[3] Scottish Seafarms, 'How our salmon are grown', available at: <https://scottishseafarms.com/our-salmon/how-grown/> [accessed 1 Feb 2023]
[4] MOWI, 'Kyleakin Pier', available at: <https://mowi.com/uk/kyleakinpier/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]
[5] Scottish Salmon Watch, available at: <https://scottishsalmonwatch.org/>[accessed 30 Jan 2023]
[6] Rob Edwards & Francesco di Augustinis, 'Revealed: 16 Toxic chemicals used by Scottish fish-farmers', *The Ferret*, 17 March 2021, available at: <https://theferret.scot/16-toxic-chemicals-scottish-fish-farmers/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

supply due to this industrial usage, undoubtedly creating a knock-on effect to the ecosystems they are taken from. Along with waste and parasites, the chemical treatments pass through the mesh and pollute the seabed beneath the cages, leaving a footprint devoid of organisms. Down on the beach, I often found flotsam of the industry: a dead rass; huge plastic tanks; a health and safety sign instructing safe handling of hydrogen-peroxide. Occasionally I catch an almost biscuity chemical smell in the air, and on those days, I'm pushed away from the sea, physically repulsed.

In 2019, Northwest Skye, two-hundred rainbow salmon were found having escaped from a local fish farm.[7] With stunted dorsal fins and scarring from the sea-lice across their bodies, the salmon bore the markings of being farmed. They were caught undertaking an attempt to return to fresh waters: compelled by an instinct they had never actualized. Being triploids, bred with three sets of chromosomes instead of two, they would have been unable to breed with wild salmon, but their plight was tragic, nonetheless. Caught in a cycle powered by the market and fuelled by fossil fuels— the generator, the packing ships, the transportation— the farmed salmon and surrounding marine habitats are undoubtedly damaged by this intensive aquaculture.

Through its contribution to local work economies, value to global markets and large-scale food production, the industry is protected, and Scottish salmon is valorised as an affordable luxury product emblematic of this landscape. This year, rising sea temperatures are increasing the mortalities of farmed fish, creating problems both economic and of animal welfare.[8] Although operations continue intact for now, pressure is mounting for the industry to innovate beyond the environmental damage caused by current practices.

Within systems thinking, a leverage point is a point within a complex system (a corporation, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything. Environmental scientist Donella Meadows

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[7] Skye & Wester Ross Fisheries Trust, *Review September 2020*, available at: <https://docslib.org/doc/1370430/skye-and-wester-ross-fisheries-trust-review-september-2020> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

[8] Ilona Amos, 'Salmon fatalities at fish farms double in past year figures suggest', *Scotsman,* 16 Jan 2023, available at: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/salmon-fatalities-at-fish-farms-double-in-past-year-figures-suggest-3987766> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

wrote *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*, as an overview of systems change with a series of leverage points graded by their effectiveness. Meadows acknowledged that the essence of radical transformation is understood far beyond systems analysis, with the silver bullet, or the single hero or villain who turns the tide of the story, representing a cultural understanding of a particular point of power. And yet, within the lore of systems theory, Meadows explains, it is shown that understanding complex systems, and changing them, is often counterintuitive. 'Leverage points are not intuitive. Or if they are, we intuitively use them backward, systematically worsening the problems we are trying to solve.'[9]

Current regulations in fish farms include adjustments to chemical usage and the monitoring of sea lice per salmon. Changes to these would be understood as adjusting the parameters: the least effective point of systems change on Meadows' list as it is seen as merely tinkering with the edges. A more effective intervention for aquaculture currently in development would be to instead grow the salmon in closed containment. By creating an impermeable barrier between the fish and the marine habitat, ecosystems would theoretically be protected from the harms of the industry. The power to add, change or self-organize systems structure is the strongest form of system resilience. As an example of self-organization within systems change, the ability to innovate and respond to the conditions of the whole is regarded by Meadows as akin to the ability to evolve.

Last autumn I travelled over to Skye to visit *CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones*, a project made the artists, Cooking Section, and local organisation, ATLAS Arts.[10] As the tide slowly slugged away from broadly curved Portree bay, the metal grid formation of the *CLIMAVORE* oyster table was revealed. In situ for the last five years, the table was clustered with bladderwracks, making it almost invisible on the beach even at low tide. Striations of fresh water trickled past striped sand bars where squabbling seagulls now gathered. The intertidal zone was once used as a twice daily event of rich pickings for nonhumans and humans alike, but

[9] Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,* (Hartland VT: The Sustainability Institute, 1999), available at: <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

[10] Atlas Arts, *CLIMAVORE,* available at: <https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/climavore-on-tidal-zones> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

coastal foraging has largely fallen out of cultural practice. The table stands as a platform to invite humans to gather from the intertidal zone once again.

A town well attuned to tide times, the layout of Portree is shaped around the sea which has long provided for it. The line of colourful buildings alongside the depth of the harbour, are where the fishing boats, now predominantly trawlers are moored. I watched the night previously as langoustines were unloaded from the boughs of a trawler and packed carefully under floodlight, lined tightly into crates on ice then wrapped and stacked into the back of an unbranded van. Destined for markets and mouths far from this harbour, the complexity of fishing quotas and the depletion of sea stock has created a perfect storm, whereby the bottom feeders of the seabed—once seen as poor pickings— are sold off as a luxury product.

The intertidal zone could be democratic by comparison. Availability is overseen by the timing of the tide; its quota is governed by the sea. At low tide, the intertidal zone emerges as a liminal multispecies common, and it was here that Atlas Arts and Cooking Sections choose to place the *CLIMAVORE* table. Installed as a platform both for the literal attachment of seaweed and bivalves, but also as a platform for discussion and cultural response to the growing emergency of unsustainable food systems, the table has been the tangible centre piece to a much wider project of education and experimentation within the local food systems of Skye and Raasay. After today the table would be deconstructed and the project would move into its next phase. But first, the oyster table would host its final celebratory event.

As the brackish water oozed away, people picked a careful path through the eddies of the river towards the table. Against the piles of olive-toned wracks and glossy kelp, new colours announced themselves. Yellow wellies and the bright woollen hats of the artists, Cooking Section— hot pink for Daniel Fernández Pascual, pale pink for Alon Schwabe— moved across the tableaux of seaweed. In a well-practiced flow of preparations, they unpacked and assembled the makings of a feast; the makings of their art. Marine red waterproof mats were unfolded across the benches that surrounded the table. A huge silver pot was placed centre stage.

I was handed a cup of tea that steamed with the fragrance of nettle, mint and fennel. I settled myself onto a cushion above the steady dripping of seaweed that grew through the porous construction of the table. Conversations encircled the structure, and a sense of occasion surrounded the artists who, with heads bowed and knives in hands were busy preparing the feast. Wearing a silver chainmail glove, Daniel gripped a shell in his palm, and skewered his knife back and forth to shuck the oyster, separating the clasp of the twinned shell and unhitching the foot of attachment. The pile of discarded half shells stacked higher by the minute until the wooden chopping board was offered before me, filled with an arrangement of oysters, lemon slices and tabasco.

Their project, 'Becoming Climavore', was based around an exploration of how our eating habits could respond to the needs of a changing climate. A large part of the climavore diet that the project proposes is based around the consumption of bivalves and seaweed, as opposed to industrially farmed salmon.[11] A contentious subject on the island, and the west coast in general, many in the local population are directly employed within the running of the fish farms. The premise of 'Becoming Climavore' seeks to both offer a viable alternative to this industry, working with local food supply chains to change the nature of our culinary habits. As it was my first-time eating an oyster, I applied lemon as advised, and tipped the rough barnacled shell into my mouth. My tongue was flooded with a delicate salinity as I bit into the pearlized flesh. A distant minerality, cool and fresh, left me looking appreciatively into the smooth pink interior.

These were cultivated Pacific oysters, *Crassostrea gigas*, imported as tiny sprats to be grown in special bags on an oyster farm and selectively grown for their size and succulence. The native European oyster could also be found on this shoreline: an even more gnarly creature of a smaller size, but its numbers remained low after a legacy of industrial-scale processing and centuries of high-level pollution. Large-scale conservation programmes of native oyster reintroduction were beginning to take place around Scotland, but the intervention that this oyster table sought to make was not around the notion of

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[11] Cooking Sections, *Becoming Climavore,* (2015) https://www.climavore.org/seasons/becoming-climavore/ [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

conservation. Instead, the premise was to make intervention into the food system itself, creating an alternative aquaculture to salmon farming. A regenerative aquaculture which grows habitats within a polyculture of food production.

Bivalves, the name given to oysters and other shellfish whose shells come in two parts, have the unique property of filtrating the water that they grow in.[12] Unlike salmon farming, they require no additional feed or chemical intervention, and can be grown in a system that is scalable. Packed with protein and zinc, shellfish has been a stable food of coastal Scotland and the British Isles for millennia. Below the surface of the modern fish farming methods, lies all the traditional ecological knowledge that is needed to re-establish regenerative aquaculture. Scallop divers, mussel farmers and polycultures of marine harvesting have operated here long before the initialisation of this project. Yet compared to the modern-day monopoly of the salmon farms, they have become marginal practices.

The intervention that Cooking Sections intend with their art works is to shift food production systems towards regenerative models. *CLIMAVORE* targets a habitat well known to them: the institutions of the art world. As well as working with restaurants across Skye, Cooking Sections have brokered an agreement with Tate Gallery and the Serpentine to remove industrially farmed salmon from cafe menus and provided support in finding Climavore replacements through an array of seaweed and bivalve inspired recipes.[13] Their intervention is specific: a leverage point that bypasses fish farms and spotlights regenerative food systems by transforming our cultural appetite, and mindset. To change the goals of the system, or the mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises, is understood by Meadows as being almost the most powerful intervention possible.

Data from the Fish Health Inspectorate revealed that the death rate of cultivated fish had reached an all-time high this year, due to rising sea

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[12] Caryn C. Vaughn and Timothy J. Hoellein, 'Bivalve Impacts in Freshwater and Marine Ecosystems', *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics*, 49:1, (2018), 183-208 <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-ecolsys-110617-062703> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

[13] Atlas Arts, *Climavore Recipe Book*, available at: <https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/climavore-on-tidal-zones/climavore-recipe-book/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

temperatures and following explosion of parasites and viruses. The latest innovation for fish farming— the SuperSmoltFeedOnly™— aimed to speed the smoltification stage of salmon growth to reduce harm when transferred to saltwater and reduce fatalities.[14] Within the next year, all Scottish fish farms would be using this method. The innovation chemically accelerates the lifespan of the farmed salmon, forcing the bodies of a creature once venerated as a symbol of ecological wisdom to comply with market cycles. Instead of manipulating and subjugating living creatures in attempt to satisfy the fallacy of infinite growth, it is our lifestyles and systems which need to shift and transform in relation with the needs of the planet.

The adaptations of food systems inspired my own thinking around the regenerative possibilities for Airigh Drishaig. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the scale and variation of environmental issues enfolded into any one locale. I wanted to get beyond my own limitations, when thinking about the recovery of this landscape. When you reach a limitation, I told myself, notice it. Meet the edges and find ways beyond. The enclosures of language. The words we have available only reflect what has already been held within cultural history. The freedom we are thirsty for is away from the industrial capitalistic model, which has impoverished our mindscape-landscape. The final point made by Meadows, for the intervention with most impact within systems theory, is the power to transcend paradigms altogether.

> That is to keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms, to stay flexible, to realize that *no* paradigm is "true", that every one, including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview, is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond human comprehension.[15]

Across Scotland, shifts within deer management were gradually starting to happen.[16] Forestry and Land Scotland stated they would no longer provide funding to create fences around woodland, instead putting the onus and

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[14] Fish Farming Expert, 'SuperSmolt wins double patent victory' available at: https://www.fishfarmingexpert.com/biomar-europharma-feedonly/supersmolt-wins-double-patent-victory/1379201 [accessed 2 April 2023]
[15] Meadows, 1999, p. 19
[16] Scottish Government, 'The management of wild deer in Scotland: Deer Working Group Report', 5 Feb 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/management-wild-deer-scotland/pages/19/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

financial burden onto estates which wanted to maintain higher populations of deer. Through land reform legislation, landowners in Scotland would soon be made responsible for any environmental degradation to their land, with obligations both social and environmental.[17] Recent Scottish policies determined a renewed commitment to lowering numbers of red deer.[18] Slowly, the tide was turning from the current status quo of sporting estates towards increased community and ecological accountability. And in the meantime, while these cultural shifts, and policy reworkings were underway, these new enclosures of Airigh Drishaig would provide steppingstones of habitat recovery, which in the longer term would provide the seed base to enable a landscape recovery far vaster than what we might currently be able to imagine.

[17] Scottish Government, 'Rights and Responsibilities Statement', 22 Sept 2022, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/pages/3/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]
[18] Lorna Slater, 'Agenda: Creating a Sustainable Solution to Scotland's Deer Problem', *Herald Scotland,* 22 July 2022, available at: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/20294063.agenda-creating-sustainable-solution-scotlands-deer-problem/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

Wild Flourishing

> Many of the wildest, apparently least-tamed forests, are little more than overgrown gardens created by the ancestors of those who live in them today. That [..] has important lessons for how we should treat our forests and their inhabitants today. We may indulge our forest fantasies. Even so, we should remember they are as much human landscapes as pristine paradise.[19]

Early evening, Alasdair, a woodland ecologist with the Woodland Trust, arrived at my front door holding a thin staff of hazel and a rucksack full of supplies. The Woodland Trust had recently purchased Couldoran Estate, the neighbouring land to Applecross Estate. [20] Alasdair was responsible for surveying possible routes of habitat connectivity in the region. Airigh Drishaig was the first place on his list. I welcomed him into the cottage for dinner, where I'd made a nettle risotto, garnished with sheep sorrel and kale flowers. I was brimming with a million questions for this man of the woods, whose amicable ruddy face featured a beard just like the tresses of *usnea* lichens which hang from the trees here. Our conversations burst into life and soon the table was covered in maps as we discussed the landscape and woods. Alasdair carried an easeful, earthy knowledge of native woodlands, grown through years of working as an ecologist and living as a crofter.

Early the next morning, fuelled by rocket strength coffee and prepared with packed lunches, we set out on a ground survey of the site to piece together an understanding of the possible future connectivity of this woodland. Alasdair paused on the path almost sniffing the air to discern the intricate overlay of microclimates, and explained that he needed to drop into a certain way of thinking: would trees grow here? I followed him silently up the footpath, then we were down on our knees to observe a tree lying prostrate to the path that I had never noticed. A tiny-leaved creeping willow, *Salix repens*, it was apparently particularly well suited to this coastal environment.

[19] Fred Pearce, *A Trillion Trees: How We Can Reforest Our World,* (London: Granta Books, 2021) p. 7

[20] Woodland Trust, 'Woodland Trust Scotland buys Highland Estate', Dec 2021, available at: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2021/12/woodland-trust-scotland-buys-highland-estate/> [accessed 30 Jan 2023]

In *Arts of living on a Damaged Planet,* anthropologist and forest ecologist Andrew Mathews describes the act of surveying a former woodland as requiring consistent attention to form, texture, and colour through a constant speculation of pattern. 'I walk with a dozen speculative possibilities in mind, some of which strengthen into impressions, many more of which I soon dismiss or remain speculations.'[21] Mathews likens this process to that ethnographic interviewing, with its 'constant tension of between here and elsewhere, accompanied by the close attention to the indeterminacy of what is going on in a particular encounter.'

Through Alasdair's eyes, it was apparent that everything was responding to the way in which the land had been used previously. Each patch of vegetation— from the gorse surrounding the cottage to the molinia on the terraces— each population was a response to what had been before. We stood to look over the stretch of land surrounding *Meall Alt Fraochach*. The Gaelic name, translating to heathery hill, suggested that this hillside had historically been species-poor.[22] It was unlikely to ever be an area of prime woodland, but we discussed how a scattering of trees might return, either through patchy regeneration or through enrichment planting, the process in which trees are planted to increase population density and tree species diversity.

As we crossed the burn and walked up and over onto the terraces which looked down onto the remaining woodland, Alasdair theorised as to the possible story of this landscape's depletion. He pointed out how the terrain was 'poached' with the hoof marks of cattle and deer, which formed lines of trampled imprints into the soft ground, criss-crossing over the terraces. But this was only half the story of why the molinia grasses were so dominant here. 'Fire is the culprit,' Alasdair explained. 'Intentional or otherwise, it seems like the vegetative seed source has been depleted by historical fires.' The terraces had slowly been drained of biodiversity. Any regeneration of trees and palatable vegetation had been grazed; any seeds of perennial or annual vegetation had been scorched. From this historical suppression, these species could not yet rebound. The remaining lichens and the molinia grasses were the lone survivors of this newly made

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[21] Andrew S. Mathews, 'Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories' in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G147
[22] Translation given by Roddy Maclean

tundra. The molinia was not particularly palatable to the deer, and so was left to grow in tall tussocks, becoming rank and impenetrable for other species.

Further along the coastline, we paused to look down on the craggy oak trees which were experiencing some form of crown dieback. Alasdair suggested this could be re-entrenchment— a condition caused by a combination of nutrient poor soil and heavy rainfall which meant that as the trees aged, they were unable to support their own weight. The steep sided land meant that without a treeline of birch and hazel interspersed above these oaks, any available nutrients had leached down to the sea. The oak woods were slowly regressing and when these geriatric trees died, there was no next generation to follow. Slowly, the cycle of succession was beginning again, with birch and willow finding crevices to repopulate the terraces alongside the remaining clusters of veteran oaks that we were headed towards.

At the far side of the terraces, we slipped between trees into the oakwood. Oak trees experience a second burst of growth, which occurs late summer and is known traditionally as Lammas budding.[23] Lammas is the Celtic festival of the first day of August and celebrates the fruits of the season. The growth spurt is particularly evident on sessile oaks, as it combines an increased growth of the annually produced stems, which remain conspicuous with their brightness. The female pink budded flowers which had adorned the branches back in spring, were now swelling towards their recognisable form as acorns.

We circled a particular oak, admiring its sprawling limbs which stretched low to ground, and drew in close alongside a horizontal branch to examine the cushioned mass of lichens. Alasdair listed off their names, explaining that these were predominantly from the Parmelion group of lichens, which grow on trees with acidic bark, especially on poorer soils. The tufted tips of a coral lichen, *Sphaerophorus globosus*, were being grazed by a slug, and I was amazed to learn that this would assist in the dispersal of lichen propagules.[24] Many of these

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[23] Hugh Fife, *Warriors and Guardians: Native Highland Trees,* (Argyll: Argyll Publishing, 1994), p. 174

[24] P.M. McCarthy and J.A. Healy, 'Dispersal of Lichen Propagules by Slugs' in *The Lichenologist* 10. 1. (1978), Cambridge University Press: 131-132. doi:10.1017/S002428297800016X

lichens were nationally, and even globally scarce, clinging on to these last vestiges of woodland habitat.

I'd anticipated learning about woodland ecology from Alasdair, and yet what was most striking was the human ecology that his knowledge made visible. As we strolled through the trees, we passed numerous branches that had been sawn. I'd always assumed that these had been gathered by a previous tenant, perhaps even by John, but as Alasdair rubbed his hand over the weathered edge of a stump, he estimated the cuts to be around one hundred years old. Perhaps, he speculated, someone might have wanted to remove low hanging branches to give cattle better access to these nutrient rich edges of woodland pasture. Mathews writes of how in the 'ghost forests' he surveys, evidence of former human use is omnipresent:

> I have been tracing the ghostly forms that have emerged from past encounters between people, plants, animals, and soils. These ghostly forms are traces of past cultivation, but they also provide ways of imagining and perhaps bringing into being positive environmental futures.[25]

Woodlands are a long entanglement of relations between people and trees. Forester and writer Hugh Fife suggests that no other tree has more greatly improved our standard of living than oak.[26] From the ink created by oak-apples made by the gall wasps, to the tannins which were extracted from the bark as the principal ingredient for tanning leather, oak has literally shaped and coloured our culture, utilised in vast quantities in the period approaching the industrial revolution. In the West Highlands, oak bark was stripped from trees and sent to Glasgow for the purpose of leather tanning. In addition, the tannins from oak bark were used in coastal areas for preserving fishing nets and sails against the rotting effects of salt water.[27]

Timber provided fuel on a domestic scale, as well as being industrially used for iron-smelting in furnaces in Argyll. The timber of choice for barrels, wheels, doors, and tables, perhaps the most important use of oak was in ship building,

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[25] Mathews, G145
[26] Fife, p. 176
[27] Milliken and Bridgewater, p. 100

for which generations of trees were harvested around Britain. John Fowler proposes that within Scottish history of West coast woodlands, oak was encouraged at the expense of other species, which were sometimes weeded out. ‘The predominance of oak in many surviving woods is not so much natural as artificially skewed.’[28] Whatever the balance of species, it seems that in the Highlands, it is possible that the shieling culture and silvopasture practices of woodland cattle grazing prevented the timber extraction more common in England: the difference in past practices preserving the remaining habitats to which these rare lichens and other lifeforms now cling.

Over the course of the day, we walked the fragments of woodland that I’d come to relate with over the past three years, each made newly abundant through the expertise and enthusiasm of Alasdair. In the ravine he pointed out liverworts and a new flower for me, sanicle. Our scramble up a bouldered scree slope to locate junipers resulted in us finding a carpet of wild thyme, and many more juniper trees than I had previously spotted. A quick stop under a sheltered crag for lunch revealed the surprise of a lone rhododendron, flowering in magenta, possibly windblown from the gardens on the opposite shore. Rhododendron is a particular threat to native woodlands and temperate rainforest, suppressing regeneration and shading out the plant species. Many other west coast sites face the colossal task of intensive cutting back followed by stem-injection application of herbicide to kill each individual plant. Incredibly, rhododendron rarely features along this shoreline. I made a note of its location to return with a pickaxe and uproot it.

Having covered the terrain to the west of the site, we headed back to the woodland directly below the cottage. Last night, we’d looked at the first edition OS map from 1870, the map by which ancient woodland in Scotland is determined.[29] On this map the field directly adjacent to the cottage is marked as a white blank space: the inbye. An area of land cultivated and improved, the

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[28] John Fowler, Landscapes and Lives: The Scottish Forest Through the Ages (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002), p. 68
[29] Ordnance Survey, 1880. Ross-shire and Cromartyshire (Mainland), Sheet CXVI, Six-inch 1st Edition [online map]. National Library Scotland. Available from: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74428442> [accessed 17 Jan 2023]

inbye would have been used to grow oats, and then as winter grazing for the cattle. Just one tree was marked in the middle of the field. We walked down into the woods. Of the oaks which grew here, it was Grandmother Oak— the Octopus— that I had thought to be the oldest due to the thickness of trunk. The next tree along had a splayed collection of stems, none particularly thick, and I had passed by a hundred times without paying much attention. But it was this tree to which Alasdair made a bee line. He circumnavigated the base, and then stood back to tell me his theory. It was likely that these multi-stemmed trunks were the regrowth from an enormous ancient tree that had been pollarded, or more accurately in this example, coppiced.

Coppicing is the act of cutting a tree back to produce a close growth of young branches forming a round canopy, a practice which produces a repeated yield of usable timber. Although it seems a violent act, coppicing can extend the lifespan of the tree. Mathews describes the biological response of a tree to its cutting:

> The act [catalyses] a sudden wild flourishing of dormant buds that had lurked as potential growing shoots in the cambium layer beneath the bark. Cutting the main trunk removed hormonal signals from the dominant meristems in the upper crown and shed a flood of sunlight on the bark, triggering the emergence and rapid growth of shoots near the stump.[30]

Fowler describes just how common coppicing once was. 'All along the western seaboard of Scotland and the glens reaching inland, from Wester Ross in the north to Galloway in the south, oak woodlands show unmistakable signs of past coppicing.'[31] Coppicing was enacted on rotation, whereby portions of the wood were felled in rotation over a number of years. Instead of clear-felling, the wood was managed as a patchwork of different stages of growth. Fowler describes how some of the evidence is very old and can be misperceived. 'Here and there are stools— clumps of trees springing from one set of roots— so broad and splayed out that they might be mistaken for single trees growing close to one another. The wider the ring of stems and the more open the centre of the cluster, the older the original tree is likely to be.'[32]

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[30] Mathews, G149
[31] Fowler, p. 66
[32] Fowler, p. 66

We wrapped the tape measure around the girth of the oak. So splayed were the stems that as I held the end of the tape in place, Alasdair edged round again, and again, and again. Four times round to measure a basal girth of 8.72 metres. It was huge for a west coast oak, making it likely that this tree was well over eight hundred years old. I was astonished. This was possibly the mother tree of all the other oaks in this part of the woodland. Alasdair stood next to the tree making notes to later record on the Ancient Tree Inventory.[33] I stepped back in new appreciation, to witness and photograph the fullness of its canopy. The timber of its previous growth might have been utilised to make a boat or a barn; perhaps it was even in the rafters of the cottage, which became double storey at the turn of the nineteenth century. This tree had witnessed the succession of human inhabitants: foragers, hunters, grazers, growers, shielings, crofters, wanderers. Wolf, lynx, boar, and bear must have scent-marked and snuffled against its previous iterations of trunks, while the roots have remained the same, reaching ever deeper.

It was apparent that this area of former silvopasture was thriving. The oak trees within this former field were far vaster in stature, and seemingly more virulent than elsewhere on the site. I'd understood this to be related to the increased fertility given to this area by the presence of cattle, and perhaps the enrichment provided by seaweed brought up from the shoreline if oats had been grown here. But there was something else too. As I sat back and observed each of these trees— Grandmother Octopus, the newly recognised Mother Tree, and the others within this area, I realised that they all shared a common feature. The mossy bases of their trunks and spread of roots were each entangled over a pile of small boulders, also covered with moss. Known as clearance cairns, these are created through the agricultural practice of gathering rocks to clear an area for cultivation. In contrast to the other areas where veteran trees were experiencing re-entrenchment, it seemed that by growing on these cairns, the oaks experienced improved drainage and stability, along with the trickle flow of nutrients from past activities and from the treeline of birch and willow above.

[33] Tree ID: 231307, *Ancient Tree Inventory*, Woodland Trust, available at: <http://ati.woodlandtrust.org> [accessed 18 March 2023]

Human activities have been destructive for arboreal communities, but as Fowler emphasises, 'there are other models of inhabiting the world, in which the human is not a destructive force, but rather one that impacts nature in ways that support its lively ecologies.'[34] As I watched Alasdair recording notes on this ancient tree, I looked at the clearance pile on which it grew and realised that the age of this tree would potentially also give indication to the long duration that humans had been tending this pasture.

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My world had changed. I lay in my bed that evening, physically exhausted but mentally stimulated. I felt my perception dart over the land we had walked as if suddenly expanded, buzzing with the sense of having shifted beyond previous boundaries. Before we parted, I had taken Alasdair to see the Scots pine trees, which grow on the steep sided rock face to the east side of the land. Overlooking the turquoise depths and white shelves of the seabed, the scaley trunks of these *Pinus sylvestris* were tethered to the near vertical cliff, impossible to access. We had wanted to measure their girths but settled for taking coordinates instead. Standing tentatively on the edge, our faces were close to their canopy, allowing us to admire the pointed shoots of this year's growth and those bright perky cones that promised seed.

I had already known that these Scots pines were special, but I hadn't realised how uncommon it was to find them out here. Only twenty-five sites across the West Highlands remained, Alasdair explained. The last fragments of the Caledonian forest. We counted eight mature trees— a number so low it would be easy to dismiss their significance. But these trees were part of something much wider, their community dispersed wide around the edges of this sea loch. A familial diaspora, they were scattered but connected by the dance of their fine yellow pollen gusting over landscapes and deep waters. Their fruits were now swelling. Fragmentation and connectivity come to look differently when the forces of the wind, or birds, are at play. As land creatures, we tend to think of connectivity in terms of footfall and continuous coverage. Now I understood the

[34] Fowler, p. 77

Scots pine as a being both airborne, and landed, genetically adapted to this exact location and cross-pollinating across the ecosystem.

Speaking with Alasdair, I realised that from a deep time perspective, it was possible that this remaining fragment was not the anomaly. Perhaps the previous extensive coverage of the Caledonian forest, enabled by the different climate of the Holocene had been the ecological discrepancy. It flipped my thought patterns. There was no normal. Loss and contraction were a dynamic of planet earth. And yet, of course these pines and this woodland could still expand. Just above the cliff edge there was a hillside of cowberry— a plant which shared the same mycorrhizal root connections as pine— showing the perfect place for its expansion. Nationally, and globally, there was a push for tree coverage: carbon credits, offsetting, woodland creation. But rather than through tree planting, a soft needled urge came from those pines: to let woodland grow from these fragments. These genetic adaptations held the keys, the cones. It was as if they implored, let us slide up this cliff edge, so we might expand beyond the limitations of refugia.

I thought appreciatively about the mysterious woodcutter and those saw cuts of yesteryear, aged and weather smoothed into the limbs of still living oak trees. At first, we had thought the cuts were made by herdsmen, to clear areas of grazing for cattle. But as we progressed through the woods and saw careful piles of logs leaning against the trunks of wide oaks, we couldn’t be so sure. A branch taken from this tree, and one from another, too high to have interfered with cattle. One hundred years old, Alasdair judged these cuts to be. I traced through the names I had written down from the census records for the cottage. There was the gamekeeper, stationed at the cottage during the first world war, followed by another stalker and his family in the thirties. But the cuts were too far away in the woodland to have been for firewood to carry back to the cottage. These ghostly piles— undisturbed for the past hundred years— suggested a different type of relationship with the woods.

Perhaps the woodcutter’s name was not on the census records. Perhaps this person lived here invisibly, carefully sawing the wood from overhanging branches, tossing it downhill to a simple bender construction, with a fire outside. It occurred to me, that perhaps they had used the rock shelter, the

original shelter of this land. Tucked into the craggy coastline below the hill which pointed the way for any fugitive in need of shelter: *Meall na Uamha*, Hill of the Cave. There were travellers, whose names and occupation as 'Tinker' were recorded in the 1901 census at Toscaig, but whose wayfaring must have extended far along this wooded shoreline. And there would have been many others who might have had reason to live in the woods, in the turbulence of a hundred years previous, and in many other waves of social unrest.

The woodcutter was tall, judging by the height of the cuts. I hoped this person had thrived in these woods and was relatively dry and comfortable. I hoped they weren't found if they didn't want to be found. That they had their freedom with trees as companions, and a bellyful of meat, the goodness of berries, and the wisdom of fungi as nourishment. I thought of the trust that they must have had that their life would be supported here, living off the land under the radar for a time, and found myself crying at the thought of the woodcutter and those careful piles. The knowledge of the living world which enabled this landscape to be home. Medicinal plants, hunting skills and fire tending. Could this landscape support a human life living wild here today? There'd be plentiful venison for sure. Maybe there was regret that my own life here wasn't 'wilder'. With access and responsibility to the cottage, and the high prevalence of ticks, I'd stayed more domestic than first imagined.

From the restfulness of my tired body, I remembered with delight the existence of the Mother Tree, the newly measured ancient one. Previously, I'd guessed these trees to be roughly one hundred and fifty years old and had felt connection to the human community of that time. In fact, the Mother Tree reached back further, teaching me that maps must only be taken at surface value. The tree had been coppiced to the ground, and then grew again. And still, it thrived. Rising, disappearing, rising again, the realisation of this as coppiced woodland renewed appreciation of the entanglement of human-arboreal relations.

Three years' worth getting to know this land had deepened and consolidated in this day. Realising the webbed lineage of woodlanders who had shaped this environment, made me see my own presence, and the role of the enclosure differently. Fowler articulates, how '[t]hinking about the human as an element

that can be beneficial for the environment challenges the habitual ways of understanding sustainability as a call for preservation rather than for transformation.'[35] Airigh Drishaig was not defined by the deer enclosure, but by relationships within the wider landscape, emergent with habitats and routes of connectivity. My own relationship with this place was still open for discovery. It was in the final moment of saying goodbye to Alasdair, as he began the long walk out towards the road that he called over his shoulder and asked, 'Have you ever thought about setting this place up as a Woodland Croft?'

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The computer tab outlining the model of Woodland Crofts remained open over the next few weeks.[36] There was a phrase which stayed with me. 'Lifestyles & livelihoods based on woodlands are traditional in many parts of the world but are currently rare in Scotland.'[37] In 2019, Duncan Halley made a comparison study between land use and woodland regeneration in the Highlands contrasted with Southwest Norway.[38] The climate, geology and landforms of the two regions are very similar. Pre-eighteenth century, land-use in both regions was characterised by 'subsistence pastoralism' with low tree cover. However, while the Highlands became dominated by commercial sheep ranching in the late eighteenth century, and then recreational hunting in the nineteenth century, the older pattern of land-use in Norway did not change until 1860. After this time, natural woodland regeneration began to occur, while the population continued to own and manage small farms. In the time since, woodland in Southwest Norway has considerably regenerated, returning to landscapes which had been devoid of trees for millennia. The farming communities sustain themselves through a range of livestock grazing, timber harvest and woodland crops such as berries and fungi. Halley emphasises '[t]he difference in

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[35] Fowler, p. 122
[36] Woodland Crofts Partnership, available at: <https://woodlandcrofts.org/> [accessed 26 April 2023]
[37] ibid.
[38] Duncan Halley, 'Woodland Regeneration and Farming in South West Norway', in *Highlands and Islands Woodlands Handbook for Crofters, Communities and Small Woodland Owners,* ed. by Bernard Planterose (n.p: Croft Woodlands Project, 2019), pp. 237-243

productivity, biological and economic, with the average Highlands and Islands hillside is, to anyone who has seen both, very obvious.'[39]

Woodland Crofts seek to address the opportunity to revitalise livelihoods based on silviculture within the Highlands. As a legal entity, a Woodland Croft is simply a croft with sufficient tree cover to be considered woodland under forest policy.[40] Governed by a range of strict crofting legislations and additional forestry regulations, woodland crofts were first formalised in 2007 to give opportunity for individuals and communities to build lives and livelihoods based on woodland resources, with an expectation that the woodland management would offer economic, social and environment contributions. Recent examples of woodland croft creation in the Highlands include the Glengarry Community Woodland who through the creation of six woodland crofts and affordable homes, aim to repopulate and regenerate the glen.[41]

The human story was so integral to the story of Airigh Drishaig, and over the years of coming into relationship with this place, it was clear to me that it was not solely a rewilding project. The cottage, and its occupants must remain an integral part of this landscape, as the emphasis shifted towards woodland regeneration. Airigh Drishaig as a woodland croft— if permitted by the landowners— would secure the human story of this wild landscape and strengthen the crofting heritage of Applecross.

The Applecross peninsula holds twenty crofting townships, with the land surrounding each township divided into crofting strips, and shared access to areas of common grazing. However, the south of the peninsula— Airigh Drishaig included— never received crofting designation as it was only after the community were cleared and the land became a sheep farm, that the 1850 Crofting Act was established. Airigh Drishaig was managed by Applecross Estate as deer forest, and more recently for woodland conservation. The human story of occupancy had only ever been established through a case-by-case arrangement. If Applecross Trust were ever to consider the possibility of making

[39] Halley, p. 242
[40] Woodland Crofts Partnership
[41] Glengarry Community Woodland, available at: <https://www.glengarry.org.uk/ardochy-forest> [accessed 26 April 2023]

this a woodland croft, then legal designation could ascribe an agreed area of land to the crofting tenant or assign the land to an individual as owner/ occupier. Either form would safeguard the role of the human tenant in relation with the land.

Woodland crofts shift the emphasis away from managing livestock, and it is hoped that future funding allocations would better support this diversification. The Scottish Crofting Federation are in support of Woodland Crofts, advocating that through crofting legislation, land management and community resilience are each strengthened. 'Crofting legislation gives a balance of rights and responsibilities that offer protection to the occupier, the owner, and the land - ingredients for community growth. It is the model land use and the rollout across Scotland should continue as originally intended.'[42] Diversification from traditional crofting has widened, and in recent years, examples of social crofting where a range of agriculture activities, social activities and specific health and wellbeing assessments and interventions converge in a plurality of ways to support mental, emotional physical and social wellbeing, have been studied.[43] Examples of 'wildlife crofts' which utilise existing crofting legislation but prioritise biodiversity, rather than animal livestock can also be found.[44]

Within this epoch of afforestation targets and increased attention towards rewilding and ecological restoration, what opportunities and models of organisation would arise for human communities? The organisation Reforesting Scotland has been advocating for the resurgence of arboreal cultures, from woodland crofts to silvoculture; forest schools to agroecology, for many years. Slowly, Woodland Crofts in the Highlands were gaining traction, but it was a complex issue which, like most things in Scotland, boiled down to a question of land ownership. In addition to ecological restoration, a greater diversification of land relationships and organisational structures away the current monoculture of landowners was critical to the co-flourishing of human and nonhuman communities.

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[42] Tweet. (@ScotCroftingFed, Jul 28 2022)
[43] Zoe Russell & others, 'Spaces of Well-Being: Social Crofting in Rural Scotland', in *Journal of Rural Studies*, 86 (2021), pp. 145-154. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.05.007
[44] Wildlife Croft Skye, available at: <https://wildlifecroftskye.co.uk/crofting/> [accessed 6 Feb 2023]

Infructescence

Airigh Drishaig is a refuge for both wildlife and humans. It was a precious resource, this sheltered home within an expansive, regenerating landscape, far from the nearest road. I thought of the others, friends who had visited and formed their own relationships with this place. The seed collectors, deer chasers and wild gardeners. Individuals who had taken solo time outside, before coming back to the warmth of the cottage for food and heartful conversations. There were many reasons that a person might value coming here, whether taking a pause from their working lives; needing space to reflect and process; for a creative retreat; to contribute to fieldwork or conservation tasks; or local friends who came here to escape the bustling tourism of Applecross in the height of summer.

And yet it was not just a retreat. It required active tending. Labour. Foot paths necessitated continual tasks of clearing vegetation, redirecting watercourses, and the buildings needed a renewal of external render and a multitude of jobs to be kept in good condition. Then there was the wider terrain— the tree planting, fence maintenance, deer stalking, and opportunities for creating an orchard, copse, and pollinator meadow. Without any expectations or predetermination, over three years of explorations I had been considering possibilities for an organisational model that could best serve Airigh Drishaig.

It was never a project of homesteading or settling. Graham and I wouldn't be doing this as a couple, although he was very much a part of it and had his own unique relationship with the place. But there were other people I could collaborate with: it didn't have to be a solo endeavour. I wanted to be able to share this place and grow community through the experience. To bring others into relation with this landscape and widen the skillset beyond my own experience, simultaneously sharing the responsibilities and the rewards. It could be based around a dynamism of seasonal movement, continuing the pulse of contemporary transhumance, and enfolding a diversity of approaches: creative, social, and ecological. I wanted to find an organisational structure that could shift the binary thinking of 'wild' and 'home' to emerge as something mutually beneficial to both people and wildlife.

The idea for a cooperative model arrived in a moment. As if dropping from tree to hand; the idea invited me to taste it. How would it be for Airigh Drishaig to be set up as a cooperative, holding a longer-term intention towards becoming a cooperative woodland croft? I savoured the words in my mouth, turning over the individual flavours and their collective effect. Within a cooperative— most broadly defined as a community with common needs— the members are the main stakeholders, sharing the benefits and contributing or investing into the shared vision. Most often used for housing cooperatives or for agricultural workers, this would provide an entirely different model for how a wild landscape could be cared for.

How would a collective of individuals come to know and tend this land together? What observations, specialisms, and knowledges could be grouped and pooled? Not a commune, a project of attempting to live together, but an organisation of shared responsibilities and access, where each member could enjoy solo time and the gift of being able to return and grow relationship with a wild landscape. Passing the story between us, the cooperative model would open new opportunities, releasing from the pattern of single tenancy and connecting back to the site's historical patterns of collectivism and transhumance. With the possibility for work parties, creative collaborations and annual gatherings, larger tasks could be undertaken as a group. The cooperative members could grow together as a place-responsive community, holding vision for landscape restoration.

Being female led, with LGBTQ+ representation, the cooperative could embed principles of diversity and inclusion within the ethos of its membership. Without obligation for financial contribution, the cooperative model could enable a broader remit of socio-economic involvement with wild landscapes than ordinarily facilitated. Together, we might grow different ways of belonging to this landscape through non-extractive means, based instead on reciprocal relationships with the rights of the land and its non-human communities included within the principles of the organisation.

Mainstream conservation as currently practiced, whether through neo-protectionism or Natural Capital, does not necessitate the transformation of social systems. As the Anthropocene moves into increasingly volatile climatic

repercussions, philosopher Isabel Stengers urges the questioning, of how might we inherit differently?[45] Ecological restoration offers opportunity to transform not just approaches to land management, but also through ethics of multispecies care and responsibility, our social systems. Büscher and Fletcher determine their conceptualization of convivial conservation as necessarily postcapitalist and nondualist. At its core, they propose the building of long-lasting, engaging, and open-ended relationships with nonhumans and ecologies by shifting from *protected* areas to *promoted* areas, where people are welcome as visitors, dwellers, or travellers. In addition, they propose a shift away from 'saving' nature from humans, and instead focus on saving and celebrating human and nonhuman nature equally, acknowledging the unique nature of each life form. By focusing on meaningful long-term engagement instead of touristic voyeurism, they emphasise the importance of a democratic engagement with nature.

In the slow overturning of large-scale single land ownership, there is a movement towards collectivism, and diversity. Witnessing the emergence of broad demographic projects in Glasgow and across Scotland has demonstrated that when a space is community owned, there comes an investment of belonging. It is a slow transition, this shift towards community ownership and responsibilities of the landowner. I'm grateful for the efforts of the generations before who have been working to turn the tide. The tireless work of organising and structuring— finding new ways to hold power to account, and to share power differently.

Within the urgency of land reform, woodland crofts offer a reciprocal model for both cultural regeneration and ecological restoration. Working as a cooperative to tend a wild landscape would be a mode of nurturing *Dùthchas*, sharing the fruits of an ecological belonging which roots in relation through a pattern of returning and contributing. Capitalistic conservation interactions with nature focus on the spectacle of nature, and yet it was through dwelling alongside the ordinary magic of wildlife in all its splendour and mundaneness, that our lives are given meaning. As Büscher and Fletcher suggest, by emphasising *living with* other aspects of nature, convivial conservation 'moves away from capital-

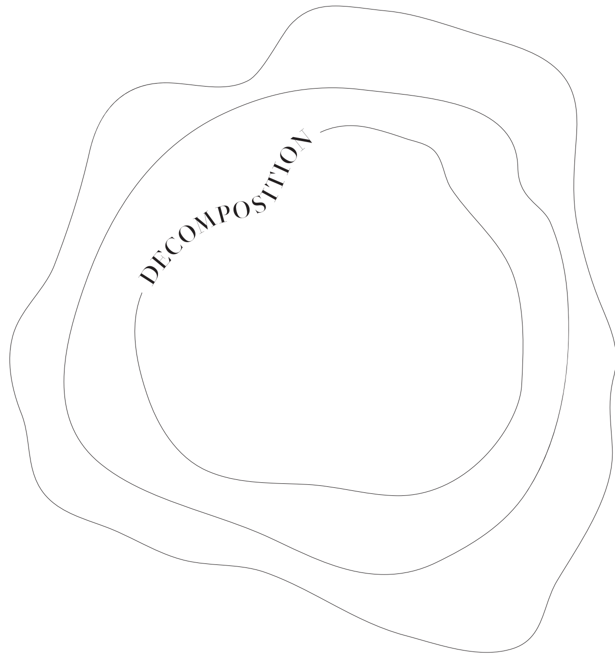
[45] Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Lüneburg: Open Humanities Press/ Meson Press, 2015)

inspired ways of rendering visible the value of nature, and instead become part of broader structures of sharing the wealth that nature provides.'[46]

I left the cottage for a gentle walk through the woodland to mull over these ideas. As I approached the oak trees on the slope down to the sea, a giant creature stirred from the ground flora, its body rising from the moss, faun brown and feathered. It lifted from the ground, white tail bar splayed, and primaries extending to take flight. Creature of the ground became creature of the sky. *Lolaire suile na grein*. The eagle with the sunlit eye. White tailed eagle. This weighty weightless creature glided above the treetops, but for a moment it had been here, where I now stood. Transformation. Exchange. Reciprocity. A project of ecological restoration becomes an opportunity to live and think differently. I carried on walking to the shoreline, hands in my pockets and heart like a drum, knowing that the cooperative had begun. Everything that had happened, everything that was still to happen, was trickling towards it.

[46] Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher, *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene,* p. 97

DECOMPOSITION: Regenerative Rituals



Archival

It was only with the first light of day, when the wind finally diminished, that I knew my visit to Applecross Heritage Centre could go ahead as planned. I'd been awake until the small hours as the wind scoured the hillside and pressed down on the cottage with a sickening intensity. Met Office showed the wind speed on the Bealach as 90 miles per hour and fear had infiltrated my body as I'd considered the possible eventualities. What *would* I do if the roof blew off? In the eerie stillness of morning, I left the cottage to walk the eight miles to the centre, first along the footpath, then the road, spotting signs of wind disturbance in the gardens and fields I passed along the way.

Positioned just inland from the wide mouth of Applecross Bay, the simple stone building of the Heritage Centre stands next to the graveyard and the Clachan Church where the monastery of Maelrubha once stood. I arrived excited if a little sleep deprived. Fiona Mackenzie, the coordinator of the centre and a crofter, greeted me at the door. Inside, the building was a storehouse of interpretation panels, artefacts, and Applecross related ephemera. A hand-turned wooden butter churn sat beside scallop shells pierced with holes once used to skim milk. A glass case displayed rusted tins from Wills Tobacco: Woodbines and Bristols. We stood beside a scale-model of the monastery grounds and chatted about the night before. 'That was an unusual one,' Fiona confirmed. 'You certainly weren't the only one kept awake.' The wind had come from the northwest, meaning that everything— from the trees to the cattle feeders— had been pushed differently to the prevailing south-westerly with which they were anchored in relation.

As Fiona showed me around the centre, our conversation spiralled from the solidity of the old houses to a discussion around the skills of sustainability, and how integral these were within each generation of the community. A gnarly twisted stool made from a tree-root and worn smooth from years of usage, sat near the window. I learned that Fiona's grandfather had once been responsible for patching up the asphalt of what was then the newly opened road over the Bealach, and that the shed he had used for storing the equipment halfway up the hill had since been repurposed as the porch for her cottage in Toscaig.

As it was the end of the tourist season, I would have the privilege of sifting through the archive alone. Once Fiona had inducted me to the filing system, I spent the day going through the census records, making a timeline of the names who had lived at or been connected to Airigh Drishaig. I was on a search of any mention of the place.

The accounts for the making of the four-mile footpath between Toscaig and Airigh Drishaig— the very path I had taken that morning— were there in astonishing detail. Completed in 1937, the cost for each estimate was listed in letters of communication, with the lowest estimate given by Roderich Mackenzie and A. MacLennan from Muir of Ord who secured the contract. The exact specifications for the engineering— from the 400 chains in length to the turf uplift to the cross drains that the path must be fitted with— were all detailed in the contract.[1] Costing the grand sum of £577, the work was paid for by the Wills family of Applecross Estate from their wealth directly linked to the tobacco industry. The effort of the endeavour undertaken by these two men to complete the path must have been colossal. The path that I walked was indebted to their labour. The heritage of this landscape was deeply human— each name I copied into my notebook drew me in closer.

I began to systematically photograph each relevant document but kept being interrupted in the most delightful of ways. The archive kept activating. One by one, having heard that I was there for the day, someone would pop into the building to discuss various projects with me. First Megan MacInnes, who worked for the Scottish Land Commission and was keen to chat about the newly purchased community-owned woodland. Then came Marion Gilroy, a crofter and chief commissioner of the local fire service, who wanted to talk about expanding the tree nursery I had started with the primary school. Next, Mike's daughter, Mairi Summers, came to talk about her socially engaged art practice and we quickly discovered a shared affinity with Tim Ingold and Donna Haraway. I scribbled down names of projects, books, and references I thought might be useful for them and realised that the knowledge I was seeking from the heritage centre was alive and thriving within the community.

[1] Applecross Estate correspondences, Applecross Heritage Centre, fol. 1

That night I stayed at the hostel, Hartfield House, positioned one kilometre further up the glen. In Maelrubha's time, the glen would have held the centre of the population, who were later cleared when the land became the estate farm. Fiona had kindly allowed me to take the archival folders with me and from the warmth of the hostel's living room, I continued to read story after story. The files were alphabetised rather than listed chronologically, so the 1940s doctor who reached the north coastline by motorbike, was situated next to archaeological accounts of Maelrubha. Colonial legacies, cultural heritage, and the varied approaches towards forestry were embedded within details which seemed to dance through timelines. Passing Cloud, a cigarette blend, was the name given to the yacht owned by the Wills family and was once used for shoots.[2] The area surrounding the graveyard and the remains of the monastery was planted with Sitka plantation in the 1960s, making it inaccessible to the public and causing concern of archaeological damage.[3] When the plantation was removed in 2000, the remains of the original Clachan Church were revealed.

Within these files, details of Airigh Drishaig occasionally surfaced, such as the recollections of a local man, Dan McCowan, detailing his time working for Applecross estate as a ghillie. The paper described how the deer forest had been broken up into four 'beats'— the 'Home Beat' of the estate, Inverbain, Russel, and Aridrishaig.

> Communication between ghillies and stalkers was dependent on smoke signals (if there was anything dry enough to burn) or waving frantically from some designated viewpoint. There were no radios! If the system failed, the ghillie was always wrong![4]

From the estate records and correspondences, I could fill in some of the gaps in the census records to complete the timeline of the stalkers who had been stationed at Airigh Drishaig. The intriguingly named Fraser 'Blow Hard' was the stalker based at Airigh Drishaig between the 1930s and 1940s with his family. Significant modifications to the cottage were made in 1937 including the addition of the upstairs rooms and plumbing to bring water into the house.[5] It

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[2] Iain MacLennan, *Applecross and its Hinterland: A Historical Miscellany*, p. 25
[3] Roddy Maclean, 'Buried Treasure?', *Ross-Shire Journal*, 28 Feb 2000, p. 7
[4] Dan McCowan, 'Applecross and Red Deer', (2002), Applecross Heritage Centre, fol. 1
[5] Applecross Estate correspondences, Applecross Heritage Centre, fol. 1

seemed likely that this was the last family to have lived at the cottage, and when I later spoke with Catriona McCowan, Dan's wife and the former headteacher of the school, more details of Fraser's family came to light. With three children, the youngest, Robbie, would walk over to Toscaig, where he would stay Monday to Friday and walk to school each day, before returning to Airigh Drishaig for the weekend. Catriona told me that Dan's grandfather, John MacPherson had been stationed at Airigh Drishaig during the first world war, to keep watch on the deer as apparently the Plockton folks used to come over for poaching when meat was at a premium. Bella, his daughter, accompanied him as the housekeeper, and they would walk back and forth to the cottage, years before the footpath was laid.

Flo was working a night shift at the hostel, and we stayed up late, talking about regenerative grazing methods and how soil health might be rebuilt. The next morning, I headed back to the heritage centre along the track carrying the files in a white plastic feed sack I'd borrowed to protect them from the fine mizzle. The Highland cattle were spread across the field grazing, having returned from their summer at the glen. On the other side of the fence, a couple of steers started to follow me, seemingly curious of the contents of my sack. Then, as if by alert, the entire herd started to run towards me. I stopped to face them, this herd of forty cattle with their horns held indignantly high and I explained apologetically that I had no food for them. Most of the cows returned to graze, but the most determined still followed. By the time we reached the far end of the field, just six remained, still hopeful that I would come to the gate and empty my sack. I imagined the cattle munching through this paper heritage, the carefully photocopied articles and annotations ingested as roughage and transformed to manure, given back to the land.

As I walked away, in a moment of shifting light where the contrast between the roughness of the ungrazed heather on the hillside and the glow of green pasture in the field below was accentuated, I understood something of Airigh Drishaig. Through archival references and oral histories, there was a suggestion of Airigh Drishaig being wilder than the rest of the peninsula. It came not from an outside projection of 'wilderness,' but through observations that were laced with cultural heritage and hinted towards practical understandings of the place.

The crofter Duncan Murchison, known locally as Whatty, had told me stories of how Airigh Drishaig was once known for its high population of adders, sharing an anecdote passed from the keeper, he heard from the old men of the community as a boy.

> One of the guys said there was a gamekeeper there who walked around with a 4 10 shotgun to kill the adders. They were certainly there. One of the pigs was bitten by an adder. A white pig it was he said, and it turned as black as it could have been from the poison.[6]

It seemed that Airigh Drishaig gained a reputation as an adder hotspot, with another cracking story from Duncan telling of how two men from the north coast had walked out there looking for work and had been given accommodation in the barn. 'But they didn't stay because the adders were whistling in the barn. They were hissing.' I told Duncan that I'd just seen one adder in my years of being out there, coiled on the path asleep. 'I don't like them at all, we were always taught that they were dangerous and to kill every single one that you saw,' Duncan confided. 'It was always known as an adder place.'

Duncan knew Airigh Drishaig well from having grazed sheep there with other crofters fifty years ago, walking out as a teenager to shear them in the fank. He had been part of the team employed to put up the fence in 1962 between Toscaig and Airigh Drishaig to put an end to the sheep grazing there, by demarking the deer forest from the crofters' ground. I'd asked him why this would have been seen by the estate as important, to separate the sheep from the deer. He told me his theory, that a sheep is more wary than a deer. 'It would be more difficult to stalk a sheep than to stalk a deer. They would be giving the alarm and the deer would take off. I think that is what the objection was. They didn't like them there.' After the demise of the large-scale sheep farms, deer were synonymous with the sporting estate, and sheep affiliated with the crofters.

I visited the home of Alan Gillies over in Culduie, one of the string of townships threaded along the west coast. A descendant of one of the seven families once cleared from Airigh Drishaig, Alan lives in the very same house that his family

[6] Interview with Duncan Murchison, (9 December 2021)

were moved to. A skilled researcher of Applecross histories, with Alan's input, and the records from the Heritage Centre, I pieced together a timeline of occupants and key events of Airigh Drishaig. In our conversation, Alan asked me about the advance of the gorse, and whether it had yet concealed the stone walls of the ruins above the main cottage. I told him that the gorse was indeed spreading, and for the first time, felt some impulse and responsibility to clear it. Sat together looking out the window towards Raasay with a cup of tea and a KitKat, I asked Alan about the impact that the change of landscape and the loss of place his ancestors had experienced, and he mused that there was much movement at that time.

I spoke with Catriona about Airigh Drishaig, and the places dotted around the peninsula that were once inhabited.

> I must say I find it quite odd. When there were no facilities people lived in all these places and on the islands, the Crowlin islands. Nowadays when we have all these technological aids, boats with powerful motors, nobody lives in these places. They all seem to want to congregate.[7]

The relative inaccessibility of Airigh Drishaig meant that many locals were unlikely to have walked out there, busy as they were with their own plots and crofts. 'It's great to have these places and they're very special places because they're more difficult to get to,' Catriona had shared. 'I do think it's a pity that there's not a wee bit more life in them. But people live in a different way and it's a different economic climate. It's a very hard life, you definitely can't romanticise it. Everything had to be carried in or you had to grow it.' For the local community, Airigh Drishaig was one of the lesser seen, semi-abandoned margins of the peninsula, where common land-practices and human community had slowly peeled away.

[7] Interview with Catriona McCowen, (25 November 2021)

Mycorrizing

Little by little, I moved the pile of firewood that I'd split and stacked after the tree surgeon had visited with his chainsaw, uphill from the shingle beach to the newly built woodshed beside the barn. Twice a day I loaded my rucksack with logs, heaving it onto my back to walk the steep route up through the oaks towards the cottage. Many before me must have walked this route, shouldering creels instead of a rucksack, each straining under the weight. As I clambered up a steep section, hanging onto the tree roots for support and stretching my fingers to retrieve an acorn from the moss, I had the impression of climbing through the strata of the woodland, a kind of human hyphae within a wider cycle of exchange.

I was back to my favourite task: seed collecting. This autumn was moderate for the masting of the oaks. Each acorn was valuable carbohydrate. What hardships would the wildlife be faced with? I found myself looking for acorns, but not too thoroughly. My mental map of the fruiting habits of the woodland was now layered with three years' worth of experience. Not long in the life span of these woods but long enough that I was beginning to recognise the masting patterns of trees and specific areas of the woodland. When I came to a consistently non-fruiting oak, I placed a hand against it in recognition. Honouring and accepting. Fruiting is not automatic; reproduction is not the only attribute of a tree or indeed of any living thing.

Nevertheless, the bags seemed to fill effortlessly enough and once each load of acorns was tipped into a bucket of water and the floaters skimmed away, the hoard was dried out on newspaper, ziplocked into bags and into the fridge for storage. A group walked out to the cottage to join me for a day collecting acorns to grow trees for the new community woodland project. Through funding from the Scottish Land Fund, the community had purchased a fourteen-hectare Sitka-spruce plantation from Applecross Trust. The plantation had been clear-felled and over the next few years, the site would be replanted with native woodland grown from local provenance seed. As I took the group around the oakwood, each of us crouching low to collect acorns, I couldn't help but smile in

recognition that these woods were now providing seed for future woodlands across the peninsula, and we were their agents of dispersal.

From the wetness of the season, the ground responded with fungal firmness. Hyphae had risen from beneath, webbing into a fast-rising solidity above ground. Chanterelle. Amythest deceiver. Milkcaps. The tiny ochre oak fungi with globules the same colour as the dried leaves they emerged from. Cresting above the earth, these fruits volunteered themselves to scent, spore, drift and be eaten. The gloss of a Pennybun stopped me in my tracks. Burnished a friendly brown, it had a baker's glaze that when touched, lifted in viscous strands with my fingertip. The cep— *Boletus edulis*— is the bonniest of all the boletes. As well as being delicious, ceps are one of the most immediately identifiable mushrooms, creating an easy trust. Taking out my pocketknife, I sliced the blade through its base, admiring the champagne cork shape and the webbed patterning of the stipe with a slightly raised white net pattern— the reticulum— on the top third. Taking a slice of cep to my tongue, I tasted its umami savouriness. With depth and complexity, the flavour suggested nourishment at the deepest level. Standing next to the oak tree whose roots were wrapped with this mycorrhizal partner, my mouth felt full of the forest.

Each plant species has certain mycorrhizal species they relate with. Fungi have been evolutionary guardians to plants, showing them how to develop complex root structures. For the oak tree, the cep is one of its many fungal partners. From the Greek, *mykes*: fungus, and *rhiza*: root, this symbiotic relationship benefits both fungi and tree.[8] Mycorrhizal relationships have been supporting the plant kingdom— and the Earth's future— for hundreds of millions of years. The fungal partner, which cannot photosynthesis, receives valuable glucose from the roots of the tree. In exchange, fungi make nitrogen and phosphorus available to the tree by breaking down the matter of the forest floor. They are the decomposers of the living world. This was the first year in which I'd witnessed the mycorrhizal connections showing themselves above ground as fruiting bodies. With these conditions, the affiliates of the woodland were made visible.

[8] Najla Bentrad and Louiza Bouhired, 'Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi in Phytoremediation' in J.A Malik, (eds) *Microbial and Biotechnological Interventions in Bioremediation and Phytoremediation* (Springer: Cham, 2022) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08830-8_7

The Latin word for extravagant means ‘to wonder outside or beyond’. Merlin Sheldrake suggests this as a good word for mycelium, which ceaselessly wanders outside and beyond its limits.[9] As the sticky living seam which holds the soil together— the safety net of the earth— plants, and subsequently all of life, are utterly dependent on these mycelium webs for the sharing of water, nutrients, and carbon. Yet until recently, plants had been thought of as more or less distinct entities. In the 1990s, the work of Suzanne Simard disproved this and led to the coining of the term ‘Wood Wide Web’.[10] Sheldrake heralds this as a momentous shift away from thinking of plants as autonomous individuals with neat borders.

> Can we think about a plant without also thinking about the mycorrhizal networks that lace outward- extravagantly- from its roots into the soil? If we follow the tangled sprawl of mycelium that emanates from its roots, then where do we stop? Do we think about the bacteria that surf through the soil along the slimy film that coats roots and fungal hyphae? [...] Do we think about the other plants whose roots share the very same fungal network?[11]

The rhizome has transformed not only understandings of the plant kingdom, but of cultural theory. French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari critiqued the ‘arborescent model’ of thought, by which the Western paradigm of knowledge production takes a small idea— a seed or acorn— to root and grow into a branching tree, all linked and traceable back to the original seed. Arborescence, they argue, has defined, and limited Western philosophy and logic. ‘We’re tired of trees [...] They’ve made us suffer so much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics.’[12] Instead of the tree, from a poststructuralist perspective, it is the rhizome, or fungus— an organism without central organisation or singular point of origin— which best represents postmodern culture. ‘A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles.’[13]

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[9] Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*, (London: The Bodley Head, 2020), p. 169
[10] Suzanne Simard & others, ‘Net Transfer of Carbon between Ectomycorrhizal Tree Species in the Field’, in *Nature* 388, pp. 579–582 (1997), https://doi.org/10.1038/41557
[11] Sheldrake, p. 164
[12] Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi, *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 15
[13] Deleuze & Guattari, p. 6

Deleuze and Guattari's call towards becoming rhizomorphous, is echoed by Sheldrake's own provocation towards 'lichenisation', which encourages an appreciation of lichens as stabilised networks of relationships between algae, fungi, and bacteria, which can inform new understandings of our human selves as symbiotic organisms rather than neatly bounded autonomous individuals.[14] This expansion of thinking around the relationships between trees and mycorrhiza has reshaped both social and arboreal science. On a practical level, recent research demonstrated that such is the importance of mycorrhizal connections for young trees, tree planting schemes were doomed to failure.[15] Tree nurseries have now begun to inoculate tree saplings with mycorrhizal fungal partners as this greatly increases the tree's chances of survival when planted out on the hillside.[16]

Following the recommendations of mycologist Matthew Rooney, and with guidance from the James Hutton Institute, I began to research how to inoculate the oak saplings in our own tree nursery and visited Applecross Primary school to facilitate a session with the class. We took to the nearby oakwoods of Toscaig to forage for the fungal partners of oak. As part of this Fungi Safari, before any picking, we stopped within an open woodland glade to play some fungi inspired games. With the class of twelve kids spanning an age range of five to eleven, I divided the group into 'Fungi', the youngest kids, and 'Trees', the older ones. We stood as a group in this clearing, the sunlight pouring through the gaps, and passed a ball of string between us, from Fungi to Tree until we were each interlinked by this criss-crossing yarn. While they each held onto this string web with one hand, I passed out snacks— apple slices for the photosynthesizing Trees and pitta bread fingers for the Fungi decomposers. As they munched their snacks, the kids considered, and grossed out at the idea that through these mycorrhizal connections, nutrients and glucose could be passed between them. 'What else might they pass through this network?' I asked. Medicine, Information, Jokes, were each suggested. 'Germs?' ventured another. Bella, the

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[14] Sheldrake, p. 103

[15] Aileen Baird and Francis Pope, 'Fungi: The Missing Link in Tree Planting Schemes', in *The Conversation,* 7 Feb 2022, https://theconversation.com/fungi-the-missing-link-in-tree-planting-schemes-175008 [accessed 6Feb 2023]

[16] Personal communication with Trees for Life.

oldest child, the tallest tree, told us of a book that her mum had, which suggested that trees spoke to each other. With our eyes closed we stood still, holding the web with our hands. One person tugged at the string towards the next person, who tugged again and passed the 'message' along the network threaded between us. In the partial success of the experiment, the web trailing with giggles and eyes peeping open, Bella asked, 'what will the trees say about us when we leave the woods?'

With a shared basket, we collected two of the mycorrhizal partners of oak, focusing on the Oakbug milkcap (*Lactarius quietus*) and the trusty ceps. For the other fungi we encountered, we harvested descriptive words; Fluted, Frilly, Monstrous, Floppy. Back in the classroom, while the younger kids made spore prints, the older kids made Spore Slurry. The word 'pulverised' was passed with the hand-stick blender as they took turns to mix the contents of the bucket into a thick mushroom soup topped up with spring water. With a spoonful of molasses, and a sprinkle of salt, the Spore Slurry was left to brew. The activity had been a great way to get hands-on with fungi although, scattering oak leaf mulch from a mature woodland onto the compost would also be enough to inoculate the saplings with mycorrhizal connections.

After the class had finished their afternoon session of Ceilidh dance practice in the school field, I called them over to the tree nursery. We crowded around the thousand saplings that grew in root-trainers, leaning over the pallet windbreak to observe them. The trees were around thirty centimetres tall now, and as thick as pencils. In the two and a half years since we first sowed the seed, some children had moved up from the nursery and others had moved onto secondary school in Plockton. Some of the saplings would be planted out at Airigh Drishaig, and the rest would be planted in the new community woodland. As I poured the spore slurry over the base of the trees, I imagined the future woodlands, and the further revelations of our ecological entanglements with the living world that these children would grow up to experience.

In his book, *A Billion Trees: How We Can Reforest Our World*, Fred Pearce makes the case that growing and replanting trees is an expensive and unnecessary approach to afforestation, advising us to '[p]ack up the seed nurseries and put

our money back in our pockets.' In most places, Pearce suggests, to restore the world's forests 'we need to do just two things: to ensure that ownership of the world's forests is vested in the people who live in them, and to give nature room.'[17] But in the example of the Highlands and Islands, while Pearce's two principles are paramount, community owned tree-nurseries are burgeoning as a much-needed resource. Remaining fragments of woodland such as Airigh Drishaig are best supported by encouraging natural regeneration with some enrichment planting, but in other landscapes— whether clear-fell plantation or over-grazed glens, the native tree seed source has all but disappeared. Growing and planting local provenance trees is an essential and culturally empowering part of ecological restoration. The surge of community tree nurseries was the first step towards strengthening and reclaiming our woodland culture.

Back at Airigh Drishaig, out in the front garden, I dug up the tatties. Three sacks full: dark heritage purple, pinkish-red and dirty white. The generosity of the soil, to triple what was put in, ingesting the seaweed in exchange, was a marvel. As I forked through the soil for the last rogue tubers, it struck me that these so called 'tattie holidays', the name still given to the autumn half-term as a remnant agricultural legacy of community harvesting, was also the optimum time for collecting tree seed such as acorns and hazels. The activity of community tree seed collecting could become an active component of these school holidays— an activity which could be extended towards a regenerative tourism model which encourages slower, meaningful engagement between visitors and place.

The week brought a succession of visitors. Escaping a downpour, a walker, Bob Burnell, popped into the porch and was amazed to find me there in the cottage. Originally from Galashiels, he lived in Capetown but was a regular visitor to Applecross. He told me that his friend's uncle had once been the postman who delivered letters to Airigh Drishaig in the 1950s, which suggested there had been an inhabitant here during that time. He called this friend right then and there in the porch, and introduced us over speaker phone, the three of us marvelling over the eight-mile round trip of the postie. Bob was a geologist and after the

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[17] Fred Pearce, *A Billion Trees: How We Can Reforest Our World* (London: Granta Books, 2021), p. 11

rain stopped, we stepped outside to look out across the landscape behind the barn. We shared our impressions of what we saw. Bob told me the intricate deep time story of Torridonian sandstone but was amazed when I confirmed to him that sessile oaks were indeed indigenous to Scotland.

Next came Grant and Katie, a couple of walkers who had left their campervan at the campsite and were keen to tell me that they were *not* doing the North Coast 500. They asked about the wildlife, and I shared stories of the bird life and the wandering pine martin who had been looking for a mate. Grant told me how as a kid, holidaying in the village of Plockton just across the water, he had been out with his dad on Loch Kishorn in a small fishing boat. As his dad had faced forward, Grant had spotted the hulking form of an enormous body in the water behind them and tried to communicate what he was seeing. His dad assumed that it was a seal following them, but Grant and his brother both clearly saw the spout hole of a humpback whale. The experience had stayed with him his whole life and visiting Airigh Drishaig was a continuation of this formative encounter.

I felt myself more appreciative than ever of the stories of this place being brought here. The story of each place is webbed across geographies: people return and bring perspectives and details that you would never have imagined. A walker is never just a tourist, but a weaver of places, carrying stories and connections. Placing their words into the logbook, their stories and names are recorded, and, on meeting me, they write my name into the book too, wishing me well with the seed collecting and thanking me for the tea. I found myself returning to the simplicity of understanding my time here as a study of place and ecological belonging. Ideas of rewilding and restoration begin from our relationship with place. Seed collector, story collector. The logbook held rhizomes of relation, and it was possible that one day it might tell the story of the land coming into community ownership.

Autumn colours had finally started to catch across grass and woodland. On a bright afternoon I walked out west to swim in the sea below the ravine. I emerged from the water clasping a succulent handful of dulse and stood shivering on the beach, watching my long shadow nibble at the seaweed. Walking back through the expanse of bracken that filled the plateau at the

bottom of the ravine, I stopped in amazement, getting down on my knees to look more closely. Beneath the roof of dried bracken, a layer of diverse ground flora left behind from woodland long gone, continued to flourish. Wood sage, primroses, wild strawberry, tiny ferns, and woodland sorrel: an ancient woodland indicator.

I wondered if this spread of bracken was maintaining the conditions of the woodland floor. Creating coverage with its fronds, it prevented the ground from drying out in the summer months, and come winter, its dried thatch would keep the weight of snow off the plants below. There remains much debate of the ecological function of bracken, and whether it out-competes tree saplings. Some foresters are adamant that as a tree comes into leaf prior to the unfurling of bracken it has opportunity for growth, while others evidence the need of clearing back, or planting taller stands, to be essential for the tree to survive. [18] The spread of bracken tells of a disturbed, depleted landscape. But below this opportunistic architecture, greenery had prevailed. A secret world of abundant textures, repeating patterns, twinned leaves, sepulate edges, climbers, heart-shaped leaves, and moist mosses. A whole twist of green awaited its canopy. The land was showing me a vanished woodland, a perfect place for planting out the newly inoculated trees.

[18] Guy Shrubsole, 'Using Bracken Maps as a Guide for Regenerating Rainforest', *Lost Rainforests of Britain*, available at: https://lostrainforestsofbritain.org/2022/02/03/using-bracken-maps-as-a-guide-for-regenerating-rainforest/ [accessed 6 Feb 2023]

Ground Spell

It was a listening day. Not a flicker of breeze passed through the air as I stood at the front door with my mid-morning cup of tea. The willows had turned the brightest yellow, and a band of tits rushed a riot through the garden. An oystercatcher gurgled at the shoreline and the noise arrived in my ear as if metres away. The sound of a rumbling train skimmed across the water from the other side of Loch Kishorn, letting me know the exact time. 11.17 am. Plockton to Kyle of Lochalsh. It was the railway system which had first necessitated the synchronisation of time, and communities here must have become accustomed to these temporal markers made audible across the sea. Today held accordance with a calendar much older than mechanised time. Samhain, the last day of October, marks the beginning of the darker half of the year. It is a liminal day, often said to be when the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest and when the ancestors, spirits and fairies of the Otherworld, are most present.

These cross-quarterly festival dates of the Celtic calendar remind me of the movements of the people who once lived and grazed cattle here, prior to the establishment of the railway and the subsequent economisation of sheep farming. Within pre-industrial agricultural rhythms, Samhain was the marker for when the final harvest was complete and daily life would become increasingly domestic. Even now, as fossil fuels and global food systems had shifted our dependence from the annual cycle of plant photosynthesis, this time of year marks the end of a cycle, or the beginning of something new.

In Applecross, the tourist season drops off, the campsite closes and for many, work patterns and daily tasks are changed. Samhain was a reminder of how even as seasons slipped and merged into something less clearly defined, we were still affected by the palpable shift between the light and dark halves of the year. My own cycle of tasks on the land, shaped in part by arboreal rhythms, had reached a natural pause. Firewood was stacked for the year ahead. Acorns were packed, ready to be stored at the tree nursery for their winter stratification. My rucksack was at the door, filled to the brim with these vibrant seeds, their weight taking the place of the food I'd carried in.

Over the last few days, I'd been harvesting the long purple stems of mature nettles to use in a weaving workshop that I would soon be holding for a fringe event for COP 26, held this year in Glasgow. Working behind the barn, I stripped away the leaves of the nettle stems and tapped along their length, snapping, then peeling back the fibrous outer layer from the inner core. Apparently, the city was already surrounded by helicopters and drones in advance of world leaders arriving, with venues and community spaces buzzing with preparations. 'The Encampment for Eternal Hope' was an installation created by artists Walker & Bromwich, which would provide space for a programme of talks by indigenous activists, experiential ceremonies and workshops. I would be running a workshop there with my friend, the ancestral skills teacher Lucy O'Hagan, called 'Weaving Kin'.[19] I was conscious of the spatial shock of the soon-to-be-transformed city with activists from around the world, and of the underlying tension, that this COP nor any other, would meet the needs of the planet. Pegged on the washing line to dry, each coil of nettle fibre was a physical preparation not only for cordage but for what might lie beyond the conference— for this place, for the planet. I felt a spontaneous knowing of what I would do with this last day of solitude before the transition to the city. I would feed the land.

After being here for the autumn, I'd reached the point where I found myself chatting indiscriminately to the beings I was in the company of, be it a mistle thrush or a pan of boiling pasta. Sometimes they'd talk back: the quiet mutterings of seeds, or the affirmative coos of eider ducks. Perhaps the suggestion to bake an offering came from the ingredients themselves. The last bit of butter had sat in a dish on the kitchen table, suggesting itself into various edible guises each time I looked. Last week, my friend Kirsten—the only human I'd seen all month— had carried it here along with other treats. As she unloaded her bag onto the kitchen table I'd watched, open-mouthed in delight at the prospect of human company and culinary decadence. Our days together had been rich: foraged hedgehog mushrooms and eggs from the primary school chickens for breakfast; a cocktail of elderberry cordial and whisky, served in

[19] Walker & Bromwich, 'Encampment of Eternal Hope', (Glasgow: WASP Studios, November 2021), available at: <https://www.waspsstudios.org.uk/events/encampment-of-eternal-hope-weaving-kin-practices-of-belonging-afternoon-creative-ceremony/> [accessed 2 April 2023]

John's finest crystal glasses under the stars. We toasted our plan to hold a 'Wild Womxn of the West' writing retreat here together next year.

After Kirsten left, the last wedge of butter sat luminous with possibilities, especially now, at end of my stay, when the cupboard was almost bare, and I was back to my usual simple vegan meals. Still, a jar of oats remained, and a last quarter bag of flour. Perhaps there was something deeply rooted, some folkloric association that made me think of bannocks, for I'd never made them before. I found a recipe online and began to freestyle an approximation of quantities, intuiting the method at hand.

Bannock, from the Gaelic *bannach*, was a generic term for bread in the Northwest Highlands, where ovens and wheat were once less common. An adaptable recipe made from a variation of available flours and toasted on a griddle, the bannock was a culinary response to this landscape. Sifting a handful of flour over another of rolled oats, I stirred them with a sprinkle of salt. As I rubbed the fat into the dry mix, making clumps then crumbs, I remembered the tale of *The Wee Bannock*.[20] There was once an old man and woman, who lived quite contentedly in a cottage with cows and chickens in the garden. The old woman thought she'd like a bannock that eve and toasted two on a girdle across the hearth. Once baked, they were set aside to cool. Just as the old man broke one open to take a first bite, the other bannock took flight and escaped across the village. First the Tailor tried to catch it, then the Weaver, the Miller, and the Smithy. As the bannock sped through the succession of houses, it defied each attempt at being caught. Eventually, the tired bannock crept under a whin bush where it thought it could rest, but instead fell into a fox hole, where it was caught in the mouth of the hungry fox who hadn't eaten for three long days.

As I added a dash of hot water the mixture transformed in my hands, becoming a warm, malleable mass. The tale foregrounds the agency of the bannock, who wilfully evades the desires of the human community in their attempts to capture and consume it. Yet through the intervention of the land the food lands in the mouth of the one most in need: the hungry fox. A sense of community expands beyond the human realm and makes distinction between subsistence and excess.

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[20] 'The Wee Bannock' in *Scottish Folk Tales*, (Glasgow: Lomond Books, 2010), pp. 73-78

As I rolled the dough out flat, it became a thin cartography of this land that held the multispecies territories and human ecologies. The cracked edges seemed to acknowledge the limits of my knowledge, the limits of my roaming, and the last of the food resources which physically sustained my time here.

With an upturned glass, I pressed rounds into the dough. These individual bannocks would be offerings for distinct places of shelter on the land: human and nonhuman. Samhain has a long association of making food offerings to ensure people and their livestock survived winter. Recognised as All Hallows Eve, or the Day of the Dead, the souls of dead kin were thought to revisit their homes on this night, and an extra place was traditionally set at the table to honour and appease the ancestors. As the bannocks baked, I imagined them as place markers, to be spelled out across the landscape in a constellation that interconnects hearth and wild. I folded them into a cloth and stood again on the front doorstep.

My feet led me out of the garden gate, up along the path and directly to the water which flows down the hillside. Allt Fraoch begins at the top of Meall am Fraoch, where it gathers its namesake of heather-filtered waters into a meandering descent, before gliding under the deer fence and the footbridge to cut a black path through the bedrock, forming a hydrological boundary to the land, long utilised by past inhabitants of the cottage. Staggered and swirled through a sequence of waterfalls, slides, and pools towards an increasingly vertical drop to the sea, every section of the burn was distinct.

Beside one waterfall there was a drystone wall, presumably once utilised as a holding pen for a cow and calf. The next pool was where the otter, with playful deep dives, washed salt from its pelt. Further down, cast-iron pipes that once siphoned water to Ninian's Platform lay disconnected alongside the burn, skimming an arc over the bog grasses. Beside the black slide of water, on a clutch of heather late last summer, I had witnessed a golden-ringed dragonfly emerging from its exuviae with crumpled tissue-paper wings, pumping its body stiff as I'd watched barely breathing, praying the wind would be kind enough for it to take flight into its adult form.

Each pool was a world of its own making. The one I stepped towards was the washhouse of Airigh Drishaig— the swimming hole, closest to the cottage. The pool would have been well used by past generations, providing cold storage for butter during the summer months. It was a treasured depth of coolness for those occasional hot days, as well as a crossing point to the land on the other side. I sat on a rock in the middle of the ford, giving thanks to this sacred water that flowed either side. *Water of life, life of the hill. Ancestor of water. Dragonfly highway. Pool of the otter, speckled trout, and grey wagtail.*

This watercourse swells in size, expanding and contracting in response to the weather each day, everchanging in character and colour. From dark water raging white, to a glowing amber, this water enables the lives which grow beside it. This powerful water stream has been utilised by industry in the sea below, and for now its surge continues to disperse the chemicals of the fish farm below. How best to be in relationship with the land, and with water, when we feel complicit and powerless in changing how they are utilised and abused by industrial practices? I opened the cloth and selected a perfectly round bannock. Placing it into the dry holding of a boulder caressed by the flow of water on either side, it was a simple acknowledgement of the complexity of loving this damaged planet.

A viewpoint. A flat rock that crested the hillside like an exposed bone, gave a vantage point. This rock has held my hot-blooded struggles without comfort or judgement. I scattered crumbs across the glacial scratches and lichened rosettes of the rock face. It was from here that I most often come for a look-out. The scenic, aesthetic quality most often associated with the term landscape would be applicable here, for it is from this rock that I'd viewed the ever-changing visual compositions of the land. But it was through the repetition of my embodied movements within the dense fragments of mature woodland, over the gorge and across the overgrazed plateau, that I had come to understand the dynamics of this intricate cross-hatching of ecologies. Below the rock, a huge pile of fencing posts and rolls of wire had recently been dropped by the helicopter. The repair work of the existing deer fence and installation of the new enclosure was imminent: the latest move in the long-term collaboration and constraint between humans and herbivores. If a walker was to stand here on this

rock, they would be admiring not the view of an untouched wilderness but a millennia old dance of land management and a recent, but partial resurgence of woodland.

From this view, the rusty red oil rig appeared to loom over the woods. With its future still uncertain as to whether it would be decommissioned or maintained for further use, the rig held a spectral and divisive presence within surrounding communities. For me, it seemed to symbolise the continued rise in fossil fuel emissions which hung over the woodlands we dared to lay claim to as natural solutions through the myth of off-setting. Even as the United Nations clearly stated that no further oil and gas development would be possible within the global agreement towards safeguarding 1.5-degree Celsius rise in global temperature, the UK government was still proposing new oilfields. Cambo. Rosefield. Before the industrial revolution, when societies were largely dependent on the annual cycle of plant photosynthesis, the quantity of energy available was therefore limited, and economic growth was constrained.[21] The need for governments and energy corporations to now constrain, limit and scale back growth, and adapt renewable energy infrastructures was critical. What cultural practices, and fossil fuel dependencies were we willing to drop, and adapt away from, in the aim of maintaining a liveable planet?

The operations of vessels surrounding the fish farm sucked and scraped like a dentistry extraction while the hum of the generator droned on. The density of fish contained within the nets below offered perfect breeding grounds for viruses and parasites. The plantation mentality still governs global food systems, and the impacts of this could flare at any moment with devastating consequences. Instances of avian flu had recently begun to reappear, with whole colonies of seabirds at risk, and there was not yet a coordinated action to suppress or contain the outbreaks let alone to curtail the harmful, inhumane practices of factory farming which incubated the virus. Looking across the waters to Skye, I remembered the CLIMAVORE oyster table, and the delicious stew of barley and mussels we had feasted on. Industrial aquaculture and bottom trawlers were putting pressure onto marine systems which were in a constant state of decline.

[21] E. A Wrigley, 'Energy and the English Industrial Revolution', in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, 371 (2013), https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsta.2011.0568

Protection areas are limited by the powers to enforce, while regenerative aquaculture and agriculture could create the grounds for the total transformation of our food systems. The fish farm was my daily reminder that with both the sea and the land, it was impossible to consider ecological restoration without also redesigning resource use, food systems and the way that we live.

Calling my approach from a distance, I walked towards where the closest neighbour would once have lived. Less than a mile southwest of Airigh Drishaig, the small, abandoned township of Draoraig was close enough that if a neighbour was to walk over with freshly baked bannocks, they would still be warm by the time they arrived. A shepherd and his son lived in one of these houses until 1851, after which time the township was abandoned and vanished from the map.[22] How many years since food had been passed around the land? I visited the half dozen or so ruins across the hillside, scrambling over moss and heather to access their doorways and place a bannock at the entrance and then slowly back away. Some had a welcoming presence, others less so. Each was dilapidated to a different extent, their degeneration an ongoing collaboration between the elements.

The most complete of all the scattered dwellings was home to a single standing birch grown tall from the protection afforded by the walls, the trunk peeling with russet-brown and bone-white papers. If it had been a young sapling, one might consider uprooting it to better protect the archaeology, but it was too late for that. A new community stood beyond, the birch trees filling the gaps between geriatric oak trees to create vibrant woodland in the dell behind the cottage. Positioned next to a small burn, the house was fronted by an area for grazing and another for growing crops, with the walls still discernible beneath folds of bracken. Many intricate arrangements of grazing had once been inscribed onto this hillside with drystone walls and homes, creating boundaries and shelters according to the lay of the land.

I crouched beside the wall, touching the long lintel stone of the window with admiration. It was huge. Hefted into place by so many careful hands, easing it into position, the stone must have been a triumph to find. The half-fallen walls

[22] Applecross Placenames map, ibid.

of the building still sang with the precision of the original stone placement. With its gently rounded corners, the mastery of the stone-dyking used in this building was palpable. Each stone held a vibrancy that exuded far beyond the historical human occupancy of the building, and yet their selection and grouping together still held the intentionality and vision of the builders. Of all the buildings, this carried the most potential of being restored. These ruins catalyse a dreaming of how it would be for human communities to repopulate these hillsides once again. Even intermittently, if the shelter was roofed it could be used as a meditation hut, a walker's bothy, or a shieling for the person looking after the cattle's seasonal grazing. Realistically, having spoken with a local builder, I knew it would be easier and more cost effective to build a new building from scratch than to restore these, but they strengthened my resolve to form community in relation to this landscape.

Pillows of moss occupied the horizontal run of the wall, and thickets of heather tufted out from between the lowest row of stones. A bright sulphur lichen encircled the base of the building, lapping the rock surfaces with its pastel covering. Craft work would have once been a main activity for the winter, and there on a boulder was the lichen, *Ochrolechia tartarea*, from which a red dye was made when fixed with ammonia. Lesley Kilbride, a local expert in natural plant dyes and traditional crafts, once remarked to me that when we think of the past we imagine it in dowdy colours, when in fact, the fabrics of daily life were wildly vivid.[23] Talking with Lesley had made me appreciate how much colour had originated from these lichen ecologies.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this traditional use of *Ochrolechia tartarea,* or Cudbear lichen, was scaled up to a rapid industrialisation with factories of production in Glasgow. During the heyday of the Cudbear Industry, around 250 tonnes of lichen were collected annually in the Highlands and Islands by labourers, who scraped it from the rocks with iron hoops and sold it for a good price, resulting in the near decimation of the species.[24] I placed a bannock on top of this thicket of grey-white lichen, mottled with tiny convex granules or warts, which had so nearly been lost to the industrial revolution. *Ochrolechia*

[23] Interview with Lesley Kilbride, (8 October 2020)
[24] Milliken and Bridgewater, *Flora Celtica*, p. 179

tartarea had since recovered and outwith intense industrial usage, lichen harvesting for natural dyes was perfectly sustainable. Cudbear was a cautionary tale in ensuring we held regenerative relationships with species, but perhaps an even greater risk comes from us not recognising them at all. Species are sustained by people using them. 'People preserve the things that they use,' Lesley emphasised. Without this relationship of usage within wild landscapes, we were risk of losing knowledge, and lifeforms.

Leaving the ruins behind, my route took me back into the oak woods, following a burn through a gentle ravine that ran from hill to sea. Feeding the human ancestors was a deliberate act, one of respect towards this land which connected me to communities of the past. While I have no genealogical connection to this land, I feel kinship with the landscape, and that necessitates and invites relationship with all its inhabitants— past, present, and future. Perhaps it was a way of acknowledging myself as a future ancestor of this place, not through bloodline but through tree line. Samhain invited acknowledgement of the points of connection between past and present. My topographical knowledge was forming not through caring for livestock, but through seed collecting, and the annual cycle created a seasonal correspondence between agricultural intimacies and restorative practices.

I came to the seam of woodland where I'd found the ceps, which had reassured me of the mycorrhizal partnerships that trailed through the root systems beneath the ground. It was a remarkable year for fungi. Whole cityscapes of the saprobic fungi, clustered bonnets— *Mycena inclinata*— grew from fallen oak logs. The bright hollow bowls of scarlet elfcup, *Sarcoscypha austriaca,* were dotted throughout the leaflitter. Between trees, acorns mixed with deer pellets and the ground was punctured with markings where stags had dragged their antlers across the ground, ripping through bracken and scoring lines onto the forest floor in their pheromone-charged preparations of the rut. It occurred to me that these openings would create niches for seeds to take root.

Pushing through a thicket of young birches, I came face to face with a hind. She immediately took flight, nostrils flared and chest twisting away to spring uphill in retreat. Cortisol flooded my system, likely pulsing through both of our bodies in this shared fright of the other. The flush of excitement I felt from the vitality

of this wild creature— the closeness of her breath— stayed with me. An encounter with a nonhuman animal has the power to strip me of any complacency. The later thought that she would be better off shot did not displace the respect I felt for her. Deer were an important part of this woodland ecology, but for this period of its recovery, they needed to be culled. Issues of access to this woodland necessitated a different approach to deer management to elsewhere on the peninsula. It would make sense for a stalker to utilise the cottage and monitor the deer numbers inside the enclosure on a regular basis. Due to the roughness of the terrain, the carcasses would need to be left in situ, which was at odds with traditional stalking practice, but would greatly benefit scavengers: from White-tailed eagles to Common sexton beetles. With a bit of encouragement, I hoped that Applecross Trust would agree to this proposed change in land management.

I continued towards where the hind had emerged, trusting her route across the undulating coastal edge. Checking my position against the fish farm, I determined which steep crag to follow down towards the sea. I descended, steading my footfall against heather and handholds of jutting bedrock. Just metres above the small shingle bay where the tide was cresting and pushing with waves, was the rock shelter. A sideways mouth through a slab of sandstone, the dark opening was partially shielded by a twisted oak tree bedecked with ferns. A vertical holly, anchored above the side crevice, trailed its blonde rootlets across the rockface to be drip-fed water and nutrients that trickled from the woodland above.

The rock shelter was the wildest expression on the land. Beneath a bulging overhang, it remains almost invisible until you are crouched right outside it. It commands a cautious approach, never assuming the space to be uninhabited. Looking within this enclave of protection, it was instinctive to feel the presence of the countless creatures— humans, and animals alike— who have sheltered here. The cool recess of rock, splattered with green algae, forms a natural altar in the widest section of the hollow. As my eyes adjusted through the gloaming, I saw there were bones piled in the centre. A deer carcass had been split in half and stripped. The torso was upended like a sculpture, the skull held up by

antlers standing on their tips, gnawed, and whitened. A more-than-human installation of predator and prey.

An archival shelter, the cavern stores memory of animal species who were present in these wildwoods long before the arrival of humans. Giant elk, wild boar, lemming, wild ox, reindeer, brown bear, wolves, northern lynx, as well as the still-surviving presence of red deer, fox, badger, pine marten, otter, stoat, and weasel, could each have sheltered here, as well as hunter-gatherers from many epochs. This forever home has offered protection through the ages whilst species after species has been erased from the landscape. The artistry of the fox was a tangible link to the long legacy of apex predators who have utilised the shelter. I placed two bannocks beside the bones, one for the fox, one for the ancestors.

The rock-shelter had likely given name to the landmass above, *Meall na h-Uamha*: Hill of the Cave. When the rock-shelter was excavated in the First Settlers project, archaeologists found a midden of limpet shells and simple stone liths.[25] The seasonal usage of this shelter in Mesolithic times was likely the first human inhabitancy of this landscape. With the sea level estimated to rise one metre over the next fifty years, slowly the shelter would become a rock pool, then a sea cave. The changing tides of species loss, and possible reintroductions, meant that the future ecologies of these lands were uncertain. Which animals would inhabit this woodland? Would lynx, or wolf ever be reintroduced to these islands? For now, the shelter would endure as a dry space, inherited by each successive creature, and passed between generations of tooth, claw and antler. Perhaps in fifty years, it would be reclaimed by the rising sea: the meaning of the hill name submerged below water.

A rustle coursed through the trees above me, and through the dry bracken. The wind stirred that it was time to move on, to climb back up the steep slope, walking the opposite direction from which the fox dragged the deer. I walked away, and immediately recognised I could have stayed longer. I flit around this ancient shelter, visiting only occasionally, daring to stretch a hand inside to

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[25] C. R. Wickham-Jones & K. Hardy, K, 'Scotland's First Settlers: the Mesolithic Seascape of the Inner Sound, Skye and its contribution to the early prehistory of Scotland', Antiquity (2002), pp. 825-33.

place a lit candle as an offering on the altar, before backing away in reverence or trepidation, thanking this shelter for the communities that it has nurtured, for all the lives it has protected, for the remaining animals who keep this land stitched together. Much later, in the city, I would make plans to sleep there come spring. It always seems possible, *necessary*, from afar, but once there, squatting beside the entrance, its presence is so strong that just a touch of the stone and a glimpse into its depths is enough.

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It was a strangely fitting task to be carried out on Samhain: to identify the 'life death juncture' within a dying oak tree and to take a sample from this point. Through the logistics of needing the sample to be as fresh as possible before posting, the task had become enfolded within this ritual of walking the land. The forest pathologist had advised taking a sample of bark from one of the affected oak trees from an area of a lesion where healthy tissue meets with the dead. In addition, I was to gather a selection of branches with leaves from trees showing severe crown dieback.

The area of woodland in question was directly behind the fish farm on the convex uplift of land which rose steeply from the coast. Along the edge of the first coastal shelf stood the straggly line of wind-sculpted oaks. This section of woodland was in steep decline. Even within my short time here, it was apparent that these emaciated elders were now slipping beyond their living years to begin their equally long stint as standing deadwood: snags. By identifying the point of dieback and taking a sample from the tree, the woodland consultant had speculated that it might be possible to determine whether this section of oak woodland was impacted by re-entrenchment, as Alasdair had suggested, or whether there was another reason for their dieback.

I moved slowly into their presence, passing between pale trunks, their scant branches reaching like twisting proboscis that had long searched for the place of least wind resistance. One by one the life held within these trailing branches was hardening into weathered wood. Entire trees were slowly dying. A vertical silhouette, a pale ghost tree, told of extremities that could not be overcome. Its appearance was almost identical to a tree having perished with drought. In a

healthy woodland, the senescence of trees was an essential, dynamic part of the whole, and their death then releases the young saplings held in check and adds value to the ecosystem through the abundance of deadwood. On this exposed fringe, for so many of the oak trees to be simultaneously experiencing dieback, it was potentially a sign of woodland degeneration, whereby the oakwood was steadily reverting to birch. If I was the momentary human witness to the changes of this woodland, then I wanted to understand what I was seeing.

My eyes followed along their limb-paths, scanning this community of weathered oaks to search for an individual branch which might hold the juncture of life and death. In this pattern of struggle, the trees held their leaves closely to their trunks and lowest branches, growing in dense, stressed clusters of foliage. I reached up with my bowsaw to take hold of the end bunch of leaves from an overhanging branch, selecting a handful that was mostly still green but with some paler pigmentation. Take a sample the size of 'an average bouquet' was the instruction given by the forest pathologist and get it to the lab as fresh as possible.

The teeth of the blade rasped back and forth through the knobbly branch until it released with a spring. Twiggage and greenery landed in my arms, and I was cradling a woodland bouquet, faced with the familiar lobes of oak leaves, crisping to brown at their edges. Each leaf was a riverbed slowly drying as the main tributary of green cells receded from the basin, the pigmentation transitioning to yellow, then russet brown. On inspection in the lab, the leaves might tell the story of this west coast site: the struggle of the tree to grow in an exposed spot with ever-increasing wind strength. Or perhaps it would reveal the presence of chlorosis, a paling of green cells that could be caused by nutrient deficiency. Either way, the vulnerability of this woodland was starkly apparent.

In their paper, 'Posthuman Sustainability: An Ethos for our Anthropocenic Future', Olga Cielemęcka and Christine Daigle make the observation that, 'survival depends on this ability to live-with and co-depend on other creatures and unfolds against a twisted temporality in which death is a foundation for the

future, and the future impacts the present.'[26] With weather patterns set to become ever more unpredictable and with increased wind strengths, dieback, whether through weather conditions, oak mildew, or pathogens yet to be discovered, was set to be a characteristic of the woodlands we rely upon. I crumbled a bannock around the base of this dying tree. I felt a sudden appreciation for these distinct ways of knowing being brought together: the sample ready for lab testing and the ritual offering that strengthened relations. Perhaps they weren't so different.

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The last stop was to Grandmother Oak. The name was simply a marker for what I had come to feel for this tree: a signifier of the familiar movement of sliding my hands into the crook of branches and easing myself upwards to where there is a holding place for my body— a place I feel at home. I fit here as securely as the toad, who last year had a habit of climbing up the trunk to sit open-eyed inside the hollowed recess, hands resting calmly against the barked folds of the toad-sized cavern. This enormous toad and I, perhaps the same age in solar years, had chosen this same Grandmother Oak, whose branches were crisscrossed with multiple lives of the woodland. In the summer months, the branch was marked with scat dyed a distinctive purple by the blaeberries eaten by the lone pine marten. We each favoured these same points of contact. A world of lives within the same tree.

With my body supported, I half-closed my eyes, gazing upwards into the canopy, where two branches conjoined in an act of self-inosculation. Their bark is a landscape; the surprise of matte grey lichen in puckered rosettes; the platelets of protection that form caverns for insects. In this woodland canopy, the crown-shy gap between each tree makes a shaggy halo of sky. I can be sure now that these oaks have been pastured, coppiced and grazed. The sense of slippage in the cultural memory of ecologies is disconcerting. Gan and Tsing emphasise that '[f]orgetting, in itself remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages

[26] Olga Cielemęcka and Christine Daigle, 'Posthuman Sustainability: An Ethos for our Anthropocenic Future', in *Theory, Society and Culture*, 36 (2019), p. 77 DOI: 10.1177/0263276419873710

over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces.'[27]

The former practice of coppicing has given an intentionality to this collective, yet each tree is still distinctive in its own form. One grows with a twinned stem, standing belly to belly with itself, an intimacy of green where they touch. One is multi-antlered; an angular fluidity, cresting and surfacing. Another has a dancer's frame. And this one, Grandmother Octopus, blinking her way across the forest seabed, dropping acorns in their thousands. No matter how many had been gathered, still, this tree spilled with abundance, streaming life force. I thought of Margaret Bain, who in 1841 lived here as a 35-year-old farmer. It was likely that this tree, Grandmother Oak, first chitted from an acorn in that same period of Margaret's life.

Perhaps it was through this repeated connection of my sacrum being suckered to this trunk, that it was always clear to me when I sat here, how woodland restores us to ourselves: to the ecological multitudes we are part of. Woodland is a connective force, a shaper and originator of human cultures, and humans have extraordinary roles to play within supporting and honouring the diverse relationships of earth's existence. I eased myself to the ground, placed a bannock into the cavern where the tree disappeared underground, and plucked a final, spectacular acorn in return. Would there be a human to sit with this future tree in its maturity, and what stories would they share of this place?

Dusk came with a renewed south-westerly. Behind the barn I sat on the bench, watching the huge flock of fieldfares and waxwings converge mid-air. The birds had returned en masse from Scandinavia last week for their wintering, bringing a new liveliness to the landscape. Delighting in their chosen feeding grounds, they soared above the tangled berry-scape of hawthorn, rosehip, and rowan, flying with an inimitable exuberance in their seasonal ritual of return and renewal. Propelled towards an agreed landing point, the flock swooped into the branches of an oak tree and vanished, as if inhaled whole. I sat staring at the tree wondering if I had imagined them, thinking of the audacious performance of the world and her creatures, always spilling beyond what could ever be perceived or

[27] Gan, Tsing and others, G6

expected. Whatever I saw of this land, whatever tricks of the light or surprises a flock might pull, my perception would only ever be partial.

After a long pause, the flock emerged, transformed into a new configuration. Flying with different intensity and diminished in number, they continued into the sky. Without knowing how their numbers compared to years previously, their presence and intentional selection of this habitat felt vital. With each visitation, the habitat-making presence of these bird communities seeded scrub and then woodland, steadily transforming the ecological stories of the land. Habitats were shifting into new formations. The sideways sprouting multi-stemmed willow seemed to affirm this; its yellowing leaves curled like a shoal of tiny fish. I stood from the bench behind the barn, and posted a bannock deep between the stone walls, imagining the mammalian delight of finding a feast before winter's hibernation.

My feet felt fully grounded. As a kind of ritual mapping, the offerings felt like an affirmation of relational caretaking. Just as the acorns carried the genetic story of this woodland, the offerings continued a long pattern of human ways of belonging to place. Within the ecological urgency of our times, when the need for solutions is so great, it could seem too slow a response, too simple a premise to begin from the point of relationship. But what if it is the ground we stand on, and the relationships we form there, that make and remake the world? Ecological restoration must enfold the embodied experience. Our participation laces the human community into relation with the more-than-human world: the common ground of our earthly relationships.

Whatever was to happen next for the ecological restoration of this land, and whatever targets might be negotiated at COP, this was not a site for off-setting, nor for a nameless designation of carbon sequestration. This was a storied landscape, and its culture was still culturing. Extractivist practices have usurped, assumed and imposed upon landscapes, and it is vital that restoration should not be carried out in the same way. Within the practice of ecological surveying, a drone survey is often performed first, followed by an ecologist on foot checking the data for accuracy in a process known as 'ground truthing'. Gaelic place names offer a baseline survey for the possible restoration of the Ghàidhealtachd, encoding the ecological knowledge observed and collated

through millennia of ground truthing. Toponymical place knowledge can guide how areas of depleted habitats could be restored. These connective links between people and place hold biodiversity, language and cultural heritage.

As well as being inspiring and informative, it can be intimidating to relate to a landscape within a cultural heritage so deep rooted, and with a language I would always be a learning. Yet within Gaelic, there is expression of the wider belonging of our earthly relations. And it is through this earthly belonging, that I give myself permission to be part of the regenerative culture which now works to tend these lands, guided by relationship with traditional ecological knowledges, by the global movement of ecological restoration, and by my own embodied experiencing. Coming into relationship with the specific habitat is critical to ecological restoration. Woodland historian Oliver Rackham urges conservationists to be sensitive to the *genius loci* of the wood, 'to find out what makes it special as it is, and to not force it into a pattern determined by a top-down theory of what a wood ought to be.'[28] This invitation towards a place-responsive restoration requires a practice of continual attentiveness, transformational to both the practice and the practitioner.

I'd first arrived to Airigh Drishaig with a curiosity about rewilding, but instead, I'd learnt about community resilience, networks of transformation, and land reform. Through my relationship with this marginal site, I'd come to be linked with the local community, and with other woodlands, in ways that I would never have imagined. How could I assume anything about this land that I arrive to, again and again, and which still meets me anew? Each day relationships shift within this changing planet. Safety, security, and the assumption of continuity has been forever altered.

This landscape— every landscape— is shaped by roots and routes of exploitation and extractivism. Ecological restoration, or re-storying must hold social justice and decolonialization. It is not an end destination to be reached, but a continual practice which must be inclusive and reflexive, helping each other to move away from extraction and into systems of good relations with all species.[29] We hold

[28] Oliver Rackham, *Woodlands,* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 553
[29] Emma McKeever, 'Extractive Delusions', in *New Internationalist*, March-April 2023

the world within our relations. Even within the dynamic of personal relationships, we still have so much to shake off from what has been projected onto us by power-over politics. The love that Graham and I share is a steady anchor when I am out here alone, and I've come to realise that our relationship does not need to look like any version other than what works for us.

I don't want to idealise the idea of ecological restoration. When the planet is unravelling, it is clearer than ever that restoration of what was is neither attainable nor desirable. Instead, it is a practice that is messy and unresolved, shifting, and incomprehensible. I cannot summon the bold proclamation that we should restore or protect 30% of the planet by 2030. This neoprotectionism operates with the same failed logic we've seen in conservation over the past hundred and fifty years. Likewise, Natural Capital only reaffirms capitalist economics. Instead, the transformation that is needed must come from all directions, changing our patterns of consumption, diet, and means of production— not solely projected onto wild spaces as the solution. It is system change that is needed most of all alongside ecological restoration, from land reform, agricultural to transport, to housing, to governance, right the way through to the interpersonal, and the way we relate with ourselves.

We each play our own unique, distinctive parts in this collective venture of ecological restoration and regenerative culture. Within the diversity of the people who had visited me, it was apparent that change was happening. The seed collectors: Ida now works with NHS Scotland in formalising the use of nature prescriptions; Róisín was training to become a deer stalker; Ama was growing for a veg box scheme while facilitating conflict resolution. Graham was soon to qualify as a play therapist. My local friends, Floortje and Lisa, were keen to explore possibilities for Airigh Drishaig as a cooperative model, and I was now connected to a network of woodland crofters.

Reciprocal restoration is an adaptive practice threaded through a story of place, made, and remade continuously. Like nettle cordage, it is both an ancestral skill and a continuous learning which is not only of the past but innovating ecological futures. Renewal of resources, survival, reinvention, reintroductions. Making of community. What sort of basket, what sort of weaving is required for this next evolutionary stage, that of restoring the ecological systems of earth, that of a

just transition to the Life Story? Haraway's 'seed bag for Terraforming with Earth Others' offers some inspiration.

> Instructed by companion species of the myriad terran kingdoms in all their placetimes, we need to reseed our souls and our home worlds in order to flourish— again, or maybe just for the first time— on a vulnerable planet that is not yet murdered. We need not just reseeding, but also reinnoculating with all the fermenting, fomenting, and nutrient-fixing associates that seeds need to survive. Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology and of organism, language, and machine.[30]

Within the weave, there must be multispecies kinship and interpersonal solidarity, attending to both the local and the global, amidst the unevenness of power relations and the changing dynamics of displacement and emplacement. Its weave must enact ecological and social justice, whereby the invisible communities— whether the creatures of the compost or the most vulnerable of human communities— are foregrounded. Haraway's imperative towards *Staying with the Trouble* requires learning to be truly present, as mortal creatures 'entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of place, times, matters, meanings.'[31]

In this landscape, 'staying with the trouble' is informed both by Gaelic epistemologies, and by the emergent understandings of the Anthropocene.[32] How does an indigenous language hold change, wreckage, and regeneration? How does a colonising language? What new forms of expression will be needed? Taking long moments to sit within these earthly relationships, we can tend our multiple anchor points and territories, guided by the materiality, conviviality and sentience of the living world. Trusting that there will be someone, some kin, to carry it on. Because our original teachers— the plants, the water, the land, the remaining creatures— were still guiding us.

Airigh Drishaig: this teacher who would always surprise, had gifted me with a wider understanding of restoration. This multispecies taskscape was shaping and

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[30] Haraway, p. 117

[31] Haraway, p. 1

[32] Linda Russo and Marthe Reed, *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing within the Anthropocene*, (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018)

opening me. My creative energy and embodied attention were now entwined with the regenerative pulse of this woodland, while honouring the huge losses, dissonance, and grief that are part of being alive at this time. Speaking the name of a place keeps it from being abandoned, forgotten, or unitised into the language of Natural Capital. Embodied practices of ecological restoration would keep this as a known place through which a continued pattern of coming and going disperses seeds and stories and starts something new. 'Our actions', as Ingold has it, 'do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world's transforming of itself.' [33] An owl flew low over my head towards the moon above the oil rig. The half-light played tricks. Trees were creeping, waiting to reassemble themselves once I'd turned inside the cottage. The bramble grows and the woodland moves on.

[33] Ingold, p. 164

Afterword

Another year has passed. I'm still the tenant of Airigh Drishaig, but my role in this wider landscape has evolved. Earlier this autumn I became employed as Woodland Development Officer for Applecross Community Company. The seed collection project, and the tree nursery that I established with the school four years earlier, were now part of my job. For my first day of work, I had walked from Airigh Drishaig towards this new story of woodland.

Torgarve Woods, *Coille a' Thorra Ghairbh,* recently became community owned, and after the Sitka plantation was clear-felled, a taskscape of agricultural histories and settlements, with crofting systems and field boundaries, seventeenth and eighteenth-century township, and a bronze age roundhouse was revealed. Within this community led project, ecological restoration would include the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage within a mosaic of habitat creation. Over the next four years, the site would be restored to native woodland, with an emphasis on Gaelic heritage and plant lore, foraging and crafts. Working with the steering group and the board of trustees, I would oversee the development of the woodland management plan, aiming towards a regenerative business model.

Airigh Drishaig evolves too. The deer fence has been repaired and we would soon plant some of the trees grown from seed. Plans for a stalker to visit more often were in motion. The Applecross Forest Plan now indicates that the area along the south of the peninsula, with Airigh Drishaig in the middle, is considered as landscape scale restoration, spreading in each direction and linking with habitat corridors in the wider region. The nearby Couldoran Estate, owned by the Woodland Trust, would soon be opening as the Scottish Rainforest Education Centre. The refuge of Old Stalkers Cottage continues, and my friend, Viv, would stay there this winter to finish writing her book.

Under the overhang of the rock shelter, I prepared to light a fire. Slowly, methodically, I cleared a patch in the leaf mulch, brushing spiders carefully out the way, and breaking sticks to form a platform. I laid a handful of birch twigs on top and knelt to strike the match. I wanted to ask permission from the land, and from all who have collaborated and contributed— human and non-human—

to offer up these ongoing, on-growing stories, towards the re-storying of planet Earth.

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