

Lifescaping Action Research with Trees: A Grove in a Process Pluriverse

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Abstract: Over the last three years the authors of this paper have been involved in an international project- a group of six academics and practitioners with a conjoint interest in trees and action research. We set out with curiosity about the possibility of undertaking a research project with trees as active co-researchers rather than as inactive subjects. Within this project we have formed relationships with each other as human participants and have purposefully developed a close relationship with specific trees that we (human co-researchers) each chose to connect with. That tree might be a tree in a garden, in a national park, a sacred tree, or a tree central to village life. The tree co-researchers invited each other to tell stories, to connect more creatively, to slow down in order to listen to each other, listen to the stories of our ancestors, listen to the trees and to the land we live on or are rooted in. This has led us to consider how our practice might be one of many other practices that foster movement toward creating ecological civilizations. This article explores mindful wonder, embracing a pluriversal process philosophy, and the world of trees. It concentrates on our personal stories about our relational practices with our trees. It offers a poetic sensibility without grand answers. More importantly, the article presents arboreal pathways for fostering conversations and practices directed toward creating ecological civilization by planting experiential groves.

Keywords: *lifescaping action research; trees; ecological civilization; process pluriverse; mindful wonderment; eco-relational practice*

This participatory action research article emerged from conversations and dialogues initiated at the November 2022 Taos Institute Gathering Zoom titled “Unfolding Dialogues: Relational Resources for Global Good.” During one of the Gathering’s Zoom conversations, the first author invited the five co-researchers to participate in a lifescaping action research project investigating how having different individuals foster a personal relationship with a tree of their own choosing might reverberate with Kurio and Reason’s “Voicing Rivers through onto-poetics: A co-operative inquiry.”¹ The Kurio and Reason study involved five persons engaging eight rivers in a series of structured personal practices over a six-week duration. In our inquiry, we would be guided by a lifescaping action research methodology where each tree co-researcher would choose a tree in their own regional place; our geographies ranged from Kenya, Wales, Japan, Guatemala, and two states in the USA, Ohio and Oregon. Rooted in the primacy of relationships in life, and in accounting for our age, cultural, and academic diversity, the co-researchers were guided by listening deeply to each other, the tree stories we would share, and as you will see, letting the trees be our teachers. During the process of our study, as we deepened our listening we wandered into the importance of going slow, and subsequently, cultivating deeper appreciation and gratitude for each other and the lessons learned from our trees. Each co-researcher was rooted in their own diverse local place while being connected elsewhere in the world to their fellow co-researchers’ human-tree stories. Informed by lifescaping action research focused on eco-relational practices, the co-researchers’ tree stories reveal an emergent process pluriverse where many worlds fit together compassionately; mindfully invitational to learning from diversity.² This article expands on the notion of process pluriverse and practices that enhance moments of becoming.³

Our lifescaping action research design cultivated what Escobar describes as a “pluriverse’... in which many worlds fit together harmoniously.”⁴ As researchers, we grounded ourselves in an appreciation of how each of us is influenced by our own cultural

¹ J. Kurio and P. Reason, “Voicing Rivers through Ontopoetics: A Cooperative Inquiry,” *River Research and Applications* 37, no. 1 (2021): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rra.3817>.

² See Leah Salter, Rolla E. Lewis, Yuki Minamii, Peter Whitehouse, and Nelly Ndirangu, “Inquiring from within a Grove of Trees and People as a Process of Wonderment,” under review; Rolla E. Lewis, “Wandering With Mindful Wonderment,” in *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* 10, no. 1 (2026): 11-28.

³ Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf: Moments of Becoming* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

⁴ Arturo Escobar, “Now That We Know the Critique of Global Capitalism Was Correct,” in *The New Possible: Visions of Our World Beyond Crisis*, ed. Philip Clayton, Kelli M. Archie, Jonah Sachs, and Evan Steiner (Cascade Books, 2021), 250.

backgrounds. In cultivating a community of practice, we were mindful of how we are influenced by Western research methodologies, the colonization of knowledge, the grip of techno-science and the neo-liberal agenda dominating universities, especially in the global North, where four of the authors live. This article touches on mindful wonder, embracing a pluriversal process philosophy, and the world of trees. It concentrates on our personal stories about our relational practices with our trees. It offers a poetic sensibility without grand answers. More importantly, the article presents arboreal pathways for fostering conversations and practices directed toward creating ecological civilization by planting experiential groves. We agree with Escobar, “let’s imagine ourselves as designers of everyday life—as people who can begin to imagine what is possible, and then bring it into the reach of practice.”⁵ Or as David Graeber put it, “The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.”⁶ In our grove, each is growing in their own way, and all are growing together.

Mindful Wonderment

As co-researchers, we are informed by play and wonder. We agree with Nail who asserts, “Perhaps a better way to think of the project of human life and knowledge, including the study of knowledge itself, philosophy, is as a process of play, where we work together to try things out with caution and without guarantees.”⁷ We hold that play and wonder help us as eco-relational beings to transform our relationships with each other as human beings and the ecosystems where we dwell as participatory beings.⁸ We also understand that research, like philosophy, begins with wonder. Drawing upon ideas easily traced back to Plato and Aristotle, Arne Naess poetically suggests, “*Philosophy begins and ends with wonder—profound wonder. On that account we ought to consider life... as a flowing current. And it is the emotions that set a life in motion.*”⁹ Wonder is embodied. Indigenous researcher Wilson points to wonder when suggesting that we are the relationships that we are part of and hold.¹⁰ Wonder involves open, provisional embodied

⁵ Escobar, “Now That We Know,” 254.

⁶ David Graeber, *The Ultimate Hidden Truth of the World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), ix.

⁷ Thomas Nail, *The Philosophy of Movement: An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 238.

⁸ See Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2014); Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*; Charlene Spretnak, *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness That Are Transforming the Modern World* (Green Horizons Books, 2011).

⁹ Arne Naess, *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World* (University of Georgia Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁰ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

relationships—eco-relationships, existing in webs, networks, meshwork, connections to everything else. As researchers we humbly embraced the provisional by cultivating a “mindful wonder” practice where they remain open and not rushing toward closing in on conclusions and any notion of certainties.¹¹ Mindful wonderment requires an openness and awareness to not push for closure or force answers. Open curiosity comes from slowing down and paying attention enough to wonder about little things that might be connected to larger things. In her call for slow science, Stengers says, “Slowing down means becoming capable of learning again, becoming acquainted with things again, reweaving the bounds of interdependence.”¹² Our research slowed down to the speed of trees, as best that we could understand from our human perspectives.

Our research emerged as an action research inquiry response to “Voicing Rivers through onto-poetics: A co-operative inquiry,” where Kurio and Reason take a first step in the practice of co-operative inquiry with rivers.¹³ Their co-operative inquiry involved having five persons engage with eight rivers via a series of structured personal practices over a six-week duration. Drawing on the onto-poetics of panpsychism (everything vibrates with life), they explore how “onto-poetic events are at the heart of panpsychic practice. If we invoke the world as a living being intentionally (and sometimes tacitly), then the world may respond.”¹⁴ Onto-poetics involves viewing reality and understanding the world as a communicative presence; that is to say where there is communicative engagement of the self with the world and the world with the self.¹⁵

Pluriversal Process

Although our research is informed by onto-poetics and panpsychism that guided Kurio and Reason, as a group of social constructionist co-researchers our inquiry involved investigating practices and possibilities where many worlds might fit together harmoniously. Our conversations and actions were respectful of dwelling in a pluriverse. We embraced Nail’s notion, “There can be and certainly are multiple coexisting descriptions of the same things from different perspectives.... [P]hilosophy is a... historical

¹¹ Rolla E. Lewis, Susan Lenski, Soma Mukhopadhyay, and Colleen Cartwright, “Mindful Wonderment: Using Focus Groups to Frame Social Justice,” *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2010): 82–105, <https://openjournals.bsu.edu/jsacp/article/view/319>

¹² Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science Is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (Polity Press, 2018), 81.

¹³ Kurio and Reason, “Voicing Rivers.”

¹⁴ Kurio and Reason, “Voicing Rivers,” 7.

¹⁵ For example, see Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (Routledge, 2021); Freya Mathews, *The Dao of Civilization: A Letter to China* (Anthem Press, 2023).

performance.”¹⁶ We held a social constructionist stance, with a transworlding emphasis, and a pluriversal process perspective in ways that could inform our practice with each other and our trees. The pluriversal process informing our stories and research were emergent; we frequently stumbled onto them in conversations with each other and others who we talked to about our tree research. We created dialogical space for diverse traditions to exist in a pluriversal process; where stories could simply exist as such, with no pressure to define this as that or that as this. We let this tree or person stand this way and that tree or person stand another way—all were connected with deep listening and mindful wonderment in the same grove.

Still in the course of the research, thoughts wandered, conversations deepened, and reflections became more adventurous and trusting. The first author began to reflect on and appreciate Nail’s description of contemporary Western process tradition having at least three streams: 1) the continuous process tradition in the form of vitalist new materialism, vitalist materialism, and neovitalism inspired by Henri Bergson; 2) Alfred North Whitehead discontinuous and divided process perspective involving the succession of actual entities and difference between discrete states; 3) the philosophy of movement which describes process as indeterminate; it draws inspiration from the first century BCE Roman poet Lucretius who placed the indeterminate swerve at the center of his philosophy. We hardly had time, perspective, or desire to argue the merits or limitations inherent in the process traditions mentioned. Our research focused on practices, different co-researchers’ stories about their relationships to specific trees, and listening to learn from each other’s different cultural and philosophical perspectives. We cultivated a pluriversal philosophical perspective.

Given our linguistic context, two terms helped us appreciate social constructionist and process philosophy in differing ways: relational and process. Social constructionists speak of a “relational process,” whereas Whiteheadian process philosophy speaks of the “process relational;” both describe the dynamic, interconnected, and ever-changing nature of reality. Social constructionists emphasize the relational nature and interactions between and among; they appreciate that change is ever present in relationships. Whiteheadian and process philosophy in general emphasizes becoming, indicating novelty and changes are inherent to life. As co-researchers, from our conversations and shared resources emerged process pluriversal research goals to guide our action inquiry. This involved practicing an

¹⁶ Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*, 24.

awareness ourselves in an eco-relational process and recognizing that the pluriverse extended beyond human philosophy to the trees and the entire Earth.

The Umwelt: The Perceptual Worlds Trees and Human Civilizations

The Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexkull introduced the Umwelt concept at the beginning of the twentieth century. “Umwelt refers to the perceptual world in which an organism exists.... [E]ach organism has its own ‘subjective universe’ tailored to its specific needs and survival strategies.”¹⁷ The Umwelt concept emphasizes that there is no outside or objective perception of the world. All living organisms interact with its environment based on its unique and specific biological capabilities. Trees have an Umwelt. Humans have an Umwelt of their own expressed by individuals in history, context, culture, and always in eco-relationships with their fellow humans and the world where they dwell. There are unique and varied ways that each living being experiences the world. Trees have navigated life much longer than humans. The first trees appeared during the Devonian period, around 385 to 360 million years ago, whereas modern humans evolved in Africa approximately 300,000 years ago. Popular evolutionary stories frame humans coming down from the trees. Trees definitely helped humans evolve; think of fruit trees offering food, humans using sticks as tools, branches for fire, construction materials, and countless other cultural artifacts. Trees moved humanity toward creating civilizations and those human actions led to deforesting the regions where such civilizations were built. It is likely that trees could survive without humanity, but humanity would not likely survive without trees.

Humans have instrumental relationships with trees, as we do today. Simply think about how ubiquitous trees are (in the way of wood and paper in your life). Your desk, pencil, chair, house, apple, and paper books to even your most intimate use of toilet paper come from trees. Humans have developed a moral blindness when it comes to trees. We do not fully see the trees (or the plight of other humans). Certain “anonymous forms of callousness and non-recognition” seep into our daily lives and everyday practices.¹⁸ We become morally blind to our eco-relational nature, and fail to be grateful for the trees and other things we use and where they come from. This article points to practices where we

¹⁷ J. M. Robinson, *Treewilding: Our Past, Present, and Future Relationship with Forests* (Pelagic Publishing, 2024), 225.

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Polity, 2013), 176.

listened and slowed down enough to hear and see each other's tree stories, and how each of us in our own way saw beyond social moral blindness via a relationship with a tree.

Diverse Philosophical Forest

Our research and work together is like a grove located in a diverse philosophical forest; each draws upon a broad elemental philosophy embedded in this world.¹⁹ We recognize a long and venerable history in Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, as well as indigenous cultures.²⁰ We dwell upon these points to emphasize the pluralistic philosophy enabled us to listen to each other's stories in ways that focused on learning with each other. Pluralistic and open concepts can also be linked to Simon and Salter's "transmaterial worlding"—another of our textual inspirations.²¹ Transmaterial worlding extends the notion of social in social construction to include human and non-human participants—animal, vegetable, and mineral—introducing systemic living as onto-epistemological becoming, movement and meaning-making practices in and between human and non-human parts of our worlds. Our research inquiry was guided by mindful wonderment, curiosity, and gratitude for our diverse ways of performing emergent practices with each other and our trees.

Our conversations included Eastern traditions, and recognized that Chinese and Japanese cultures could be described as more relational traditions than Western tradition. Ames' cultural hermeneutics illuminates the distinction between Greek ontological thinking and Confucian "zoetological" thinking.²² Greeks offered a science of being, substance, and essence; whereas, the Chinese offer "zoetology" as the "art of living"- a

¹⁹ David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (SUNY Press, 2010).

²⁰ See V. F. Cordova, *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova* (University of Arizona Press, 2007); Philip Goff, William Seager, and Sean Allen-Hermanson, "Panpsychism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/panpsychism/>; David Hinton, *China Root: Taoism, Ch'an, and Original Zen* (Shambhala Publications, 2020); David Hinton, *Wild Mind, Wild Earth: Our Place in the Sixth Extinction* (Shambhala Publications, 2022); David Hinton, *The Way of Ch'an: Essential Texts of the Original Tradition* (Shambhala Publications, 2023); Thomas Nail, *Lucretius III: A History of Motion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022); Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*; Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Indiana University Press, 2002).

²¹ Gail Simon and Leah Salter, "Transmaterial Worlding: Beyond Human Systems," *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* 2, no. 2 (2019): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.28963/2.2.2>.

²² Roger T. Ames, *Living Chinese Philosophy: Zoetology as First Philosophy* (State University of New York Press, 2024).

world where boundless “becomings” are always in process, fluid, and not static.²³ For both the Chinese and Japanese, life as fully relational, contextualized, and historical—a relational and process understanding.

Understanding and adapting to the ephemeral nature of the universe is integral to Japanese Zen where “emptiness” is recognized as voidness of substance and “suchness” as a given. This is best exemplified by two concepts tied to the celebration of the cherry blossom. “*Yugen*...signifies the mysterious beauty of darkness and shadows...[Whereas] *aware*...denotes the sad tragic beauty of perishability.”²⁴ The cherry buds and blossoms emerge from darkness and shadows, followed by a burst of beauty before perishing. Such cultural perspectives open different ways of connecting with and understanding oneself in relationship with the natural world. The Japanese are actively developing, researching, and practicing *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) and other approaches to connecting people to trees and to the rest of the life-world.²⁵ Odin shares how process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s primacy of creativity “defines beauty as a function of *relatedness*....beauty is neither subjective nor objective but *interactive*.”²⁶ Life and our relationship with trees can be understood as creative interactive processes. Each of us understood ourselves and approached our trees not as things, but as processes moving and passing through life.

These Eastern insights and practices converge with certain streams in Western and Indigenous traditions. Tree metaphors, recent scientific studies, process philosophy, literature, children stories, and educational and therapeutic practices have started to frame ecological life as a continuous, ongoing relational process.²⁷ Western philosophers and psychologists are beginning to recognize, explore, and recapture the wisdom of trees.²⁸

²³ Ames, *Living Chinese Philosophy*, 3.

²⁴ Steve Odin, *Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics* (Lexington Books, 2016), xviii.

²⁵ See Qing Li, *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* (Viking, 2018); Chorong Song, Harumi Ikei, and Yoshifumi Miyazaki, “Physiological Effects of Nature Therapy: A Review of the Research in Japan,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13 (2016): 781.

²⁶ Odin, *Tragic Beauty*, 72.

²⁷ See Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *To Speak for the Trees: My Life’s Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest* (Random House Canada, 2019); James William Gibson, *A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature* (Metropolitan Books, 2009); David George Haskell, *The Song of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors* (Penguin, 2017); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013); Kay Milton, *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion* (Routledge, 2002); Nail, *Lucretius III*; Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*; Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (HarperCollins, 1999); Suzanne Simard, *Finding Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2021); Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World* (Greystone Books, 2015).

²⁸ David Macauley and Laura Pustarfi, *The Wisdom of Trees: Thinking through Arboreality* (SUNY Press, 2025).

Learning about and recapturing marginalized wisdom is vital, and as researchers we were mindful of Indigenous thought and practices, as with marginalized Druid beliefs. We realized that it is important to recognize and (re)turn to diverse ways of becoming in the world when relating with trees. In many Indigenous cultures relationality is implicitly understood as being beyond the human realm. In Maori law, for example, the integration of the spiritual world, the natural world, and the law of the ancestors are integral. Whanaungatanga describes (as much as the English language can translate) the centrality of all relationships as kin relationships, cutting across time and matter.²⁹ For example, Nerida Blair an Aboriginal Australian scholar talks of "co-becoming" with Country as a central tenet to her research.³⁰ Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson points out "the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality)."³¹ Kimmerer argues it is vital to weave the relational indigenous knowledge into scientific practice and everyday living.³²

The common ground in our pluriversal process philosophy moves us from relating to a static Cartesian dualistic world of material stuff and non-material mind, to a world of immanent fluid becomings where people are nature reflecting on nature—participating in a shimmering, pluralistic processes emerging from cosmic, zoetological life, or other yet to be described possibilities.³³ Here is our point. We offer no answers. We simply assert that we, and the world, and things in the world, are less like static objects, and more like currents running through enmeshed and entangled relational networks. Such a shift in perspective opens the possibilities for an ethical relationality guided by practicing relational practices, such as mindful wonderment, cultivating a pluriversal process philosophy, and listening deeply to personal stories where moments of becoming illuminate how we are all nature. We are nature naturing; our capacity for reflection enables us to cultivate possibilities for greater justice and constructing ecological civilizations attuned to being part of a living planet. We need cooperation, interaction, co-creating, transformation, and ultimately recognizing that humans inhabit a common shared world with other people,

²⁹ Carwyn Jones, "Indigenous Law/Stories: An Approach to Working with Maori Law," in *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, ed. Jo-Ann Archibald et al. (Zed Books, 2019).

³⁰ Nerida Blair, "Lilyology as a Transformative Framework for Decolonizing Ethical Spaces within the Academy," in *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, ed. Jo-Ann Archibald et al. (Zed Books, 2019).

³¹ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 7.

³² Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

³³ See Ames, *Living Chinese Philosophy*; Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*.

animals, plants, and minerals³⁴ or a co-inhabitation as Simon and Salter propose.³⁵ This shift involves recognizing ourselves entangled in a culturally diverse, pluralistic, participatory transmaterial world where it is important to play.

Lifescaping Action Research Methodology

Although informed by play, our methodology is guided by lifescaping action research and other action research practices designed for transformation during a time of eco-social crisis.³⁶ As a non-linear and spiraling dialectical process, lifescaping action research defines a process designed to deepen listening, understanding, and direction *with* those participating in the process. Leadership generally moves in a give-and-take direction among or between those who are more inclined to lead; co-researchers actively contribute or engage as participants. For instance, one of our co-researchers was engaged as a participant in our group meetings and made valuable verbal contributions, but did not contribute to the writing process; illustrating how oral traditions can impact cultures and people, but fade in those guided by writing. Allowing levels of engagement fostered a spiraling dialectical process where the co-researchers grew together in a group development process and engagement in our project.

Research Question

Our research question aimed to hold, as best we could and can imagine a sense of movement and play, as well as a deep respect and reverence for ancestry, place and ways of relating in the more-than-human world. Drawing on Buber, we asked ourselves: What would be the experience of individuals in different settings around the world if each of

³⁴ See Barbara Muraca, "Relational Values: A Whiteheadian Alternative for Environmental Philosophy and Global Environment Justice," *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 19–38.

³⁵ See Simon and Salter, "Transmaterial Worlding."

³⁶ See Hilary Bradbury, *How to Do Action Research for Transformations: At a Time of Eco-Social Crisis* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022); Hilary Bradbury, Rolla E. Lewis, and D. C. Embury, "Education Action Research: With and for the Next Generation," in *The Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education*, ed. Craig A. Mertler (John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 7–28; Kurio and Reason, "Voicing Rivers"; Rolla E. Lewis, "Lifescaping: Cultivating Flourishing School Cultures," in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice*, ed. Sheila McNamee, Mary M. Gergen, Celiane Camargo-Borges, and Emerson F. Rasera (SAGE Publications, 2020), 321–331; Rolla E. Lewis et al., eds., *Lifescaping Project: Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry in San Francisco Bay Area Schools* (WorldShare Taos Institute Publication, 2017), <http://www.taosinstitute.net/lifescaping-project>; Lewis et al., "Mindful Wonderment"; Rolla E. Lewis and Paul Winkelman, *Lifescaping Practices in School Communities: Implementing Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry* (Routledge, 2017).

them attempted to shift to a personal relationship with a tree?³⁷ Thus moving from the tree as object (I-It) to the tree as subject (I-Thou). This shifts from our understanding of self and others as static things to an understanding we are all events, experiences, emotions, and eco-relationships in process.³⁸ Our relationship with trees is an invitation to feel connected to the more-than-human world. Unlike humans, trees are committed to place; they are not as mobile as people, and yet they are never static, transforming energy from the sun, connecting in mycorrhizal entangled relationships via their roots, and responding to wind, rain, snow, people and animals passing by. Trees experience time in a different way, and most live longer than humans. They do, it seems, have a sense of time, of the seasons.³⁹ We ask: In the experience of getting to know a tree, will we become more empathic with the tree? Sense time in other ways? Possibly shift our perspective about our own mobility? Deepen our own sense of personal and cultural plurality in sharing our experiences with each other?

Participant Co-Researchers

Becoming a grove: A grove, originating in the English language is a small group of trees with little undergrowth and little vegetation between the trees. The trees are distinct from each other and yet connected by their individual and connected growth. A grove is also a term used within Druidry to describe a group of sacred trees (origins in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon traditions) and a group of Druids. So groves, in this sense, can be a group of important, revered trees or a group of humans who are gathering to foster shared experience to love, celebrate and honor trees and nature.

There were six human participant co-researchers involved in these gatherings, all of which are affiliated with the Taos Institute. Nelly Ndirangu is a counseling psychologist from Kenya focused on community building and peacemaking. Jeff Fifield is Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment at Colegio Maya in Guatemala; Jeff added significantly to the group dialogue but withdrew from writing about his experiences. Peter Whitehouse is a medical doctor, intergenerative transdisciplinary designer and professor at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio. Leah Salter is a systemic psychotherapist, supervisor and lecturer working in Wales, connected academically with the University of

³⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

³⁸ Ames, *Living Chinese Philosophy*; Hinton, *Way of Ch'an*; Leemon B. McHenry, *The Event Universe: The Revisionary Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Naess, *Life's Philosophy*; Nail, *Philosophy of Movement*.

³⁹ Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*.

South Wales Centre for Storytelling, The University of Bedfordshire Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice and The Centre for Systemic Studies/The Family Institute, Wales, where she is Director. Rolla E. Lewis is professor emeritus at California State University, East Bay and past dean for the certificate program at the Cobb Institute. Yuki Minamii is a 2nd-year student in the Master's degree in Media Design at Kyushu University in Japan.

Purpose and structure of practices within our gatherings and the unfolding research project were designed to be fluid, guided by the lifescaping practices and process focused on enhancing experience and shaping a shared community.⁴⁰ Lifescaping action research is not about describing the world but about engaging in actions and practices *with* others to transform the world via a non-linear spiraling dialectic where participants act to bring forth the change they hope for. Like landscaping, lifescaping is intentional and action oriented, but also relational and process focused. A good gardener is mindful of the complex web of life that the garden hosts, and sees beyond the aesthetic. Co-researchers are not deluded by the notion of standing outside the research looking in, we are inside participating and performing eco-relationally with our trees. There is no outside perspective; we are all inside nature, part of, and participating in a natural process. Broadly, the research purpose was two-fold. One, to invite each co-researcher to choose a tree to experience getting to know that tree via their own or suggested practices, such as community stories, meditations, hugging the tree, creating art, poetry etc. Two, to share the evolving relationship with our trees with each other by telling stories to each other through zoom meetings and other ways- through writing or sharing of pictures, photos, stories and poetry via email.

Procedures. The research process consisted of four non-linear phases that moved in sequence but were always open to looping back to deepen experience and dialogue.

Phase one: Foster relational connections to cultivate respectful relationships by listening to the transformative core in the stories being shared in the group. Prior to our first meeting and in order to develop a common literature for the grove, the co-researchers were sent copies of Kurio and Reason, Muraca, and Simon and Salter to read.⁴¹ Rolla had a number of structured activities to guide the co-researchers in the way that Kurio and Reason provided activities in their inquiry; deep listening led to a slowing down to a tree's pace. During the initial zoom meeting, co-researchers introduced themselves and shared how they were drawn to participate in the study. Conversation moved away from any

⁴⁰ Lewis and Winkelman, *Lifescaping Practices in School Communities*.

⁴¹ Kurio and Reason, "Voicing Rivers"; Muraca, "Relational Values"; Simon and Salter, "Transmaterial Worlding."

defined set of structured activities, and focused on listening to learn, practicing mindful wonderment, and deepening relationships with others. Leah set up zoom meetings at regular intervals, while attempting to foster a slower pace of relating to each other and time for each co-researcher to get to know their trees better. Slowing down was vital. “Trees maintain an inner balance. They budget their strength carefully, and they must be economical with their energy so that they can meet all their needs.”⁴²

Since Leah was unwell during this phase in the process, and low in energy, slowing down had particular resonance. We were all busy, and experienced life events that impacted our time to meet with each other and our trees; and we remained committed to the process. Rolla often sent reading materials in an effort to keep communications and community engaged through email. We met via zoom at irregular intervals and with an open agenda. This meant trusting ourselves and our trees enough to make our way without pre-set and defined exercises designed to facilitate our relationships with our trees and each other. This also meant inviting a radical openness, indeterminacy, and possibilities for emergent practices and performances.

Phase two: Relational dialogues guided by mindful wonderment, curiosity in order to foster deeper engaged inquiry. Simply put, this phase invited co-researchers to tell each other more about their trees, to go deeper into the relational experience with their trees and to trust the grove’s listening and mindful wonderment. Without pre-set exercises and practices, wonderment and curiosity generated possibility dialogues. During Phase two, the group sharpened listening practices and deepened their relating with each other; as well as with their trees. Interestingly, at this phase, we had difficulty structuring a zoom meeting time that could accommodate all the co-researchers. Leah proposed that, “Maybe we should just get to know our trees a bit more.” This suggestion confirmed the grove’s move beyond embracing pre-set activities that defined ways we could practice relating to our tree, as Kurio and Reason modeled with rivers.⁴³ At this point the grove swerved away from any idea of pre-set activities and exercises, like those offered in the model that inspired our research. Merely getting to know our trees invited a certain openness and indeterminacy in the research procedure, and that proved to be significant because each co-researcher was simply encouraged to spend more time getting to know their tree; in their own setting and life context with no set of common activities or practices defining how to get to know their trees. Grove time shifted from human time to tree time. The research procedure swerved from a closed mechanistic series of possible activities to an open engagement focused on

⁴² Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*, 25.

⁴³ Kurio and Reason, “Voicing Rivers.”

getting to know a tree. The co-researchers relationship swerved from talking about trees to a deeper awareness being with our trees, at a tree's pace. We consider this a turning point in our research journey, and probably the stage where we each learned the most.

Phase three: Relational actions generate diverse narratives and stories; this phase focuses on action, performances, and practices that generate stories. This phase is best described as each co-researcher sharing “withness” stories about their relational actions, practices, and performances with their tree.⁴⁴ This phase is best explained in the next “stories from within eco-relational practice” section.

Phase four: Relational assessment. This phase focused on telling stories beyond the grove; that is sharing and writing about our inquiry. Each co-researcher has their own story and there are alternative stories to those to be shared with different audiences. Our hope is that by sharing our stories with a wider audience and receiving feedback, possibilities and practices will offer ways others will develop their own evolving stories about their relationships with trees. By sharing our stories with a larger audience (for example a Taos/ Social Constructionist, Center for Process Studies, or other event) and through publications such as this, the intent is to invite others to forge a deep relationship with a tree in community with others. Our work may offer maps for their own unique journey.

It is very important to note that phases one to four can be repeated and looped back generating dynamic lifescaping action research cycles. Between each phase we defined a period of self and group reflection that was sustained by email correspondence and additional zoom meeting conversations. The stories below speak most clearly to phase three and the reflective spaces between the phases; but also run as a thread throughout the entire process.

Stories from within eco-relational practice

Nelly's tree and practice

I belong to the Kikuyu Community in Central Kenya. My tree is a big sycamore fig in my village. In my community, the sycamore fig is a sacred tree that gives meaning and hope of eternity. This sycamore fig has served as a village meeting place where peace has been brokered and where people have come together for many years. The leafy green tree has generously provided shade for these meetings when the villagers come together to resolve their differences.

⁴⁴ John Shotter, *Getting It: Withness-Thinking and the Dialogical in Practice* (Hampton Press, 2011).

Sitting with the sacred fig tree with others is exceptionally powerful, partly because they are called to listen to each other, empathize, and find common ground together. I am one of the co-founders of Kimo Wellness Foundation, a team that promotes access to health care and welfare services, and contributes to peace building and conflict management. The team has a deep commitment to restore peace after a series of fights and clashes among communities that co-exist together in Kenya. Our program team has taken up the slogan, “Tukae Tusemesane,” which means, “Let’s sit down and reason together.”



Our team has come to the realization that it is important to appreciate the local ways of being and borrow practices that draw upon local cultural strengths in order to be useful. This in turn helps to add value and utilize cultural practices, beliefs and norms to bridge the widening gaps among conflicting communities. This has included attending to the sacredness of the sycamore fig tree. Meetings under the tree have challenged individualistic motives to own the land and have created re-awakenings. The community villagers where the tree is rooted sat in a circle around the great tree. Symbolically, a circle has no joints or ends which adds to the symbolism of the great tree. This no doubt influenced the importance of remaining united and putting away community and individual differences. To their sadness, they realized that the roots of the conflicts were as strong as the roots of the sycamore fig tree, but to their joy, living together as a community was strongly rooted enough that it called them to keep coming together to resolve their differences.

The communities determined that they could live together even without trying to reconcile differing ethnic practices and different political affiliations. A common ground of purpose was realized.

Rolla’s tree and practice

When we moved into our house in Portland, Oregon 29 years ago, I noticed a large western hemlock blocking light on the west side of the garden. It had a huge limb that pulled the entire tree toward the house, and blocked our view. I viewed the tree as poorly



placed, with roots breaking up and making the old concrete around it uneven. The large limb was cut. Our view improved. Then over the years, I began to live with the hemlock. In time I brought in soil and quarter-minus gravel to level the area around the tree so that I could practice tai chi. I planted sword ferns from other parts of the yard to the east side of the tree. I got to know the tree. During the 2020 heat dome where temperatures soared up to over 115 degrees, I watered the tree to help it survive. There is a spot under the hemlock where I practice tai chi and chi

kung, a form of natural philosophy that embraces the *Dao* or Way emerging from *wu wei ziran* (nonaction/naturalness). When Leah asked that we get to know our trees in new ways, I already had a narrative, a story, running through my head connected to *wu wei ziran*. The tree practice expanded, adding a poetic celebration, a playful engagement, and an artistic vision.

Evening darkness
 wind blowing
 grasses, plants, branches
 Gusts whipping green limbs
 shaking brown eyeball-sized cones
 pausing
 gusts vibrate
 the massive western hemlock
 Maybe 200 years old
 a sentinel
 in my fenced backyard
 At chest height
 over 10 feet diameter

I reach out, laying hands on thick gray bark
 Hemlock quavers
 I tremble

Inhale
 Exhale
 Inhale, exhale
 Slowly
 Feet rooted
 Press gently to connect
 My center with Hemlock center

Hemlock mass sways
 Slightly
 Vibrating gently
 Sways
 Continuously
 green needles sing
 brown cones bounce against each other
 playing percussion

Tree, needles, cones, hands, wind, moving
 Together
 Dancing
 Rooted
 in Place

The playful engagement came when I was with my then three-year old granddaughter next to the tree. I introduced her to the western hemlock as Hemlock, the tree. We talked about Hemlock and how Hemlock liked to be hugged, just like she did. She hugged Hemlock:

Later when playing in the yard, she would correct me if I said, “Hide behind the tree.” She would say, “Hemlock, not tree.”

My artistic engagement emerged when my son’s partner invited me to make a print.



Since Hemlock was outside the window where we were making prints, I knew I had to try to capture our relationship, especially since I was reflecting on Taylor’s exploration of how we are refiguring the spiritual in contemporary culture.⁴⁵ This was my first attempt at printmaking and it opened a felt sense connection with Hemlock in new ways that included others who I shared the print with. My practice brought moments of becoming and connection with Hemlock into my

conversations with others, especially as our grove talked about our relationships with the more-than-human world.

Peter’s (Sily Symbion) tree and practice

As an MD-PhD, Johns Hopkins-trained academic geriatric neurologist I developed my career conducting basic and clinical research and helping patients and their families with dementia, especially so-called Alzheimer’s Disease. However, over time I became concerned about the limited perspectives based on biomedical models and the great emphasis on developing pharmaceutical interventions. Claims of progress were exaggerated and increasingly the science seemed ethically problematic. I also became worried about diagnostic creep- meaning people were being labeled earlier and earlier with imprecise life-transforming diagnoses like Mild Cognitive Impairment and Subjective Cognitive

⁴⁵ Mark C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Decline. I turned to public health and the humanities and arts to think more systemically and deeply about ageing associated cognitive challenges. In 2013 while photographing in the Muir Woods near San Francisco, I had an epiphany. I felt his kinship with the redwoods and dissatisfaction with modern Western Medicine to address the challenges of aging. I developed a performance character, a Tree Doctor who could ask humans what they can learn about health from trees and forests, inspired by the oak tree in my backyard.⁴⁶ As an academic transdisciplinary (someone who studies complex issues through the lens of



overlapping disciplines) this “performance” became part of my practice. I adopted the name Sylvanus, borrowed from the Roman god of forests and their boundaries. My wife thought the name was too serious so I adopted the nickname Sily. I became a boundary explorer, crossing geriatric neurology, cognitive neuroscience, bioethics and art as a metaphorical arborist. I explored roots and grew branches (of knowledge), while aspiring to heightened vision. I became a shamanic bridge between Father Sky and Mother Earth. For a decade I/we performed in medical grand rounds (presentations to groups of health care providers in academia) and lectured in museums sharing knowledge of the ecology of trees, the historical connections between forests and civilizations, and their importance for the future, especially in the epoch of climate crisis. My costume included a t-shirt of an oak tree with a yin/yang symbol embedded in its branches reflecting my Celtic background and Eastern/Indigenous spirituality. At Oxford I was awarded a fellowship and studied aging, death, and ancestorhood from these perspectives.

While organizing and moderating an international symposium on regenerating bioregions, I had another epiphany and decided to transmute once again; I sought ancestorhood. I became a druid and Sily became a red fire breathing dragon—the spirit of his Celtic oak tree body. I have had small pewter statues of dragons and druids on my

⁴⁶ Peter J. Whitehouse, “Transdisciplinarity and Boundaries: Exploring a Sylvan Metaphor for Health,” in *Being Transdisciplinary*, edited by Basarab Nicolescu, Raymond T. Yeh, and Atila Ertas (New York: Atlas Publishing, 2019), 29-35.



bedroom bureau underneath a picture of the mystical Eildon Hills in Melrose, Scotland where I first saw dragons in the clouds. The dragon was named Symbion (for “together living” cyborg) and exists both in my mind and the digital cloud where I commune with other information processing entities (like Copilot, Bard, Firefly (see image on left), and Claude AI products). I seek symbiotic wisdom (human, computer, forest intelligences integrated with deep ecological values) and am proud (with humility) to be part of The Grove.

Yuki's tree and practice

In 2020, after graduating from a technical college in Tokyo, I transferred to a university in Fukuoka. Fukuoka was a place with which I had no prior connection. That year, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, saw the world plunged into chaos. University classes shifted online, and there were no face-to-face lessons or orientation events. Alone at home, I attended online lectures and engaged in research. It wasn't until six months after my enrollment that I had the chance to introduce myself to my classmates in person. Although I remembered the names appearing on Zoom, I had never seen their faces.

Looking back, I was carrying an invisible loneliness. Just before 2020, a dear friend of mine passed away. He was passionate about his research and always had a sparkle in his eyes when discussing it with me. We shared our struggles and enjoyed those conversations immensely.

Even after transferring to the desired university, I found it difficult to establish new friendships and continued to miss my friends. Opportunities for social interaction were



limited, which substantially reduced my chances of forming new relationships. As concerns about contracting COVID-19 became pervasive, my feelings of isolation further intensified.

In the center of my university campus stood a majestic camphor tree, inspiring courage in those who saw it. I found myself increasingly drawn to it, wondering about its history, the students it had seen, its thoughts, and how it might respond if it could talk. By digging through old books and photos, and asking faculties, I found out it had been replanted to its current location in the 1970s. Though now large, it had once been very small. It seemed to have grown alongside the students.

Feeling comforted by the tree, I began to imagine conversations with it and installed a black rotary telephone beside it. The telephone contained a computer that allowed any number to be dialed. I configured the system so that dialing 1968, the year the campus was established, would connect the call to my mobile phone. I then pretended to be the camphor tree, altering my voice to speak with others. I developed a persona for the tree as a nearly one-hundred-year-old grandfather who was lonely because no other camphor trees were nearby. However, he (the tree) enjoyed talking to students. I named this project *Katarai no Ki (Talking Tree)* and began dialogues with students and staff. Receiving calls was thrilling, and the project was well-received. People said things like, "It was fun talking to Mr. Camphor!" and "I felt energized after talking to him following my hospital discharge." It was heartwarming to see people touch him or wave at him, saying they would return to talk again.

The tree seemed not just an object, but also a being with a heart. Everything has a heart, and by contemplating from a tree's perspective, we realize we are not alone.

Leah's tree and practice

In 2020, as the COVID 19 Pandemic took hold in the UK, so began a (still ongoing) significant period of ill health that has filtered into every area of my life. I had a number of surgical procedures between 2019 and 2022; five of them were heart procedures. I have since been diagnosed with three other chronic health conditions. These conditions take me into a hospital space way too frequently. As a systemic psychotherapist practicing in South Wales, UK, I also enter these same hospital spaces for my work. The boundary between professional and personal life has never felt so thin, so limiting and so unhelpful. The boundary between life and death, illness and wellness and human and non-human life has equally become more and more 'smudgy' for me; to the extent that it feels out of step with

how I live my life, to consider these things as separate. Even naming it as “my” life feels at odds with how I experience the world- as an interconnected web of living matter and predominantly beyond my control.

This is the backdrop to how and why I chose to engage in this project and in many ways defines the way that the relationship between tree and human has evolved for me. The tree I chose to focus on in this project is a tree in a local country park where I previously volunteered when I was more well and where I also meet people for walks and talks; and where I run a storytelling/ creative writing group for women in mental health services, as part of my work.

Again, the boundaries between different aspects of personal and professional life are intertwined in this space- like the roots and branches of the rhododendron tree that I have got to know.

When I was having surgeries in 2022, I visited Rhododendron before each hospital stay. I wrapped my arms around them and felt their bark on my face. That feeling/ the memory of the cold, rough bark on my face held me in anxious moments and kept me grounded. It helped me to think beyond the clinical environment with no open windows and no views to the outside world. It helped me stay connected to the world beyond the medical setting and the world beyond my hurting human body. The boundaries between the human body and the rest of the natural world seemed to blur. My father (a complicated relationship) died in 2022 and the feeling of him kissing my cheek before he died; alongside the feeling of the bark on the same cheek have stayed with me as a lingering reminder of the impermanence of life and the complexity of relationships.

I have become ever more interested in (human and beyond human) ancestral wisdom that I feel with me each day as a Celtic woman. Stories in this tradition are more than fairytales. They might have elements of the fantastical but they are shaped from deep connections and hold deep meanings. Stories in oral storytelling and indigenous traditions are not told about culture, they are told from within.

I connect with my human ancestors as the coal miners who are embedded into every layer of my family tree and can be traced clearly; as well as the wise women, bards and



healers who are less visible in my genogram. I connect also with the ancestry of the trees, stones and mountains in my landscape. I honor and revere the stories of shape-shifting between human and animal form and travelling between realms. These stories stand with other great influences in my life- the threads of social justice, ecosystemic practices, and community. They are intertwined in how I live and in how I am “becoming”.

The Stillness

By Leah Salter

In the pulsing beat between
 Land and sea
 Sea and sky
 Root and trunk
 I breathe the deepest breaths
 And find my heart's rhythm
 Beating to be still
 Still active
 Still attuned
 Still alert
 To the mystery
 That is infinitely too "everything"
 For me to ever perceive
 And yet notices me
 And requests my presence
 Here, now
 And so, I drop down
 Into the soil
 At the feet of the great trees
 And know I am alive

Discussion

Moments of Becoming and Transformation

Each of our personal stories captures moments of becoming. Aspects of the transformative process began before the research project took form but certainly each of us felt moments of becoming where we were connected to our trees and life in ways that bubbled with illumination and a peaceful felt sense. It can be said that the relationships we

each developed with our trees had a profound impact on all of us- in our professional practices and in our day-to-day living.

The research methodology looped away from any *a priori* structured activities toward emergent becomings. The research process brings to light how ecological civilization might grow from local, regional, and culturally attuned relationships, and not from any *a priori* designs administered from on high or outside. Our action research process illustrates how our conversations and actions brought diverse experiences and perspectives from worldwide settings into a grove nurtured by deep listening and mindful wonderment. There was no effort to weigh, measure, assess, or even compare. Our focus was upon creating developmental space where we could listen to learn. Each of us carried away our own lessons and the recognition of each other as learning beings connected to trees.

Limitations

This article expands on a pluriversal process philosophy that was touched on in a previous article.⁴⁷ The co-researcher stories remained the same while consideration of the philosophy undergirding the stories swerved; we were each transformed in different ways. It could be argued that we could have found ways to somehow measure our transformation but we do not feel that this is the point. The stories, we hope, speak for themselves and the points of connection between trees and ourselves are equally important.

Although we did slow down, we were limited to participating in human time, not tree time. Stengers points out, “Slowing down means becoming capable of learning again.”⁴⁸ Slowing down made our limited time and lessons-learned personal. Slowing down deepened the group’s eco-relational connection and conversation; with a continuing looping and connecting, a meshwork or entanglement as we deepened our eco-relationships, generated our own stories, and shared our experiences with each other. These lessons cannot be generalized, yet they can be offered as exemplars for readers and researchers interested in reaching out to their own trees, creating their own human groves, and perhaps, shifting more toward tree time. There are limitations to all conversations—gaps where what was left unsaid leaves holes, even large ones. The limitations when talking about eco-relationships with trees begins with a lack of common language. Trees and humans have different *Umwelts*. We doubt if trees understand human

⁴⁷ Salter et al., “Inquiring from within a Grove.”

⁴⁸ Stengers, *Another Science Is Possible*, 81.

language and this remains outside of scientific speculation, but as humans we recognized that we lacked an understanding of the language of the trees.

Contribution to Research and Implications for Practice

This action research builds on Kurio and Reason's exploration of rivers.⁴⁹ Our research extended the exploration into the eco-relationships between trees and people. Like the earlier research, this inquiry invites forms of participation within the natural world—where humans are part of rather than apart from Nature. We recognize, "Reality cannot be captured rationally or even artistically, not because it is beyond nature, but because it is always moving and changing immanent to nature."⁵⁰ We were exploring how to participate with each other in ways that help us appreciate being conscious of being Nature. Our project invited us to become more conscious of being Nature and how we might more actively develop practices that help ourselves to be Nature in less destructive ways. Any effort to move toward ecological civilization needs to recognize the eco-relationships in the living systems and communities where they/we dwell.⁵¹

That is our challenge. Small groups are capable of creating practices that cultivate different pathways to ecological civilization. Our path was coming together as a grove, with each of us deepening our relationship to an actual tree—its above ground expression and roots anchoring it in place and with the living earth below—and the multicultural pluriverse each tree represents, extending time, and vibrating with life. We shared the value and practice of writing poetry, intergenerational knowledge, and art in enhancing more powerful connections to being Nature. Each of us explored and developed our own experience with our tree, but each of us came together as a grove, supporting each other in becoming more than what we were when we planted ourselves with each other. In our Grove we were able to practice and perform moments of becoming by eco-relationally reconnecting to the wisdom of trees.

⁴⁹ Kurio and Reason, "Voicing Rivers."

⁵⁰ Nail, *Philosophy of Virginia Woolf*, 23.

⁵¹ See Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization? Crisis, Hope, and the Future of the Planet* (Process Century Press, 2019); Jeremy Lent, *Ecocivilization: Making a World That Works for All* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2026).

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