

Orchestrating Sacred Space: Beyond the 'Social Construction' of Nature

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Abstract

The social constructionist approach to understanding nature has been a useful one in the historical and cultural study of environments and landscapes, including sacred landscapes. Any physical place, to the extent that it has been turned into a humanly meaningful social space, is a 'cultural construct' and a site of competing discourses. The metaphor of 'construction', however, may not be the most appropriate one for the study of *natural* landscapes that have been marked out as sacred. Drawing on research on places considered sacred within the New Age and Earth spirituality movements, especially the red-rock landscapes surrounding the town of Sedona, Arizona, this article argues for a different set of metaphors by which sacred space should be understood. Specifically, such terms as *orchestration*, *enactment*, *performance* and *network-building* open up the social study of sacred space to an acknowledgment of an active, agential more-than-human world, a world of actors who are variously enrolled in the actions of humans, who play in counterpoint to them, or who resist the orchestral scores laid out and performed in their midst. These metaphors, at least, more clearly acknowledge that there are inherent limitations to the interpretive attempts of humans to meaningfully 'construct' our worlds.

It may well be unnecessary to convince readers of this journal that nature is more than a 'social construct' and that the natural world has 'agency'. Nevertheless, the social constructionist approach to understanding nature has been a useful one in the historical and cultural study of environments, landscapes and environmental issues (see, e.g., Cronon 1995; Soper 1995; Hannigan 1995; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Any physical place, to the extent that it has been turned into a humanly meaningful social space, is a 'cultural construct' and a site of competing discourses. This has been adequately demonstrated in numerous studies of pilgrimage, sacred space and other phenomena to be found at the intersection of environmental, religious and social and cultural interests (e.g. Eade and Sallnow 1991; Chidester and Linenthal 1995).

The metaphor of 'construction', however, may not be the most appropriate one for the study of natural places. *Construction* suggests the primacy of a particular set of actors and activities: human social groups assembling the world block by block, with the bricks of discourse, text, political-economic structures, or some other mechanistically combinable parts.¹ For the understanding of sacred landscapes centered around historically significant individuals or built monuments, such an approach may suffice. But sacred landscapes of a more *natural* kind – or, I would argue, even those that are *socially constructed* as 'natural', however natural or cultural they may be in actuality – require the theorization of interactions between human social groups and nonhuman agents or environments.

In what follows, I will use my own research on sacred landscapes claimed by the contemporary New Age and Earth spirituality movements – a loose congeries of groups that, for simplicity's sake, we could call 'Gaian pilgrims' – to illustrate my argument that the nonhuman should be considered an active agent, and in fact more than a single agent, within the analysis of sacred geographies, and that, therefore, construction, despite its usefulness, may be better thought of in different terms. Nonhumans may not be agents in precisely the same way that humans are, and might not participate in discourse as such, at least as discourse is commonly, and perhaps restrictively, defined. But they participate in the networks forged between human social groups, cultural discourses, technological systems and ecological relations. Drawing on actor-network theory, ecological psychology and the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, Heidegger, and others, I will suggest that such terms as *enactment*, *enrolment*, *enlistment*, *performance*, *dialogue*, *network-building*, *choreography* and *orchestration*, may be more fruitful for understanding human–environment interactions. These terms better capture the ability of nonhumans to *resist* human constructions, and to play along or *not*

1. Anna Peterson (1999) argues that 'social construction of nature' can mean two very different things: simple *construal*, or the actual *physical* transformation of nature. In fact, however, I would argue that the term is generally used by social theorists to mean more than mere *construal* (though certainly including this), but less than physical transformation. *Construal* suggests a cognitive act, while *social construction* refers to a multileveled activity that includes interpretation in addition to forms of meaning that have become sedimented within materially embedded discourses and power relations. Given how frequently the term is misunderstood, Ian Hacking (1999), in a judicious philosophical exegesis on the topic, argues that the term has largely played out its course in social theory. As a metaphor, it implies *building* or *assembling* something from parts; but the reality of the world is too multidimensional to be adequately conveyed by such a mechanistic metaphor.

play along with the 'orchestral scores' laid out by human social groups. At the very least, I will argue, constructionism's relative hegemony in recent social and cultural theory should be loosened and pluralized by a more generous usage of alternative metaphors – metaphors that, without recourse to theological language at all, open the social sciences up to an acknowledgment of an active, agential more-than-human world.

1. *Sacred Spacings*

Most societies distinguish places that are deemed especially significant, sacred or powerful, imbued with unquestionable authority or prestige, or reserved for special uses, from those that lack such significance.² As articulated most influentially by Mircea Eliade, the phenomenology of religion understands sacred places as manifestations or 'irruptions' of inherent power and numinosity. As Belden Lane puts it, 'For religious man, space is not homogeneous', but 'some parts of space are qualitatively different from others' (1988: 16); and these qualitative differences are given by the sacred itself: sacred sites are the places where divine or supernatural power breaks through into the human world.³

In contrast to this view, which sees the sacred as a *sui generis* force whose action *precedes* the activities of social groups, much recent scholarship by cultural geographers, sociologists and others has demonstrated that spaces, places and landscapes are actively produced by a myriad of social activities, and that this 'social production of space' is dynamic and highly contested, imbued with cultural presuppositions and marked by social differences.⁴ As Anderson and Gale (1992: 4) put it, 'In the course of generating new meanings and decoding existing ones, people con-

2. Following Durkheim (1964 [1915]), this distinction between the sacred and the profane is often taken to be the hallmark of religious behavior and belief. To suggest that *every* society maintains such a conceptual distinction, however, is ethnocentric and misleading. Nevertheless, the discourse of 'sacred sites' has become widely used in the context of land use disagreements involving traditional and indigenous peoples, issues of cultural heritage protection, preservation and management, and struggles for the freedom of religious belief and expression (cf., e.g., Carmichael *et al.* 1994). Useful scholarly accounts of sacrality, sacred sites and pilgrimage include Turner (1987), Brereton (1987), Bhardwaj and Rinschede (1988), Morinis (1992), Preston (1992), Park (1994), Chidester and Linenthal (1995), Coleman and Elsner (1995), Stoddart and Morinis (1997) and Lane (2001).

3. For more or less Eliadian approaches to sacred landscapes, see Tuan (1974), Seamon and Mugerauer (1985), Walter (1988), Swan (1991), Prokop (1997) and Brenne-
man, Yarian and Olson (1982).

4. See, for instance, Anderson and Gale (1992), Barnes and Duncan (1992), Keith and Pile (1993).

construct spaces, places, landscapes, regions and environments...they construct geographies.' The constellations of meaning that mark out particular places are integrated within larger systems by which these places are contrasted against each other and differentiated into, for instance, the sacred and the profane, the central and the peripheral, Occident and Orient, and so on.

Sacred geographies can be analyzed through both of these lenses: that of the insider or believer, who sees the sacred as really existing in particular places (or the scholar who empathetically assumes the believer's stance in order to better understand the belief), and that of the outsider who skeptically scrutinizes or deconstructs the 'sacred' to show how it is socially produced and contested. In the latter 'hermeneutics of suspicion', sacred space is seen as a kind of 'religious void', 'a vessel into which pilgrims devoutly pour their hopes, prayers, and aspirations' and which accommodates 'the meanings and ideas which officials, pilgrims, and locals invest' in it (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15). This view has recently become popular in studies of pilgrimage, sacred space and geography of religion. The descriptions of Eade and Sallnow, Chidester and Linenthal, and others, seem to hedge between the suggestion that sacred spaces can contain an 'endless multiplication of meaning', 'open to unlimited claims' (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 18), and a barely registered admission that this multiplication of meaning is *not* quite 'endless': a shrine's power 'derives in large part from its character almost as a religious void' (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15), 'a sacred space could signify almost anything', its meaningful contours being 'almost infinitely extended', etc. (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 18; all emphases added). These authors' focus on cultural meanings prevents them from clarifying this tension, but it is precisely this tension that becomes important when interpreting a site that gets its sacred meaning, to a significant degree, from its being perceived as *natural*.

This tension is significant because sacred places, like all places, are *not* empty vessels or voids, and, like literary texts, they cannot *equally* accommodate all possible interpretations. Rather, places and landscapes are constituted in and through histories of human-nonhuman interaction in specific biophysical and material topographies and ecologies. Meanings, in other words, are not imposed onto pre-existing external (natural) realities; they emerge reciprocally with landscapes, cultures and practices. To the above two perspectives, then—sacred space as inherently given and as socially constructed and contested—we can add a third one: sacred space as shaped through interaction, over time, between humans and specific extra-human actors and processes. As people live in particular places, their activities, including their attempts

to 'anchor' their own views of the world in the landscape, 'orchestrate' those places in particular ways.⁵ But the orchestration includes players with different agendas—among them, nonhuman inhabitants and environmental 'forces' or 'actants' (entities that could be said to act), whose agency is complex and multiple.

In a recent study of the sacred landscapes of New Age and ecospiritual 'Gaian pilgrims' (Ivakhiv 2001), I focused on two sites that are considered sacred in large part because of the meanings ascribed to the Earth itself at these places. Glastonbury, England, and Sedona, Arizona, are two among a large number of widely celebrated 'power spots', believed to be centers or 'vortexes' of 'Earth energies'—energies that are thought by believers to be beneficial and health-promoting in their effects, as well as catalytic to spiritual growth. In the growing body of popular literature on such power spots, these landscapes are seen as places of personal transformation, and pilgrimages to them are considered a tool of such transformation. The literature of the New Age and earth spirituality movements projects an Eliadian geography of non-homogeneous space, marked by special places that stand out as especially important, meaningful or powerful. These places include natural sites, such as mountains, unusual rock formations, spectacular lakes and canyons, falls and hot springs—which hold in common the characteristic that they are somehow outstanding: they are places where the power, vitality or sheer otherness of nonhuman nature is obviously present, places where the Earth seems to *speak*, relatively unobscured by the din of modern civilization. Photographer Courtney Milne's lavishly produced and beautifully photographed book *The Sacred Earth* (1991), for example, is emblematic of the 'Earth cathedrals' genre of visual representation. Milne's five-year odyssey to sacred sites on seven continents was set off, according to the author, by a 'mysterious-looking document' called *Revelations from the Melchisadek Priesthood*, which described 'The Twelve Sacred Places of the Earth', a list that includes Glastonbury in England, Ayers Rock (Uluru) in central Australia, Haleakala Crater in Hawai'i, Bolivia's Islands of the Sun and Moon, Palenque in Mexico, the Great Pyramid of Gizeh and Jerusalem's Mount of Olives (a 'combination power spot'), and the mountains Tongariro (New Zealand), Shasta (California), Kailas (Tibet), Fuji (Japan), Table Mountain (South Africa) and the Four Sacred Mountains of Bali. This list echoes and overlaps with others that are readily available in numerous books and

5. I take the metaphor of 'orchestration' in the making of pilgrimage sites from Coleman and Elsner (1995), whose approach is broadly similar to, and has influenced, my own.

on countless web sites devoted to sacred spaces, power places, Goddess sites and the like (e.g. Devereux 1992; Rufus and Lawson 1991; Bryant 1991; Joseph 1992; Swan 1990, 1991; Gray n.d.). For ecospiritual pilgrims, who consider the Earth itself a potent and divine being, such places are the Earth's theophanies, and pilgrimage offers access to the power and spiritual secrets they hold.

The culture of post-1960s earth-centered spirituality, however, is promiscuously eclectic and inclusive, and it is not surprising that guidebooks for Gaian pilgrims include reference to many cultural sites – built structures, primarily monuments and temples of the world's religious traditions. The connection between these cultural monuments and the obviously natural ones, within this Gaian spirituality,⁶ is that the former are thought to have been constructed in coordination with the natural 'energies' represented by the latter. In other words, ancient cultures, such as the megalithic monument builders of Western Europe and the British Isles, the temple builders of Mesoamerica and the Near East, prehistoric 'Goddess cultures', or the legendary civilizations of Atlantis and Lemuria, are thought to have constructed their own monuments on powerful 'energy points'. According to different accounts, ancient peoples either intuitively perceived the 'Earth energies' or they practiced a proto- or quasi-scientific geomancy based on earth energy alignments that follow geometrical patterns or form planetary 'energy grids'.

It is not difficult to bring in a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' to the study of contemporary Earth spirituality, all the more so since in its popular New Age variant this kind of spirituality is predominantly an activity of middle-class Westerners with the leisure time and wallets that allow them to follow their spiritual desires to some of the more evocative landscapes on the planet. A social-constructionist reading of this phenomenon would therefore focus on such factors as the following:

- the individualism and consumerism of the postmodern spiritual marketplace;
- the culturally produced nostalgia for rural or natural places, fueled by environmentalist discourse and imagery, by the real estate market, and by the geographic imperatives of the global tourist economy;
- the suggestibility of New Age believers, a product, in part, of

6. Under this rubric I would include not only the loose category of New Age spirituality, but also women's and Goddess spirituality, creation-centered movements within the more dominant religious traditions, and numerous streams of neopaganism, so-called ethnic religions and earth-based traditional or traditionalist religions.

the mass media-precipitated decline in quality scientific education and 'critical thinking';

- and the social psychology of the New Age movement, a movement that seeks simple, 'magical' answers to difficult dilemmas in a time characterized by millennial fears and by a crisis of confidence in science and in mainstream social institutions.

The role of particular places or landscapes in this process would be a passive one: to the extent that they fit into prevailing culturally shaped notions of nature and of beauty, they serve as a backdrop for the playing out of these social forces.

In my own research, while I have found this approach fruitful, I have also found it limiting. Among other things, it fails to elucidate why New Age/Gaian *communities* persist at such places, despite the lack of the obvious factors that keep new religious movements together (e.g. a charismatic individual), and in the face of the economic pressures individuals face at these generally rural or small-town locations. Nor does it provide extensive insight into the values and motivations underlying the more committed forms of New Age and ecospiritual activity. Beyond such an obvious hermeneutic of suspicion, then, other lenses that focus on the activities and practices of these 'Gaian pilgrims' may be more fruitful for understanding how sacredness is established by New Age and Earth devotees. In what follows, I will suggest a theoretical model, drawing on ecological psychology, actor-network theory and other theories, to interpret the activities of these Earth devotees.⁷

7. An earlier version of the argument that follows was presented in Ivakhiv (2001), where I attempted to draw together the work of J.J. Gibson, Tim Ingold, Henri Lefebvre and phenomenological philosophers Edward Casey, Robert Mugerauer, and others, to develop a multi-leveled hermeneutics of place. Belden Lane has since (2001) applied such an approach to an insightful and evocative reading of the Great Medicine Wheel in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. Lane's theoretical arguments parallel mine in most respects, and articulate what I was getting at more efficiently and effectively than I did. Where my approach differs is in its emphasis on post-structuralist notions of agency and subjectivity. For Lane, poststructuralists see nature as 'essentially a projection of human language'. This may be the case for reductively Derridean textualists, but for other poststructuralists, including actor-network theorists Bruno Latour and John Law, Donna Haraway, Deleuze and Guattari, and even Foucault, it is not: the world, for them, is one in which power, desire, subjectivity, identity, and language are all intimately intertwined with materiality – including its nonhuman, 'natural' components. To my mind, these variants of post-structuralism offer a means of bringing together the strengths of the ontological, cultural and phenomenological (as Lane refers to them) approaches.

2. *The Orchestration and Enactment of Sacred Space*

In the ecological psychology developed by perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson, ecosystems are conceived in terms of the interaction between *subjects*, effective agents equipped with particular action-capabilities or 'effectivities', and *objects*, whose inherent potentials and properties render them apt for the actions and projects of subjects (cf. Ingold 1992). The environment of a given subject-organism is made up of objects that present particular 'affordances' to that organism. A rock, for instance, affords the possibilities of serving as a projectile to be thrown, a tool with which to crash a shell, a shield behind which to hide, a structural component of a larger construction, and so on.⁸ Subjects can also be objects for other subjects. Social animals live in shared environments in which inanimate objects afford possible actions, animate objects afford interactions, and socialized objects, or those recognized as 'persons', afford *proper* actions and interactions — that is, interactions constrained or mediated by the 'perceived need to present proper affordances to the other' (Reed 1988: 121). Socialization is thus 'a natural consequence of our living in a populated, animate environment, full of affordances' (117). Like tools, language and conceptual thought transform the perception of the environment and expand the effectivities of their users in specific ways. As the world offers affordances for various possible actions, interactions and proper actions, so it also presents *interpretive* affordances, which are taken up through and within linguistic and discursive practices and traditions that develop over time, and which in turn transform their environments. Perception and language, in this view, both emerge from an engagement and immersion in a world of affordances and effectivities, not in a disengaged representation and cognitive organization of data *from* the world by a subject who stands *apart* from it.

In anthropologist Tim Ingold's (1992) interpretation, this engagement between persons and environments involves a mutual process of 'production' or 'bringing forth', and 'consumption' or 'taking up': people create their environments 'in the sense that the environment is the embodiment of past activity' (50), shaped by the ways it has been appropriated and negotiated within the life-worlds of its inhabitants. As pro-

8. This concept of 'affordances' provides a way of describing an environment that is scaled to a perceiver and that entails meaning (Carello 1993: 126-27). See Gibson (1977, 1979, 1982). My usage of Gibson's work is more indebted to others who have developed his ideas, especially Ingold (1992, 2000), Carello (1993), Reed (1988), Turvey and Carello (1981) and Barwise and Perry (1983). See also Mugerauer (1985).

duction is a 'becoming of the environment' through the active labour of social beings, so consumption is a 'becoming of persons'. In Ingold's usage, the terms *production* and *consumption* are intended not to evoke a reductively productivist metaphysic, but rather the notion of metabolism at its broadest: the mutual exchange of not only nutrients but meanings as well. For humans, a landscape is not simply a backdrop for action, but 'a cognized form redolent with place names, associations and memories ...linking together topographical features, trees, rocks, rivers, birds and animals with patterns of human intentionality' (Tilley 1994: 24). The interpretive affordances of a landscape are taken up in various ways by individual subjects as well as collectives and interpretive communities, each of which appropriates them into their material and cultural practices, selectively thematizing certain affordances from out of the total array of interpretive possibilities. Organisms and environmental affordances become 'enrolled' or 'enlisted' to various degrees within the resultant networks, contributing to more or less stable or sustainable, but dynamic, relations between the various actants.⁹

Human spatial and interpretive practices, in turn, arise within the historical unfoldment of interpretive communities, which construct themselves in relation to other communities. Interpretive communities are never clearly bounded and pre-given; they are dynamic cultural achievements, with notions of identity and alterity always in process. Interpretive communities also diverge in their placement within social orders: some are more centrally aligned within spatially rooted hierarchical social relations than others, whose relatively 'deterritorialized' movement the former aim to control or dominate. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguish these in terms of the difference between 'striated', 'gridded' or 'sedentary' space, characterized by closed boundaries and ordered, segmented hierarchies and the open-ended 'smooth space' of deterritorialized and nomadic groups – characterized by a 'rhizomatic' action that moves laterally like bulbs or tubers along 'lines of flight', always in the process of becoming. In striated space, roads function 'to parcel out a closed space to people, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares'. Nomadic movement, on the other hand, inhabits the smooth space of deserts, backcountries, mountainsides and the ambiguous expanses around cities, with roads serving to 'distribute' people and animals in that open space (380; italics theirs), rearticulating socio-spatial relations, for instance, by challenging the property system through such activities as squatting. Deleuze and

9. I draw here, rather loosely, on the language of actor-network theory. See Callon (1986), Latour (1987), Callon and Latour (1992) and Law and Hassard (1999).

Guattari's distinction is useful insofar as it suggests a dialectic between *construction*, or the sedentary 'building up' of relational structures (such as kinship networks, notions of sacred and profane, or hierarchic and imperial social relations), and *distribution*, that is, the rearticulation of 'force fields' that results from movements and flows (such as the movement of pilgrims).¹⁰

Combining these ideas leads to an understanding of humans as individually and collectively immersed in more-than-human environments, with relations between them always in process, characterized by conflicts, processes of alliance-building and network-formation involving different kinds of organisms, and the ongoing production of identities and subjectivities, all taking place at a range of scales.

3. Enacting Sacred Space in Sedona, Arizona

Sedona's New Agers and Earth spiritualists engage in a variety of individual and collective activities that serve to reinforce their claims about the landscape's distinctiveness and sacrality. These activities include hiking or walking the land and visiting specific sites repeatedly with spiritual intent; cultivating a state of psychic receptivity through meditation, visualization, chanting, 'chakra activation', invocation or 'channeling' of guides or spirits; and the arrangement of stones or rocks in circular 'medicine wheels' and the conducting of ceremonies within them. New Age activities in the Sedona area tend to be centered around a series of places identified as 'earth energy vortexes' or 'vortices' – and maps of the main 'vortexes' are readily available in metaphysical bookstores, and even at the Chamber of Commerce, for the asking.

By celebrating specific events associated with a New Age calendar, such as the Harmonic Convergence (16–17 August 1988) or significant 'stargate' dates at particular sites, New Agers attempt to bring them into the sacred time and space by which they are striving to live. A more intensive use of the land occurs in the building of medicine wheels at specific sites, both for individual purposes and for collective ceremonial uses. Rather than being taken apart after use, as some claim would be a more traditional practice, medicine wheels in Sedona are often left in place after their use; and sometimes tobacco, coins, pine cones or other personal offerings are left behind as well.¹¹ The construction of the

10. This duality is more or less analogous to that identified by the scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) as *locative*, closed or centripetal and, in contrast, the *utopian*, open or centrifugal views of the world.

11. Medicine wheels are modeled after a Plains Indian practice. Space does not

medicine wheel on Schnebly Hill, just outside town, in the late 1980s proved to be the first of a series of conflicts between New Age believers and Forest Service rangers. The circular stone formation was reportedly dismantled several times in succession by the Forest Service, but, as New Age author Richard Dannelley (1993: 51) recounts, 'the rocks always managed to "find their way" back into place rather quickly'. Some New Agers have lamented the Forest Service's apparent 'vendetta' against them; but others see the hand of developers or overzealous Christian fundamentalists behind such actions. Similar controversies have surrounded other prominent medicine wheels in the area. In disallowing these activities, the Forest Service argues that the building of medicine wheels, large or small, violates the regulation against building any structures on public lands (and even rearranging rocks into a circle or piling them into cairns constitutes a 'man-made structure' by their definition). Such structures and shrines become focal points for practitioners and the curious, leading to heavier use of the area, with the result that vegetation is trampled and erosion occurs. Finally, the Forest Service argues that allowing a religiously motivated group to build anything could be perceived as favouritism unless other religious groups are allowed to do the same.

In this context, the building of medicine wheels would seem to be an actual form of the literal *construction* of landscape. Medicine wheels, however, are perceived by their builders not as constructions, but as rearrangements of elements in ways that echo or supplement the flow of energy in the landscape. One of the leaders of the gatherings known as Encampments, held biannually in the Sedona area, explained to me that the nature of the ceremonies performed at them has to do with 'working with the energy of the Earth'.

There's a certain vibration that the Earth has, literally, and when we all get attuned to that vibration, we're all on the same wavelength. [The ceremony] doesn't derive its validity from any tradition or from any Elder guidance. It derives its validity from the energy of the Earth itself. When the ceremonies work, the energy increases; when they don't, it doesn't.

Discussing the Schnebly Hill Medicine Wheel, this local geomancer continued:

We built that thing...to heal a huge ley-line up there... A lot of people resented that because we were outsiders. And I don't blame them. But that was what we were guided to [do]. [...] It was a big ley line coming from

allow me to discuss the complicated issue of cultural appropriation, but suffice it to say that the appropriation of Native American spirituality is writ large across the landscape of New Age Sedona (see Ivakhiv 2001: 178-79, 193-97, 278-79).

one fault going over to another. [Note: There are two fault lines in the Schnebly Hill area.] And it was just flat broken. [...] And there was one tree that held the ley line. [...] The reason the wheel was so big was not because somebody [...] wanted it to be big [...]—it needed to be big enough to encompass how wide the ley line was. [...] So it was determined by the energy. [...] And the pattern [had been] a vision. [...] Well, later I read that there was *supposed* to be a man-made vortex made in Schnebly Hill. And thousands of people had come to that place. They still do.

The Schnebly Hill ceremonies unfolded over a cycle of 'wheels' (four each for banishing or purification, balance, blessing and beauty) performed in the morning, noon, evening and night on a series of 13 days that culminated on the day of the Harmonic Convergence. With their number of participants growing from a handful to some 75 or 80 at the final ceremony, the process, according to this informant, was so 'powerful' that 'after a while, that's all we lived for—just to do those ceremonies. [...] It was transformative'.

In the view of those who constructed the Schnebly Hill medicine wheel, then, even this object was perceived not as a construction but as a form of participation within an active and dynamic landscape. In the process of rearranging that landscape, even in the most minimal way, Sedona's ecospiritualists enlist the rocks themselves as well as the energies of the Earth into their networks—though these network-building efforts take place against a background of a series of competing ones, including those of the Forest Service and other local groups. The idea of a flowing Earth energy to which humans can (and ought to) respond is an *idea*—a social construct—but it is a construct that is, in part, built up through repeated encounters and embodied interactions with actual landscapes and the beings and processes that make them up. It is that interaction over time that enables a sense of awe, mystery, 'magic' or 'sacredness' to *unfold* for at least the more committed of ecospiritual believers, and which, when shared with others over time, can 'anchor' alternative interpretations of the land within an actual material landscape.

In the case of pilgrimage activities more broadly, this embodied encounter of a landscape may include the movements and physical exertion needed to maneuver one's way through its topography, climbing its hills or buttes; the changing visual, auditory, olfactory and kinesthetic qualities at different stages of a pilgrimage route or climb; the colours, shapes, textures and other physical qualities of the landscape; the temporal or durational factor, as one prepares to visit a sacred site and undergoes the process of journeying, expectation and desire, encountering the site, conducting a ritual performance, meditation or 'attunement'

of some sort, and returning home; and all of these factors and qualities as they change over daily, seasonal and annual cycles. Over time, this experiential and interpretive data collects and is sedimented within the interpretive communities for whom the place is held to be sacred. As such a community becomes more firmly anchored within the landscape, its interpretations take on an increasing matter-of-factness for its members.

In Sedona, the qualities of the rockscapes – their textures (smoothness alternating with rough and jagged shapes and forms), colours and shapes – combine to create an ambiguously evocative landscape that seems to *call for* some sort of interpretation or meaningful image-creation, rather like a Rorschach ink-blot. The solidity, monumentality and jagged surface of the rocks evoke qualities associated with ancientness (e.g. ancient temples, ‘ancient Indian’ faces). Within Sedona one feels cradled, even dwarfed, by the red rock landscape. There is a monumentality to the landscape, as if it contains a web of powerful ciphers or hieroglyphics, giant rock sentinels beaming out signals to some extra-terrestrial observer. Maneuvering one’s way through the folds of the earth’s surface here, what becomes clear is that the landscape is not so much a unity, with any particular *center*, as it is a mosaic of shifting forms – a multiplicity of overlapping landscapes, canyons and riverine valleys, ridges and rock formations of the most unexpected shapes, all extending outward well beyond the city. The sense of *presence* of the red rock ‘giants’, their invigorating reds, pinks and coppers, the unmapped Native American pictographs, the grand vistas upon the ascent to a ledge, overlook or top of a rock formation, and the encounters with animals and birds (coyotes, bobcats and others), all provide primary material for an excess of interpretive productivity.

The sacralization of such a landscape can be considered a form of construction, then, in the sense of *construction as an active verb* – a form of bricolage, whereby humans shape, and also participate, in a world of material objects as well as texts, power relations and flows of desire in addition to sociopolitical and institutional structures. It is, more properly, a form of attempted orchestrations, enrollments and enlistments, performances and negotiations, spatial practices that delineate between different kinds of spaces as well as times (sacred and profane ones, for instance), a process that rarely achieves the sense of reified completion suggested by the term *construction*, but which rather involves the polyphonic enactment of performances and responses, resistances and counterpoints. It is a form of negotiation or dialogue – not so much a dialogue of voices (though Sedona’s famous ‘channelers’ give free rein to voices imagined or heard on their open cosmic bandwidths) as of bodies

and desires, a giving and taking from a world within which humans find themselves immersed. Rather than being simply imposed onto pre-existing landscapes, religious meanings may, in part, emerge reciprocally with landscapes, cultures and practices, involving not only human agents but other forms of agency as well.

This is, at least, what Sedona's New Agers assert, and what is asserted by religious believers of nearly all traditions and denominations: that part of what is of utmost importance is the encounter, dialogue or relationship between us humans and an extrahuman realm.

4. Conclusion

I have been suggesting that this process of dialogic interaction, performative enactment and orchestration of sacred space necessarily includes nonhuman forms of agency. I will conclude by saying a few words about the most generalized sense in which the nonhuman participates in human sacral-spatial activities.

In the most general, material sense, there is *something*—an object or landscape feature—at the center of the spatialized sacred landscape. But it would be a mistake to identify the 'something' too quickly, if only because all our understandings of the place are always already enmeshed within interpretive traditions. Consider Mount Shasta in northern California: a mountain that had been considered sacred by several Native American tribes long before Europeans arrived, and which in the past two centuries has become a magnet for a multitude of mystical and metaphysical groups. To say that the 'essence' that lies behind this particular phenomenon, underlying all its cultural interpretations, is a *mountain* is, in effect, saying little. It is a *particular* mountain, whose appearance dominates the horizon of a large part of northern California, whose broad, snow-covered peak takes on particular qualities at particular times of day and year (e.g. a hovering white 'ghost' overlooking a green summer landscape, a 'benevolent presence', etc.). But even the supposedly neutral term 'mountain' already privileges a reading of it as a physical thing-in-itself, something that speakers of English (and European languages) recognize as sharing in the quality of *mountainness*—not a social or spiritual being whom one might fear or revere, nor a pillar of the world whose presence is axial to the well-being of all things, but simply a large mass of rock, formed through the blind action of geological forces for no reason in particular. The language we use to describe the world, in other words, projects an epistemic grasp over that world, encompassing it into a particular formation of power/knowledge; and in the epistemic world-picture embodied within this ostensibly

'neutral' physicalist language of mountains and other objects, sacredness would seem to be ruled out, except as a quirk of cultural perception.

To understand the 'sacredness' and the mystical allure of a site such as Mount Shasta or the red rocks of Sedona, it is important that we attempt to bracket out, or at least become aware of, the unspoken metaphysical presuppositions encoded in our language. Such a site may be a social and cultural construct – a culturally meaningful place – and a site for the working out of various cultural, social and ecological relations. But it is also an opening onto a dimension of otherness, an ever-elusive, trickster-like *more* that eludes the grasp of systematic and objective knowledge. It is important that such openings onto otherness be left *open*, not be closed off by way of a reification to some pre-given essence, or a reduction to ideology, social relations, or some other explanatory principle. Such explanations are our interpretive orchestrations, into which we enroll the actants present in the landscape that is open to our interpretation. But the Open, or, as Heidegger might call it, the unconcealed, always remains only one face of the world, or Earth, whose Being persists in its never fully knowable multiplicity. Adequately understanding such sacred landscapes, then, requires *both* a hermeneutics of suspicion *and* a hermeneutics of faith, where the faith consists in an openness to the undeconstructible and in a refusal to submit it to reduction.

In what J.Z. Smith (1978: 93) calls an 'uncharacteristic moment', Mircea Eliade defines the 'principle function of religion' as:

that of maintaining an 'opening' toward a world which is superhuman, the world of axiomatic spiritual values... It is this experience of the sacred, that is, the meeting with a transhuman reality, that generates the idea of something which *really* exists and, in consequence, the notion that there are absolute, intangible values which confer a meaning upon human existence (cited in Smith 1978: 94).

I wish to suggest that, contrary to Eliade's constructivist critics, this 'opening' to the transhuman is an important, if not all that spectacular, insight. Eliade runs away with the insight, perhaps, by positing all meaning on the other side of the divide between humans and the transhuman; but this second step is hardly necessitated by the first step – which is simply recognizing that there is a transhuman world that plays an active role in the 'construction', or rather performative enactment and negotiated orchestration of landscapes.

The value of social constructionism lies in its admission of human responsibility for our beliefs, our actions, our ideologies and social systems. The risk, however, is that it leaves us with a world in which the only agent is humanity. But in the real world, as New Agers and Earth

devotees perhaps intuit at some level, but as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and sundry other natural events are perpetually reminding us, agency is much more diffuse, multiplicitous and elusive than that.

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