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Introduction: Arborphilia through the Ages

When I was in graduate school I ran marathons and, to avoid the worst of the polluted air, in Pasadena, which is adjacent to Los Angeles in California. I would usually arise and be on the road before dawn. I often ran in the Arroyo Seco, a canyon through which the Los Angeles River had been channelized in cement as a flood control measure.

One misty early morning while descending into the canyon near the famous Rose Bowl stadium, I had the impression that the trees, shimmering in a light breeze, were communicating with me. They were saying, not audibly as spoken words, but more as thoughts that were coming into my mind, that they were working hard, doing everything they could, to overcome our polluting ways by purifying the air. There was an ethical implication I perceived too: that we should repent our injurious ways and learn our planetary manners.

I had an active imagination.

At least, that is the way I reflect on the experience today, wondering about the brain chemistry involved in what some have called the runners' high, or whether that perception is an example of the 'hyperactive agency detection device' postulated to explain belief in conscious agents in nature that do not in fact exist, but that there is no evolutionary penalty for perceiving; better to over-detect than under-detect agency in nature when some of it is predatory (Guthrie 1993; Barrett 2000).

What if, rather, what I experienced was a rare moment of spiritual insight into the exotic intelligence and communicative ability of trees?

Maybe the experience was in some way a result of my own long-term arborphilia—which can be defined as a friendly or loving feeling toward trees. I had, after all, spent many of my young primate hours swinging high in trees. Perhaps this made me open to communion and communication with them.

There have, in fact, been no few number of environmentalist scholars and activists who contend that open-hearted people can cultivate just such spiritual perception (Naess 1983; Abram 1996, 2005). As Gary Snyder once told me during an interview when describing animistic perception,

> Do you know how things communicate with you? They don't talk to you directly, but you hear a different song in your head… It's not that animals come up and say something in English in your ear. You know, it's that things come into your mind (in Taylor 1995: 113).

The trick, Snyder continued, is learning to discern when one is being given a gift of communication from beyond oneself, and when one's thoughts are one's own.

Today, any confidence in this regard is far beyond my ken. What I know for sure, however, is that many people have experiences of connection, communion, and kinship with organisms who are not human, and that such experiences are not uncommon for our species.

Indeed, I have often found such perceptions and feelings among ardent environmentalists—the deeper people probe the reasons for their passions, the more often it seems they have had such experiences. I have written about such things elsewhere; I need not belabor them here (Taylor 1991, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013a, 2013c). Instead I can segue into an introduction of this special issue, another that takes arborphilia as central to its explorations (see also my Editor's Introduction in Taylor 2013b).

The *JSRNC*'s managing editor, Joy Greenberg, leads off with two fascinating articles that, taken together, explore arborphilia in its depth and diversity in both ancient and contemporary worlds.[1] The next article provides a mixed-methods study of contemporary Druidry by Kimberly Kirner, which illuminates the relationships Western Druids have with trees and other fauna and the ethical understandings that are entwined with their perceptions and practices. In the final featured article Emma Stone takes an ethnographic approach as she examines the relationships, perceptions, and spiritual practices that participants in the Afro-Brazilian religion of Umbanda have with trees and other fauna, and reasons that such religion is a means through which some Brazilians sacralise and find healing and meaning in nature.

1. The *JSRNC* is a peer-reviewed journal in which external evaluators do not know the identity of the author and vice versa. When members of the *JSRNC* editorial team submit their work we take special measures to ensure that reviewer anonymity is maintained, and we never publish such submissions without strong positive reviews from them.

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