



Sense and Consent in Cocreating with Earth Others

HARLAN MOREHOUSE

Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Vermont, USA

CHERYL MORSE

Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Vermont, USA

Abstract Recent debates around multispecies communities emphasize collaboration across difference for fostering intimate relations with the world. The basic premise is simple: a richer understanding of the ways in which we are connected to the world will yield greater care for the world. However, while collaboration across difference might close conceptual and material gaps between self and other, and nature and society, it is not always clear whether or how collaboration should take place. Indeed, largely absent in these debates are matters concerning cross-species consent. It can be challenging to obtain consent or ascertain agreement in the absence of straightforward communication. To address the whether and how of collaboration across difference, this article draws on ethnographic research on dowsing—a traditional method for finding underground water and other invisible or intangible resources—in the United States and the United Kingdom. This research shows how dowsers establish dialogue by attuning to Earth Others (e.g., water, plants, spirits) using various tools, such as dowsing rods, pendulums, and their own bodies. This article addresses how practitioners apply dowsing as a technique for communicating across human and more-than-human divides through ethical inquiries that tend to the agency and seek the consent of Earth Others in matters concerning land use. This research suggests that dowsing offers a reciprocal and dialogic strategy for collaborating with that which is often unseen, unheard, or ignored.

Keywords more-than-human communication, collaboration, ethics, consent, dowsing

Introduction

Despite living on their land for several decades Aaron and Phyllis never enjoyed a full harvest from their seven mature cherry trees in Charlotte, Vermont. Each year, birds ate the cherries before they had a chance to gather them. Wanting to enjoy a harvest of the tart fruits at least once, the couple invited a dowser, Gerald, to see if he could establish dialogue with the birds to communicate Aaron and Phyllis's wishes. Gerald arrived, settled into position amid the cherry trees and explained the couple's dilemma to the birds. It's understandable, Gerald reasoned, that they would want to feast on the cherries,

but so did the humans. Since Aaron and Phyllis were unable to safely climb ladders, they would be willing to grant the birds full access to the out-of-reach cherries. Would the birds, inquired Gerald, accept this deal? After some back-and-forth clarification of interests and terms, the birds agreed and would leave the lower cherries untouched. That summer, Aaron and Phyllis harvested cherries for the first time. In an interview about his work as a dowser, Gerald located the origins of his cross-species communication skills in his family's multigenerational history of divinatory practices. He mentioned his mother used the same method in her orchard in Scotland. She would designate specific fruit trees the birds could have on the condition they leave the remaining trees for humans. These giveaway plants, as Gerald called them, were switched each year in a process that required a yearly contract renewal and dialogue between humans and birds.

Our research with dowsers—people who use intentional methods to communicate with more-than-humans—explores strategies of working with, rather than over Earth Others. Drawing on stories from dowsers, this article examines techniques of communication and cocreation that blend human and more-than-human agencies, energetic presences, and spiritualities.¹ We address strategies dowsers use to communicate with that which is often overlooked or unseen—whether animal, vegetable, mineral, or otherwise. As geographers we are also interested in dowsing as an embodied practice for sensing place, involving ways of knowing that require attunement to other-than-human worlds. Further, in describing how dowsers adhere to a code of ethics in their engagements with Earth Others, this article suggests that obtaining consent is a crucial, but overlooked, step in fostering relations with worlds beyond humans.

Animacy and Sentience in Context

Our interest in examining dowsing is, in part, informed by long-standing debates in cultural anthropology around animism and recent scholarship on other-than-human intelligence. Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* frames animism as “an idea of pervading life and will in nature far outside modern limits, a belief in personal souls animating even what we call inanimate bodies.”² Though Tylor has been thoroughly critiqued for his use of a civilized/primitive dichotomy, variations of Tylorean perspectives have been carried through subsequent engagements with animism.³ Irving A. Hallowell's examinations

1. In this article *collaboration* and *cocreation* are used interchangeably. The former term is more common among the literatures we cite, whereas the latter term is more common among interviewees. Subtle differences aside, both invoke notions of working-with and creating-with.

2. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 260.

3. Bird-David emphasizes animisms-in-plural over a singular animism in her critical engagement with Tylor. See Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” S69. See also Halbmayer, “Debating Animism, Perspectivism, and the Construction of Ontologies”; Stringer, “Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of Our Discipline”; Willerslev, “Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps Not Too Seriously?”

of Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) ontologies emphasize extensions of personhood to some but not all more-than-humans—a function of animacy within Anishinaabe grammar.⁴ Similar perspectives are taken up in Tim Ingold’s work around circumpolar cosmologies, wherein Ingold suggests that “the world is not an external domain of objects that I look at, or do things to, but is rather going on, or undergoing continuous generation, with me and around me.”⁵ Ingold’s relational approach is also expressed through rethinking what is typically understood by intelligence. For Ingold, intelligence is “immanent in the total system of perception and action constituted by the co-presence of the human and the tree within a wider environment.”⁶ This distribution of intelligence resonates with Gregory Bateson’s declaration that “the mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin.”⁷ In a parallel vein, Eduardo Kohn’s semiotic approach in *How Forests Think* proceeds along a Peircean framework focusing on the distribution of meaningful signs beyond the human. As Kohn argues, “What we share with nonhuman living creatures . . . is not our embodiment . . . but the fact that we all live with and through signs.”⁸

Many dowsers we met attribute communicative agency to Earth Others. They do so in a manner that recalls long-standing debates in anthropology as well as Jane Bennett’s “vital materialism,” which seeks to “uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances” through recognitions of, and engagements with, nonhuman agency.⁹ We also recall Mabel Denzin Gergan’s advice to “be wary of the tendency within [materialist and posthumanist] scholarship which in one instance acknowledges trash as lively, yet, in another, dismisses people’s insistence on a mountain’s sentience or the agency of other worldly spirits.”¹⁰ Dowsers seek material outcomes by attuning to the resonances of Earth Others, be they animate or inanimate, wild or domesticated, visible or invisible, mundane or rare. Further, the dowsers we met take matters beyond agency in their recognition of Earth Other spirituality. The things of this world do not merely exist and act, they also think, feel, and are open to dialogue in the right circumstances. Moving beyond agency to recognize spirituality opens the world and expands the ranks of what might qualify as a more-than-human or an Earth Other.

In this article we use energetic presence and spirituality rather than intelligence, the latter of which is more commonly applied in discourses pertaining to other-than-human sentience and capacity for communication. In our research we found that, when interacting with Earth Others, our interviewees described their practices as attuning to energies, energetic fields, energetic presence, spirits, spirituality, and so on more than

4. Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology.”

5. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 108.

6. In Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited,” S82.

7. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 429.

8. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 9.

9. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

10. Gergan, “Animating the Sacred,” 270.

engaging with Earth Others on the basis of legible intelligence. While *energetic presence* or *spirituality* do not preclude the possession of intelligence, our usage of the former two terms is in keeping with the words of our interviewees.

What, then, is included in the category Earth Others? As one dowser, Trish, put it: “Everything has a consciousness and needs to be respected and honored.” It is, in other words, a broad category including such things as trees, honeybees, tomato plants, and gnomes. It also includes water, rocks, and other ostensibly abiotic entities (including cell phones and car keys) not often viewed as agentic, much less spiritual. Anything, really, that retains an energetic resonance is included. Given the inclusive nature of this category we are reluctant to identify an ontology of Earth Others. Indeed, dowsers tend to resist a strict materialist framing by disrupting preconceived boundaries between matter and spirituality. For dowsers, this is a productive disruption with far-reaching implications for who or what might be communicated with.

For example, Colin, a UK-based dowser told us: “I know [it sounds] crazy, but you can speak to rocks. I mean you can! If you ask it a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question, you get an answer.” By some measures, it might sound crazy. But such measures are limited by their refusal to recognize agentic and spiritual capacities that cut across human-nonhuman and biotic-abiotic divides. As Kath Weston puts it, “It is not easy to convey to people heavily invested in Euro-American conceptions of dead matter what it means to live in a world where trees ruminate, baskets talk, ancestral spirits inhabit palisade fortifications, elk decide whether to offer themselves to the hunter.”¹¹ We argue it is precisely at the juncture where ossified categories shed their rigidity that possibilities for enacting relations with Earth Others take hold. As Lauren Greyson puts it, “Wonder and enchantment often ‘happen’ at precisely the moment that an object is revealed as possessing agentic capacities. In these instances, the boundaries are redrawn.”¹²

Inspired by Val Plumwood’s “philosophical animism,” which rests on “recognition of personhood beyond humans and the centrality of relationships,” we view this redrawing of boundaries as a necessary step in fostering relations among humans and other-than-humans.¹³ In seeking to understand and contextualize dowsing, we take seriously Plumwood’s entreaty to “question systems of thought that confine agency to a human or human-like consciousness and refuse to acknowledge the creativity of earth others.”¹⁴ Further, our decision to use the phrase *Earth Others* is inspired by Plumwood’s emphasis on “recognising earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects [as] crucial for all ethical, collaborative, communicative and mutualistic projects, as well as for place sensitivity.”¹⁵ Recognizing agency and intelligence beyond anthropocentric boundaries

11. Weston, *Animate Planet*, 25.

12. Greyson, *Vital Reenchantments*, 72.

13. Rose, “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism,” 96.

14. Plumwood, “Concept of a Cultural Landscape,” 117.

15. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 175.

facilitates what our research subjects often referred to as cocreation—a dialogic engagement nourished through collaboration across human and other-than-human divides. It facilitates communication across difference, recalling Plumwood’s statement, “Perhaps the most important task for human beings is not to search the stars to converse with cosmic beings but to learn to communicate with the other species that share this planet with us.”¹⁶ Further, dialogic engagement permits us, as Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose put it, “to develop and tell our own stories in ways that are open to other ways of constituting, of responding to and in a living world.”¹⁷

Yet, at risk of introducing a moralistic dimension, neither cocreation nor dialogue are value-neutral; there is such a thing as responsible engagement that embraces experimentation while minimizing harm. Those advocating for multispecies ethnography have argued more-than-human beings are in constant communication among themselves and with humans, and further, these dialogues rest on responsiveness among all actors.¹⁸ Yet there has been little dedicated discussion on the matter of consent when collaborating with more-than-humans. Put differently, while there is no lack of rich, insightful, and inspiring accounts addressing the imperative to collaborate by “working across difference,” as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing puts it, there is little discussion of the how and whether of collaboration.¹⁹ Indeed, if philosophical animism rests on recognition of personhood, dialogue, and reciprocity, why is there so little discussion of what happens to collaborations when an other-than-human says “No”?²⁰ Our inquiry, then, is as much about ethical approaches to collaboration and cocreation as it is about the theoretical and experiential richness that might result from such ventures. In what follows, we draw from interactions with dowsers to put forward a theory of other-than-human collaboration attendant to ethical and consent-based practices.

Research Methods

This article draws from over three years of collaborative qualitative field research conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom. Our aim was to understand how individuals use dowsing to interact with specific places and landscapes. We sought to learn dowsers’ methods, why they dowse, and how they use this practice to engage with environmental matters, such as finding water, siting gardens, or solving general geographical questions. We employed participant observation methods at several dowsing workshops in our home state of Vermont to learn how dowsing is taught and for what applications it is used, and to become familiar with the practice ourselves. Further, we

16. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 193.

17. Van Dooren and Rose, “Lively Ethnography,” 85.

18. See Jørgensen and Ginn, “Environmental Humanities”; Macpherson, “Art, Trees, and the Enchantment”; Reinert, “About a Stone”; Rose et al., “Thinking through the Environment”; Tsing, “Unruly Edges”; van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, “Multispecies Studies.”

19. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 28.

20. See Rose, “Dialogue,” 127–31.

conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen dowsers, some of them multiple times. In several of these interviews we observed how dowsers work. We used the snowball method for developing contacts: interviewees suggested names of other dowsers. The contacts we developed in Vermont led us to contacts elsewhere in the United States and the United Kingdom. All interviews were conducted in person. Our interviewees included people who make a living from dowsing or geomancy work and people who casually dowse for themselves or friends. The participants included eight men and six women, all presenting as white, who came from numerous working backgrounds.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Field notes from workshops and field experiences were typed into documents. Transcripts and field notes were then analyzed and coded to identify key themes by a team consisting of the lead authors and student research assistants. The insights in this article emerge from our engagement in dowsing and conversations with dowsers. We use the language they use to describe their practices. All names used here are pseudonyms. This research was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

What Is Dowsing?

In basic terms, dowsing involves the use of a handheld instrument, or sometimes just the body, to search for information or an object, and/or to receive a “yes” or “no” answer to a specific question. A dowser will loosely hold a set of bent brass rods, for example, which might flare out for a “yes” and turn inward for a “no” when prompted by a specific question, like “Is there water below ground at this location?” A single dowsing rod might point in the direction of misplaced keys, if you ask. Or it can help to determine what nutrients tomato plants need. Dowsing instruments are simple in design and easily accessible: Y-shaped willow branches, L-shaped brass rods, bent wires, or pendulums that range from a slender necklace chain attached to a crystal, to a length of twine tied to a steel nut. Simplicity and accessibility suggest a couple of features of dowsing. First, dowsing does not require significant financial investment; one can cobble together dowsing tools from scraps lying about a barn or from odds and ends found in a coat pocket. Second, the quality of the tools doesn't matter much. Sure, the dowsers we interviewed had their favorite instruments, but give them a couple of crooked coat hangers and they'll make do. No special attachment is afforded to the tools because the tools themselves don't detect anything. Rather, they function as “read-out devices” roughly analogous to a radio tuner.²¹

Dowsing has long been applied to various uses in many locations. Central European prospectors used dowsing to locate minerals and ores as early as the fifteenth century.²² There is evidence of dowsing for water, ores, treasure, and any number of hidden things across Europe and Britain following that period. Historians suggest dowsing

21. Herbert, “Fruitful Search,” 45.

22. See Dym, “Scholars and Miners”; Kalb, “Dowsing Debate.”

traveled with European colonizers to new locations around the world.²³ In his account of German efforts to find water in Southwest Africa in the early twentieth century, Martin Kalb argues dowsing served as a tool for colonization. While Kalb's study centers on the German government's formal support for dowsing as a technology, in most cases it seems that dowsing has operated as a folk science passed from person to person.²⁴ This is reflected among our research participants, who learned dowsing from strangers, acquaintances, family members, and farmers, as well as in small workshops.

The premises and efficacy of dowsing have been challenged by scientists since the Enlightenment.²⁵ It is considered a form of divination and therefore may have been associated with witchcraft in various times and places.²⁶ One of our research participants shared that earlier generations of his family were dowzers and energy workers, but until Britain officially ended its witchcraft laws in the mid-twentieth century, his family did not openly practice these skills. The fact that dowsing has been treated as irrational at best and evil at worst may explain how some of the dowzers we met learned and perform their craft, and why dowsing remains largely decentralized.

To exemplify dowsing's diverse applications and conceptual framings, we share two brief stories from two individuals in our study, Larry and Trish. Taken together, they offer a sense of contemporary dowsing's range of applications.

Larry, a conventional livestock farmer and self-taught dowser, told us about his efforts to find a missing tractor spring. After several unsuccessful attempts with a magnet, Larry recounted, "I crawled around the grass [because] I needed that spring. So, I went and got my dowsing rods and sure enough! I mean this thing was probably ten feet away in the grass in the field. And I found that little, tiny spring. It shocked the heck out of me that I . . . was actually able to find that thing." Larry offered no explanation for how or why dowsing worked; it simply helped him find things he could not see. For Larry, dowsing is a practical tool to solve everyday problems.

Trish, a biodynamic farmer, first learned to dowse from a roommate. Later, she attended dowsing workshops. She uses dowsing in her farming work and for healing purposes. As she described it:

I feel like where I went [while dowsing] I was kind of healing this little piece of the land, healing that little piece of the land. It was all about relationships. I was doing it for me, but I was also doing it for the energy spirits that were there, that needed connection. I feel like I'm touching little things where I go. You touch, you make a flower. . . . You know, I guess I

23. See Bird, *Divining Hand*; Dym, "Scholars and Miners"; Dym, *Divining Science*; Kalb, "Dowsing Debate"; Pass, "Material Evidence"; Vogt and Hyman, *Water Witching USA*.

24. Pass, "Material Evidence," 267.

25. See Bird, *Divining Hand*; Dym, *Divining Science*.

26. Dym asserts that while dowsing came under suspicion as a form of witchcraft in the seventeenth century in Germany, its advocates distinguished it from witchcraft because of its application in mining, then a mostly male practice (*Divining Science*, 133).

kind of think of myself as being a steward of the land. . . . Being involved in the healing process. But, as I'm doing that, there's no place where I can separate myself from the experience and from the land itself.

For Trish, dowsing's applications extend beyond locating lost items to seeking outcomes by engaging energetic presences. Trish's approach was shared by many dowsers we met. Our interviewees spoke of using dowsing to check in with gnomes and fairies and to ask the spirit of a place where to site a new home. Some apply dowsing for health and healing, as one dowser did when he "tuned down" the energy of water so his dying sister could drink it to extend her life. Others apply the same principles to help land heal from past traumas associated with clear-cutting, pollution, or death. The range of applications for which dowsing is used and the varying philosophies and worldviews held by the dowsers we met lead us to agree with Jonathan Woolley's position that dowsing is a practice, not a belief system.²⁷

Our central research focus is on dowsing as an ethical practice. At the outset of this research, we decided to not ask interviewees how, why, or if dowsing works. Instead, we chose to go with dowsers to learn how they use dowsing to engage with the environment. The dowsers we interviewed came from different religious backgrounds. While we found a common set of practices associated with dowsing, we did not uncover a unifying belief system. Many did not mention any religious belief. Yet most seemed to share an understanding that dowsing fosters intimate relations with nonhumans. They also shared a common ethical framework for best practices in dowsing. This article focuses on what can be learned about human and more-than-human cocreation from this ethical framework.

Though our interests lie in identifying practices that facilitate Earth Other communication and cocreation, let us not assume the world is a human playground. To do so would foreground anthropocentric conceit and undermine a basis for cocreation. The question whether we—as researchers, collaborators, cocreators—are welcome is never a given. Who is to say whether a forest wants to be mapped or an ocean wishes to be heard?²⁸ How, then, might we determine whether we are welcome in places whose agencies are often ignored and whose voices are often unheard? How do we position ourselves, our interests, and agendas not as commands projected onto the world but rather as invitations to "make worlds"?²⁹ And, in the spirit of invitation, how might we sense refusal and be willing to walk away untroubled by a "no"?

Among the dowsers we interviewed, such questions are central. In what follows we examine procedures dowsers perform before dowsing to ensure their quest is in, as many dowsers phrased it, "the highest good for all concerned." From this we glean

27. Woolley, "Wires Crossed."

28. See Kanngieser, "Listening as Taking-Leave."

29. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

insights about ethical collaboration and cocreation. Each dowser we interviewed insisted on a set of initial procedures, often referred to as “the protocol,” which prepared body and mind for a successful dowsing quest. Though each dowser might personalize the protocol, it is commonly reduced to three simple questions: Can I? May I? Should I? These questions are posed at the outset of a dowsing quest, no matter how extraordinary or mundane the objective. If a dowser wishes to communicate with the spirit of an oak tree, they will first ask these three questions. If a dowser is trying to locate misplaced car keys, the same procedure applies. And, perhaps most important, should a dowser receive a firm “no” in response to any of these questions, they must stop. As Julia, a UK-based dowser put it, “So I ask: ‘Can I? May I? Should I?’ I always ask, ‘Is it for the highest good of all concerned, is it safe for all concerned, is it timely, and is it appropriate?’ And there may be other checks that I do with different things, but basically if you’re told ‘No,’ don’t go dowsing.” Julia’s position is representative of other dowsers’ approaches. In the following sections we provide detail about each question and how, when considered together, they offer insights on consent-based cocreations.

Can I?

A simple question, but one that involves complex matters pertaining to self-assessment, ego, and attunement, “Can I?” is another way of asking “Am I able?” or “Do I possess the required skills to proceed?” The adage “Fake it ’til you make it” is irresponsible when considering whether and to what extent collaborative practices carry risks to self and others. Thus, at the outset of a dowsing quest, the practitioner will ask this simple question about skills appropriate to the task at hand. Holding a pendulum or a set of rods, the question “Can I?” is posed: A “yes” reply—indicated by a specific movement of the sensing instrument unique to the dowser—permits the dowser to move onto the next stage, which we discuss below. A “no” reply, however, yields different options. Most directly, a “no” might require the dowser to set aside their task, allowing the Other to determine the whether of cocreation. “Can I?” “No.” “Okay, then I won’t proceed.” Indirectly, a dowser can ask a follow-up question. “Can I?” “No.” “Do I possess the required skills?” A negative reply here might mean that the dowser has more to learn and should consider asking a more experienced dowser to take over.

But what if, following a negative reply to “Can I?” the answer to “Do I possess the required skills?” is a “yes?” According to James, this would indicate a block or interference caused by negative energy. James recounted how when dowsing in the presence of clients, if an observer had doubts about dowsing’s legitimacy it could disrupt communication. This disruption would need to be cleared by placing the negative energy in a box and setting it aside.

Sometimes interference is caused by the dowser’s ego. As Jane, a dowser and labyrinth-maker, put it, “The ego cannot dowse. . . . So, when you feel your ego coming up, don’t dowse, go have a cup of coffee, go read a book, go do something, ’cause the ego is really not connected to the wave form [energies].” Jane’s sentiment is shared

among many dowers we interviewed, for whom setting aside ego and immediate desires is an essential step. This is not to suggest their approaches to dowsing are without desire but rather that ego-driven desire was often framed as a potential misuse of dowsing. As James succinctly put it, “Always for need, never for greed.” Dowsing for winning lottery numbers, for example, would constitute greed and run counter to ethical practice. Dowsing for water during a drought, however, would constitute need and thus be in accordance with dowsing’s ethical principles. Leading with ego centers individual desire amid relations between dowser and Other. Ego, thus, runs counter to collaborative and cocreative aspects of dowsing and must be addressed at the outset by setting aside personal desire in deference to mutualistic relations.

Another potential block to “Can I?” concerns bodily attunement. A dowser might start with a distracted mind and restless body, which draws them away from the task at hand. Moving through dowsing’s initial stages requires the dowser to assess the degree to which they are attuned to proximate worlds, whether seen or unseen. For many dowers, this is a crucial step as dowsing is a deeply embodied process. As Trish put it, “[Dowsing] is a lot about opening up your senses. Opening up that intuition. Being able to stop and listen to the subtle messages that are coming at us all the time.” Similarly for James, attunement is addressed via the question “Am I clear?” Though simple, James’s question aims to integrate one’s body with proximate worlds. Receiving a “yes” answer to the question “Am I clear?” suggests that one is adequately attuned and can proceed, whereas a “no” requires techniques for further attunement to align mind and body with its material and spiritual surroundings.

Our field notes identify the following techniques for a quick energy adjustment: (1) hydrate; (2) zip up by tracing a line from your pubic bone to your lips; (3) trace lines with your index fingers under your collar bones; (4) touch your upper lip and your tailbone at the same time; (5) hug a tree. These gestures bring attention to the body and heighten its capacities for attunement. They also illustrate that an initial yes/no question is often followed by a set of more precisely worded questions, and in this way, the dowser adjusts to Earth Other responses by generating additional questions and dialogue. Further, these gestures help a dowser to interpret replies, which are communicated through a sensing instrument or the body.

For Trish, who can dowse without instruments (body dowsing), the body already knows. She describes the feeling of receiving a yes or no answer accordingly: “When I get a ‘yes’ I feel it in my heart and I feel it come up through the throat. If it’s a really powerful ‘yes’ I can get really teary eyed or emotionally verklempt. . . . All of a sudden my voice starts to quiver. . . . If I feel a ‘no,’ and it’s a really strong ‘no,’ I’m going to feel it in my gut and can feel almost nauseous.”

Arguably, it is rare to take time to locate our bodies in place in such an elemental manner. Yet, such preparatory attunement techniques facilitate the expansion of one’s sensorium, which facilitates integration and communication with Earth Others. The absence of self-attunement might result in an unsuccessful dowsing quest wherein the

dowser is confronted with silence. After all, why should we expect reciprocity from Earth Others if we fail to make our desires transparent at the outset? Borrowing from Plumwood's "philosophical animism," perhaps the best strategy is to open oneself to others as communicative beings—an act of generosity as intellectual as it is embodied.³⁰ As Plumwood advises, "Help us re-imagine the world in richer terms that will allow us to find ourselves in dialogue with and limited by other species' needs, other kinds of minds."³¹

To review, posing the question "Can I?" serves as a foundation for any dowsing quest. A "no" answer can be met with a willingness to abandon a quest, an assessment of skill, addressing ego and personal desire, and/or attuning one's body to open clearer lines of communication. If the dowser is properly prepared, they will receive a "yes" and move to the next question, "May I?"

May I?

"May I?" is a simple question that seeks permission from another. This basic request grounds the second of the three opening questions posed at the beginning of a dowsing quest. The question invites conversation and indicates a capacity for Earth Others to respond to our queries and, by extension, consent to entering into relations with us. Here, we are called to Haraway's notion of response-ability—of an ability to be able to respond to an Other and the Other's capacity to respond in turn.³² "May I?" operates via a presupposition of entanglement and mutuality, of material linkages and shared communicative capacities.

Most dowsers we met ask permission via "May I?" before dowsing. They will not dowse without the consent of a person, or of the land, water, or other more-than-human entities that are relevant to a given query. This helps ensure that dowsing can proceed with the permission of all parties. Jane, for example, builds labyrinths that are intended to heal people who walk through them and the surrounding landscape. Before beginning, Jane asks local spirits if a labyrinth should be built. If she receives a "no" she will not proceed. She has turned down jobs when she dowses a clear "no." If she receives a "yes," she will solicit further consent to determine where the labyrinth prefers to be sited, even asking individual stones if they want to be a part of the labyrinth. In a labyrinth building workshop with Jane, author Morse had the opportunity to see this process at work. The labyrinth site was located on a flat spot on a hillside. Red surveyor's tape stretched in rings on the ground, marking the path's planned location. Large piles of rounded river rock were scattered about. The goal was to place the rocks along the taped lines. Jane explained that the participants had to ask each rock if it wanted to be placed in the labyrinth, and if so, in which ring. Participants could ask the rods to point to the

30. Rose, "Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism," 96.

31. Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," 125.

32. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 106.

rock's preferred location. She demonstrated by approaching a rock, raising her rods and asking, "Would you like to be in the labyrinth?" Her rods swung out: a "yes" response. Using a series of yes/no questions she asked where in the labyrinth it wanted to be located, and once she placed it, confirmed that it was happy in that spot. As the workshop participants began asking specific rocks these questions, some unwilling rocks were left behind. An affective dialogue with ostensibly abiotic Earth Others, one that respected "no" as an answer, took place that day.

For Trish, asking "May I?" involves taking stock and slowing down. As Trish remarked, "I'm kind of like a hummingbird where I'm always in motion." Such flitting about, suggested Trish, can impair being fully present when communicating with Earth Others. She continued, "I think part of my lesson is to learn that I am who I am, but that it'll be good for me to intentionally communicate with each energy or energetic form and to ask them, 'How would you like me to interact with you? How can we develop this relationship?' . . . To get to know them a little bit more is something I really want."

For Moss, a Druid and geomancer, transparent and reciprocal communication is vital for attuning to the landscape. We visited Moss while she was having work done on her property, which involved cutting down several towering red pines to let in more sunlight to alleviate mold issues in Moss's house. The land was in a state of transformation, and Moss was worried how it might upset its energy balance. Moss's approach was to maintain open communication with the land, reassuring it that the changes were not destructive but rather cocreative. As Moss remarked:

You've got to be a cocreator! If you want to learn how to be a good human, that means going beyond the human realm with all your decision-making, especially when it is directly affecting other things. The first [step] is just saying, "This is what's happening. This is the context of all of what I can understand about this situation." You know, getting that communicated and then [asking] "Do I have permission? It is okay for me to do this?" This land [has been] incredibly supportive and generous for me. I always get a "yes," but then it's still a process of tuning into every single tree [being cut down] and giving them a warning. Like, "Okay, it's coming in three sleeps." So, it's all done with a lot of love and respect. And it was still intense, you know, to hear them hitting the ground.

Obtaining consent by asking "May I?" offers strategies for enacting ethics across difference—whether based on species, language, or other factors. As mentioned, consent in multispecies collaboration is often glossed over. Collaborative models are sometimes ill-equipped to account for differences in language or other forms of communication. However, as Plumwood suggests, collaborative models "[allow] for many different kinds of agents and narratives about their creative expression in the land."³³ Attuning to

33. Plumwood, "Concept of a Cultural Landscape," 127.

these differences requires a “communicative ethic [for asking] permission to enter the interspecies community, and once inside we will need such an ethic to pursue negotiation and participation in dialogic relationship with the other inhabitants.”³⁴ It is here that we locate the transformative potential of consent-based practices in multispecies collaboration. Enacting cocreation not only requires clear communication but also the willingness of all parties involved to enter into relation. Dowsing helps to facilitate translations that permit relations to ethically take hold.

Ethics in dowsing hinges on two key concerns: intentionality and inclusion. Whereas the former is addressed via attunement to body and Other, the latter is enacted by contextualizing a given need relative to others, their interests, and most important, their consent. Yet, despite a standardized set of procedures applicable to all dowsing quests, dowsing is place-specific. Each place contains unique more-than-human natures, energies, and spirits. For Moss, communication generally occurs with the *genius loci*, a protective and composite spirit of a particular place. Yet, as needed, she will communicate directly with the energy of a specific member of her place, as she did when she checked in with the red pines. The relations into which Moss enters are neither mute nor homogenous; they are dialogic and unique. This recalls Stacy Alaimo’s claim that “an ethics of place can be sparked by the human desire for surprise, for play, for the possibility of becoming, by realizing it is possible for the agency, the activities, the becomings of the nonhuman to recreate a seemingly static site into a place of energy and transformation.”³⁵ For the dowers, an ethics of consent that extends beyond the human must recognize more-than-humans’ capacity to think, feel, and communicate as individual actors. As Moss puts it:

It all comes back to cocreation. . . . We need to stop being so human-centered. We need to remember every other part of creation [and] we need to have councils that involve other beings. I know that’s crazy for a lot of people, talking about the spirit world, including the ancestors and the spirits of different creatures and beings. . . . Many of us haven’t been able to see or hear them yet, [but] there’s so much wisdom there and there’s so much that we can learn from. That can help us to see the bigger picture.

Should I?

After receiving affirmative answers to “Can I?” and “May I?” the dowser’s last question is “Should I?” This is asked to determine whether the dowsing quest is in the best interest for all involved. It is one thing to use dowsing to locate a missing phone; the stakes are fairly low and should something go awry, it will most likely result in a temporary and mild inconvenience. Yet it is quite another matter to use dowsing to strike up a dialogue with the dead. Should something go awry here, a whole host of issues can crop up, like

34. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 188.

35. Alaimo, *Exposed*, 38.

inviting unwelcome energies into the interior domain of one's life. "Should I?" serves as a final check-in, as if the dowser had assembled all relevant and interested entities and now poses the question, "Now that we're all here and aware of the request, are you sure you'd like to be a part of this?" As with the previous questions, a "no" response can signal the need for the dowser to abandon their plan or to pose additional clarifying questions to establish consensus.

As James put it, "To be for the best and highest good of all involved, that's not just people. All the spirits of nature, anything else that would be affected." This appeal to beings beyond the self and beyond humans lends further dimension to the ethics of dowsing. The question "Should I?" suggests an ethics beyond an individual's immediate needs. Given the centrality of the pronoun *I* in this trio of questions, this might seem counterintuitive. However, a nuanced interpretation of these questions suggests the *I* is only an *I* in relation to others. With "Can I?" one's self is evaluated on the basis of whether it is attuned to contexts and energies beyond its boundaries. With "May I?" desire is conditioned explicitly in reference to others and their willingness to enter relations. And, with "Should I?" the decision to proceed with a cocreative venture is given over to the collective will of all parties, expressed through sensitive measurement devices held by the dowser. Thus, rather than reaffirming the centrality of the human, these questions decenter it. Indeed, the phrase "highest good for all concerned" suggests degrees of goodness defined more in terms of general benefit than of individual gain.

A Dialogue with Alfalfa

Taken together, the three questions of the protocol facilitate communication across difference, allowing for a dowser to enter dialogue with Earth Others, seen or unseen. "Dialogue," writes Rose, "is a method for opening conversations so that they are inclusive and responsive."³⁶ Dialogue's reciprocity stands in contrast to monologue, wherein communication is one-way and individual desires are projected onto others who are rendered mute. Rose suggests this "monological view of the world rests on a huge error. Actually, the world is rich in life, and living beings have their own stories, ideas, and desires."³⁷ When we embrace dialogue as a strategy for engaging worlds "we become ever more aware that monologue stifles knowledge of connection and disables the possibilities whereby 'self' finds its own meaning and purpose through entangled encounters and responsibilities with others."³⁸ Dowsing is an attempt to shrink the distance between self and other and to expand what can be seen and heard.

We find many contact points between Rose's discussion of dialogue and the way dowsers speak of their experiences and cocreations with Earth Others. Yet such relations take hold only by virtue of the Other's agency and dialogic capacity. Talk first. Cocreate later. We are reminded of Greyson's commentary on wonder and enchantment emerging

36. Rose, "Dialogue," 128.

37. Rose, "Dialogue," 128.

38. Rose, "Dialogue," 131.

when the “object is revealed as possessing agentic capacities.”³⁹ But we are not entitled to wonder and enchantment. They are not given but rather are contingent upon transparency, consent, and reciprocity.⁴⁰

To apply concepts at work thus far, we turn to another story recounted by Gerald, the dowser who helped Aaron and Phyllis negotiate with birds. Early in his career as a dowser specializing in agricultural systems, Gerald received a call from a dairy farmer and cheesemaker in England who was having issues. Half the herd of cows developed bloat after grazing on a field of alfalfa. The farm was using mob grazing, which entails pasturing a high density of cattle per acre for a short period of time to give the pasture ample time for regrowth. The herd had just been moved from one strip of alfalfa to another. The curious thing was that the two adjacent strips had been planted the same day with the same seed, yet the cows only reacted to the second strip. Gerald went to the farm to investigate. Gerald recounted:

The practice in and of itself is weird, which is [I] sit down in the field with my back against the wall and go into a light trance and have a conversation with all vested intelligences here. In that case it was the spiritual intelligence or deva of the farms, the intelligence or deva of the fields. Of the soil and soil biology and the gnomes hanging out there. Of the alfalfa and the alfalfa deva. Of the cows and the spirit of the cows individually and the spirit of the mob and then . . . the patron saint of domestic animals. If you are going to pray it is best to get as much leverage as you can, right? [Laughs.] And so what was immediately apparent was that the alfalfa had mobilized secondary metabolites because it felt that it was being predated.

Gerald explained that some plants can ward off predation by generating metabolites, which makes them bitter. Having surmised that secondary metabolites were causing the bloat, he continued: “Clearly what had happened was this alfalfa crop didn’t recognize that it had been planted in order to be food for cattle. To be milk for cheese for people and that it would then be replanted the next year for the same process. It was just more in its wild state.” By communicating with the alfalfa Gerald assured it that it was playing a role in this farm and that next year it would be planted again to continue the cycle. It wasn’t being sacrificed but rather enrolled into a process of creation. It just needed to know that. Gerald instructed the farmer to wait twelve hours and then put the cows back on the pasture. And when they did, they were soon fine. The bloat cleared and the farm returned to normal operations. Gerald credited the success of this dowsing quest to inclusive communication with all relevant parties—from alfalfa to gnomes—bringing, as it were, the collective together.⁴¹

39. Greyson, *Vital Enchantments*, 72.

40. For further discussion of reciprocity, see Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in which Kimmerer states, “Reciprocity is a matter of keeping the gift in motion through self-perpetuating cycles of giving and receiving” (165).

41. See Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 53.

How do we know that nonhumans are answering the dowsters' questions? After all, trees do not write and birds do not speak a human language. Our participants find material responses to their queries: the birds leave cherries, the dying sister swallows water, the cows safely eat alfalfa. And dowsters hear the responses because they are listening for them. As Rose writes, "We know that nonhumans communicate in multiple registers, and perhaps it is necessary, therefore, to be able to listen in multiple registers."⁴² Gerald expressed similar sentiment when he told us, "[Dowsing] gives us a communication bridge to nonhuman intelligence in landscape. And if we cooperate with that we get a tangible result, which moves it beyond fantasy and back into however you want to language it."

How to Work with Earth Others

What does the dowsing protocol offer to scholars of the environment? After all, it is unlikely that many academics will be convinced to enter the field with dowsing rods. A simplified version of the dowsters' approach to working with others suggests three steps: listen with all senses, respond reflexively, and offer gratitude. This approach closely aligns with guidance offered by feminist political ecologists and environmental philosophers whose insights have informed our orientation to dowsing as an ethical practice. In these concluding remarks, we treat each step in turn.

To listen requires attention to the Other. It demands an openness similar to the stance held when learning a new language. In this instance, the learner must use all their senses—sight, smell, intuition, hearing—to understand what the Other is expressing. Dowsters take time to attune to other-than-human environments and expressions. What would it look like for scholars to pause before entering the field to attune to places and their inhabitants? How might scholars engage the world in a manner that extends beyond materiality to account for spirituality? What ideas could emerge from a slow and deliberate listening at the start of a project? "Power," writes Rose, "lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one's actions, but rather to go one's own self-centric and insulated way."⁴³ There's a lot of this world to be missed in the absence of deep listening and meaningful dialogue. Much of that world is disappearing under the force of catastrophic environmental change. Voices are disappearing along with it.⁴⁴ As Tsing and cowriters put it, "Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying. . . . Living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice that is humble and difficult: noticing the world around us."⁴⁵

Over the course of our field research, no dowser was so bold as to proclaim that dowsing would save the planet. Indeed, most were inclined to believe the planet will

42. Rose, *Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism*, 107.

43. Rose, "Dialogue," 128.

44. See Morehouse and Cigliano, "Cultures and Concepts of Ice"; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*.

45. Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, M7.

survive the most significant anthropogenic onslaughts. Yet, still, each dowser firmly believed dowsing fosters intimate relations with proximate worlds and the materialities and energies therein. Principally, dowsing asks us to cultivate deep knowledge of place and to engage with respect, reciprocity, and care. As Rose notes regarding Plumwood's work: "[There are] two major tasks before us at this time: the first is to resituate the human in ecological terms, and the second is to resituate the non-human in ethical terms. To resituate the human in ecological terms is to overcome the idea that humans are outside of nature. . . . The second task . . . overcomes the idea that the non-human world is devoid of meaning, values, and ethics."⁴⁶

Dowsers pursue this second task via bodily attunement and inclusive communication. These engagements carry practical lessons for navigating with the world rather than through it. We learned from dowsers that they not only listen but also respond to what they learn from Earth Others. This suggests that working with other-than-humans requires checking-in during a project and adjusting as needed. To take seriously reciprocal relations one must be willing to change course and act in the interest of the Other. This recalls Puig de la Bellacasa's work on care and speculative ethics in more-than-human worlds. For Puig de la Bellacasa, "to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable beings."⁴⁷ Recognizing interdependency is crucial for enacting ethical relations beyond the human in ways that "decenter 'ethicality' and place it as a distributed force across the multiple agencies that make more than human relations."⁴⁸ This means that despite vocal calls to throw ourselves into the world's entanglements, we still need to arrive with integrity, honesty, transparency, and consent-based practices lest we lose sight of the ethics of entanglement.

What happens at the end of dowsing sessions? Dowsers insisted that at the end of a day of dowsing, it is important to offer thanks and extend gratitude to Earth Others for their willingness to communicate and cocreate. "Gratitude," Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us, "is so much more than a polite thank you. It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods."⁴⁹ Among the questions "Can I?" "May I?" "Should I?" followed by a final expression of gratitude, there are simple lessons to be gleaned from a dowser's orientation to the world. We offer the last words to two UK-based dowsers, Charles and Helen:

Charles: In all my courses that I teach and all the dowsing expeditions that we do with our group and individually, it is about approaching the site in a respectful way and asking the guardian, or the spirit of place for permission to enter and explore the

46. Rose, "Ecological Humanities," 3–4.

47. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 70.

48. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 129.

49. Kimmerer, "Serviceberry."

energies. Then, at the end, to say thank you in whatever form you want to do it. . . . Just bringing thanks and love back into the place because we know . . . that the interaction with energies is quite profound and they do react to us. And we need to feed them.

Helen: It is quite like entering a cathedral. It is that pause to think, “Is this the right time? The right place?” And then to give some respect.

HARLAN MOREHOUSE is senior lecturer of geography and geosciences at the University of Vermont. His research interests lie at the intersection of political ecology and environmental philosophy, with a current focus on climate education and ecological attunement.

CHERYL MORSE is associate professor of geography and geosciences, codirector of the Environmental Studies Program, a Gund Institute affiliate, and a member of the Food Systems Graduate Faculty at the University of Vermont. She is a rural geographer who researches human-environment interactions. Broadly, her work is concerned with how people perceive, coproduce, and experience rural places.

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