

Communion and Chiasm: Articulating the Unthought-of Aspects of Thomas Berry’s “Communion of Subjects” and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception

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I. Introduction

As the legacy of Thomas Berry grows there remain aspects of the New Story¹ requiring re-articulation and expansion if the hoped for Ecozoic era is to emerge. Among the most crucial ideas in need of further discussion is Berry’s understanding of the universe as a “communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.”² For the sake of further understanding and articulating the subjectivity and relationality of materiality, I suggest that the New Story enter a dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. In what follows, I will review Berry’s understanding of material subjectivity and relationality, and subsequently explore how Merleau-Ponty’s work helps articulate a contemporary understanding of cosmos and Earth as a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects. The conclusions reached about a re-imagined cosmology are neither present within Berry’s New Story, nor are they absent from his thought. They exist in what we might call the *unthought-of* aspects of Berry’s work: i.e., ideas that are “wholly

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1. The “New Story” refers to Thomas Berry’s ideas concerning the story of the evolutionary development of the universe and the meaning and significance of that story. The New Story is one of the most prominent ideas in Berry’s work and appears throughout his writing.
 2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 243.

his,” but nevertheless open to “something else.”³ Such thoughts are in a sense hidden within Berry’s cosmology, not straightforwardly articulated but nevertheless compatible with his trajectory, emerging only when he enters into dialogue with others. My aim throughout this essay is to summon the unthought-of elements of Berry’s ontology. This is not, however, the whole story, as the same can be said of the unthought-of elements of Merleau-Ponty’s work that are revealed by Berry’s New Story. While this essay focuses primarily on re-imagining Berry’s work, I suggest how the New Story might also give new life to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in the service of an emerging cosmology arising from the thought and unthought-of elements present within both thinkers.⁴

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3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 160. This idea builds upon the work of Heidegger, later applied by Merleau-Ponty to the thought of Husserl. Heidegger states that “the greater the work of a thinker...the richer is what is unthought in this work, which means, that which emerges in and through this work as having not yet been thought.” Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 71. “The main feature of this principle, according to Sean Dorrance Kelly, is that the seminal aspects of a thinker’s work are so close to him that he is incapable of articulating them himself. Nevertheless, these aspects pervade the work; give it its style, its sense, and its direction; and therefore belong to it essentially.” Sean Dorrance Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 74.
 4. Ultimately, this essay, like all philosophical works, is an entangled mess of ideas emerging as novel instantiations of thought wherein the elements are inseparable from one another and impossible to simply and naively assign to this or that author. Merleau-Ponty refers to this as a “middle-ground where the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together, although it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each.” Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 159. Such a perspective avoids both “an ‘objective’ history of philosophy” as well as “a meditation disguised as dialogue.” Thus we seek to avoid both “inevitable distortion,” as well as “literal reproduction,” both of which do a disservice to the philosopher we speak with. *Ibid.*

II. Thomas Berry and the Communion of Subjects

The centrality of the “communion of subjects” in Berry’s work is evident upon examining his “Twelve Principles” for understanding the universe and the role of the human in cosmogenesis, five of which evoke aspects of the communion.⁵ For Berry, the cosmos “is a unity, an interacting and genetically-related community of beings bound together in an inseparable relationship in space and time.”⁶ All differentiated existents within such a communion engage one another through their capacity for self-expression and intimate presence to other modes of being, something Berry describes not simply as a physical, but a pervasive “psychic” dimension within the universe from the beginning.⁷ Such features exist ubiquitously through cosmos and Earth, with “differentiation, subjectivity, and communion” characterizing the reality of all existents.⁸ But this does not outline in detail exactly what Berry means by describing the cosmos as a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects. Further details concerning the relationships between differentiated subjects can be found throughout Berry’s corpus, but are most clearly set forth within the New Story, especially within the discussion of the cosmogenetic principle which provides detail on the concept of

5. Thomas Berry, “Twelve Principles for Reflecting on the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process,” *Cross Currents* 37, no. 2-3 (1987): 176-177. This list is repeated in Thomas Berry, “Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process,” in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry & the New Cosmology* (Mystic: Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications), 108-09. Principles two, three, four, six, and seven deal with the communion of subjects. I note here that I am using the phrasing of the original “Twelve Principles,” including the reference to the “psychic” dimension of the universe, which I understand to exist as ubiquitous perception occurring in all things. A later version of the “Twelve Principles,” given in Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2006), omits this crucial dimension in Berry’s thought.

6. *Ibid.*, 176.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

subjectivity.⁹

Following the logic of the cosmological principle, which states that materiality throughout cosmic space operates according to the same physical principles, the cosmogenetic principle articulated by Swimme and Berry in their book, *The Universe Story*, states that the evolutionary dynamics of cosmogenesis and epigenesis are the same throughout the cosmos.¹⁰ Following this assumption, Swimme and Berry outline three form-producing dynamics at work throughout cosmos and Earth that are essential starting points in understanding the cosmos as a communion of subjects: differentiation, autopoiesis and communion.¹¹ I limit my discussion here to autopoiesis and communion as being most directly relevant to the discussion at hand, while assuming differentiation as following from the relational subjectivity.

Autopoiesis is the term used to describe subjectivity in *The Universe Story*, and as can be detected within Berry's "Twelve Principles," autopoietic subjectivity asserts the presence of unifying and self-organizing dynamics within the cosmos as a whole as well as its individual existents. Subjectivity then refers to an existent's inner dynamism, "the source of its spontaneity, its self-manifesting power," enabling the cosmos itself along with each being to pursue various possible fulfillments related to its particular dreams for existence within the matrix of the world's relational materiality.¹² Subjectivity in the thinking of the New Story is thus nothing like the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* with its anthropocentric bias for forms of perception

9. Swimme, and Berry, *Universe Story*, 63-79.

10. *Ibid.*, 66.

11. The narrative offered here, despite being Berry's most detailed treatment of the topic, is described as "a prologue for later treatments as our direct experience of the universe's development extends throughout space and time." *Ibid.*, 71. This accounting of cosmic subjectivity is thus meant to serve as starting point for understanding the communion of subjects, with the expectation that subsequent encounters with cosmos and Earth will develop the notion further.

12. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 73. The term "dreams" refers to the goals that all existents strive to fulfill their particular embodiment. See *ibid.*, 47-61, for a more complete narrative concerning the dreams, energy, and resistance of existents.

possessed by the human and those animals with similar cognitive abilities.¹³ Subjectivity refers instead to “self-organizing powers in general,” characterizing materiality itself within an infinite plurality of forms: from atoms and rocks; to red oaks and red foxes; to Earth itself, the Milky Way galaxy, and beyond.¹⁴ Subjectivity is thus akin to a ubiquitous, non-mechanistic blueprint driving the dreams of cosmos and Earth to grow, develop and articulate the various potential forms of its self-determined fulfillment.

Yet, this self-organized pursuit of dreams does not arise apart from relationship and occurs in direct response to the larger community comprising cosmos and Earth. “The cosmos,” Berry and Swimme assert, is “organized by communion. To be is to be related, for relationship is the essence of existence.”¹⁵ The agency of the cosmos and Earth have a direct impact on each existent as the self-organizing powers of each respond to the larger communal matrix of materiality. Subjective fulfillment emerges in various forms depending upon one’s relationship within the community of cosmos and Earth. Subjects determine the form of their own dreams in response to the material community while maintaining their own irreducible singularity within “a differentiated web of relationships among sentient centers of creativity,” where each subject is “meaningless outside of this enveloping web of relations.”¹⁶ Such a “communion of subjects” within the New Story thus refers to the organization of the cosmos according to the inner power of each existent to realize its own fulfillment in a variety of ways in and through relationship

13. Cf. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 45: “The living body is,” according to Abram, “the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself—the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge. The common notion of the experiencing self, or mind, as an immaterial phantom ultimately independent of the body can only be a mirage: Merleau-Ponty invites us to recognize, at the heart of even our most abstract cogitations, the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself.”

14. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 75.

15. *Ibid.*, 77.

16. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 77. Cf. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 71, 78.

with a cosmic community of other differentiated subjects. Such a vibrant, dynamic community contrasts with a modernist cosmology narrated as a “collection of objects,” wherein the world exists as a static, mechanistic backdrop for the only true centers of subjectivity, i.e., the human. Yet, while the New Story recognizes the subjectivity of cosmos and Earth, allowing us to acknowledge the integrity of the non-human without comparison or reference to the human, there are aspects of this framework that remain unclear and, thus, call for development and re-articulation. I suggest here three areas of inquiry that require further exploration within Berry’s understanding of cosmos and Earth as a “communion of subjects.”

First, the relationship within subjectivity between the irreducible singularity of individual existents and the creative power of the wider community is unclear. Are subjects envisioned as existing within a messy, monistic substance that blurs the boundaries of separate embodiment? Or are subjects within the New Story simply separate but related beings possessing their own distinct parallel interiority that influences but does not ontologically penetrate the other? All subjects are “sentient centers of creativity,” but the ontological nature of such centers remains unclear.

Second, and related to the previous concern, the nature of creative relationship and organizational power within the relational ontology of the New Story is unclear. On the one hand, Berry stresses the active dynamism present throughout cosmos, Earth, and each individual existent that exists through self-articulation. And yet, creativity only emerges within the relationship of a cosmic and planetary community, suggesting that nothing simply creates itself, but is co-created by others. Thus, it is crucial to address the ontology of creative power, asking whether it is active or passive, or a co-creative mix of both.

Third, following upon the need to expand the notion of the subject as well as the dynamics of material relationship, we also require a more robust articulation of what exactly is occurring within the creative, organizational, communion occurring between subjects. The New Story, asserting that “everything speaks itself and everything is receiving something from every particle of the universe,”¹⁷

17. Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of*

begins to speak of this engagement in the poetics of voice and agency. Yet, what exactly these poetic dynamics refers to is unclear and giving further articulation to this element of the New Story is needed within the vision of a renewed postmodern cosmology. What is needed is a deeper framework for the dynamics involved when various differentiated subjects meet one another within the matrix of materiality.

Finding clear answers to such questions and concerns within Berry's work is, I suggest, impossible given that he was either not preoccupied with such specific ontological nuances or because they were so deep within his thought that they were simply unable to be fully articulated. As such, his work provides no definitive answers or formulas that settle such questions. Hence we must consider the *unthought-of* elements present within Berry's work. Nevertheless, the trajectory of what lies unthought-of in Berry's cosmology can be set by clues within his work that are able to be expanded upon subsequently through the work of other thinkers. Such a method in reading Berry hopes to simultaneously remain faithful to his thinking, while aiding it along a coherent trajectory through a dialog with others.

Regarding such concerns, I suggest that the unthought-of elements in Berry's relational ontology suggests, however unclearly, that the subjectivity of differentiated existents overlaps in the co-creative power of the active and passive dynamics of a cosmos that acts and is acted upon and that such relationships emerge through the power of embodied perception inherent within materiality itself, which I understand to be the "pervasive psychic dimension" of cosmos, Earth and each singular existent. These broad conclusions are based on the logic of Berry's cosmology, beginning with a view toward subjectivity *as the organizational dynamic that brings materiality into being*.¹⁸ Such

Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 15-16.

18. I am omitting the "self" that Berry often prefixes to words such as organization. Such prefix makes sense when talking about cosmogenesis as a whole as this takes place within a community, but applied to separate, differentiated existents it is less helpful as it is tempting to distinguish the power for organization and articulation from the existents passivity insofar as it is created by the organizational and articulating powers of others. Self-

a creative, organizational and articulating power cannot, according to the New Story, be reduced to the individual existent apart from the dynamism of other sentient subjects. As stated in *The Universe Story*, differentiation, autopoiesis, and communion exist within one another as a symphony of entangled elements wherein each inseparably shapes the others.¹⁹ Thus, despite Berry's understanding of subjectivity as the inner, self-organizational power of a singular existent, such power, according to the New Story, is necessarily inseparable from the power of other centers of subjectivity as well as that of cosmogenesis as a whole. All that exists within and because of a communal, relational matrix that supports the ontology of cosmos and Earth. Thus, creative power cannot be the possession of any one thing separate from the power of others; subjectivity must exist communally within a relational ontology that unites all materiality, expressing itself within differentiated, but inseparable particularities of embodied and "sentient centers of creativity."

Consequently, because the power of organization and articulation is inherently communal, it becomes suspect to locate the boundaries of subjectivity neatly within the power of differentiated, but autonomous individuals who simply engage and respond to others as outsiders possessing parallel, but distinct subjectivities. Subjectivity then must in some sense be shared with the whole. Likewise, it also becomes suspect to define subjective power as simply the active dynamic of self-creative individuals since "everything speaks itself and everything is receiving something from every particle of the universe."²⁰ While Berry says little about vulnerable yet creative passivity, this dynamic allows individual existents to be acted upon, and thus co-created within the wider cosmic and planetary community. Subjective dynamism is thus the power both to create and be created.²¹ Finally, the New Story's assertion of the deep sentience

organizational power is present in the whole and its parts, but until we have a sufficiently communal grasp of subjectivity, it seems wise to downplay the self-organizational powers of the cosmos unless we accompany it with commentary.

19. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 72
20. Thomas Berry, *Befriending the Earth*, 15-16.
21. Interestingly toward the end of Berry and Swimme's discussion of communion within the *Universe Story*, they reference the bear, even within its mother's

present within bodies is not understood within an anthropocentric framework of mind but instead the ability of matter to relate to other bodies according to its particularity and inner blueprint.²² Such sentience, or awareness, is deeper than the human mind and cannot be defined by such. Instead it resides within an infinite plurality of relational embodiment through what we can only refer to as the power of perception, a power out of which relationality grows and differentiates. What is needed as we proceed, however, is a deeper framework for the dynamics involved when various differentiated subjects meet one another within the matrix of materiality.

Such ideas, I suggest, represent some of the unthought-of dimensions of Berry's cosmology and relational ontology. Yet, because they are not fully considered in his work they require further articulation and development through the horizon of other frameworks that deal in greater detail with such ideas. I turn now to the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenology of perception is helpful in developing the present but unthought-of dimensions of the New Story.

womb, as responding to the forest that calls for its particular shape and constitution. The description, however, like Berry's elsewhere, emphasizes an active dynamism within the individual existent to respond to the outside world. It remains unthought-of, however, to embrace the passive dynamism of the power to be created as something other than a privation. Yet, there is a clear and deep recognition that nothing can simply manifest itself apart from the power of the other. Such a focus on active dynamism makes sense in responding to mechanistic cosmologies, as Berry and Swimme were doing, but it is important to note the other side of subjectivity as well.

22. The "psychic" dimension of the cosmos is thus the basis of mind, but cannot be defined in reference to the human. Any position of pan-psychism must defer the human mind to emerging from the deeper perceptual power of materiality itself, allowing relationality to exist among an infinite plurality of flesh. In the New Story, bodies are not spoken of as within a phenomenology of perception, but their capacity for relationship suggests that a sentience exists in materiality itself, in a manner allowing each to receive as well as radiate information. Perception is the most basic for of expressing the passing along of such information within a variety of forms that does not appeal to any one for of normative embodiment.

III. Merleau-Ponty and Chiastic Subjectivity

A helpful model able to expand and re-articulate the “communion of subjects” within the New Story is found within the phenomenological framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Through Merleau-Ponty, we might conceive of subjects who not only actively speak and respond to others beyond the rigid boundaries of differentiated bodies, but also penetrate the porous membranes of form, touching, being touched, and becoming entangled with one another in co-creative relationship. The blurring of subjective lines through the material and psychic entanglement of differentiated bodies, as well as their existence as simultaneously active and passive dynamisms is found both in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and in his understanding of materiality as emerging from chiastic encounters between differentiated, yet entangled instances of flesh.²³

For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenal world exists as a community of entangled bodies perpetually co-creating the matrix of materiality through phenomenal relationships where subjects both actively touch one other and are passively touched in return.²⁴ Such relationships are not limited to the abstract musings of separate Cartesian minds, but occur within the perceptual powers of the flesh itself regardless of its form. Human bodies, in all their bio-historical richness, exist and relate within the deeper sensuous tissue of cosmos and Earth, where relationship defines existence and bodies emerge from the dynamism inherent in materiality itself to perceive differentiated others and respond through the radiation flowing from their own particularity. While differences exist between bodies, the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s thought encourages us to recognize the relational nature of materiality which senses and responds to itself within the particular perceptual powers of its differentiated

23. The outline of Merleau-Ponty I am framing here is not presented historically but in the spirit of the trajectory of his thought, which was ended by his death in 1961.

24. The reference to touch is not meant to be the only perceptual terminology to understand such relationships. We may substitute any perceptual power where appropriate for the existents in question. Merleau-Ponty references seeing and being seen as well, e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 68.

ways of being-in-a-world.

At the heart of this ubiquitous relationality is perception, which refers to the unique ways that any one body-subject negotiates its world by feeling and responding to the presence of other body-subjects according to the inner dynamism each possesses. Perception is an epistemology unique to all bodies; it is a means of exchanging, interpreting, and responding to information through the horizon accompanying the existents involved in phenomenal engagements. As such, perception is the dynamic communicatory event between all sensuous bodies, which plants relationship firmly and ontologically at the heart of materiality from the seemingly mechanistic interactions of atomic particles to the complex linguistic endeavors of the human.²⁵ Perception thus allows us to speak poetically of communing, an interactive dialog between bodies in relationship within the matrix of materiality, but also as critical realists, of the agency of all things existing not as static objects but as dynamic subjects who, feeling and responding to the community around them, reach out into space-time. Through this relational community of subjects, or the perception of an object-horizon structure as Merleau-Ponty calls it, the world emerges.²⁶

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25. Early on Merleau-Ponty shows some hints of a phenomenology that reduces the other to the same, but there are clues at this stage that he does not hold absolutely to this reductionism. In the essay, "The Primacy of Perception, and its Philosophical Consequences," he admits to the "paradox of immanence and transcendence." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16. For a brief consideration of why this reductionism may have been present, see Jack Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and the Alterity of the Other," *Symposium* 6:1 (2002): 63-78, esp. 64.
26. "More precisely, the inner horizon of an object cannot become an object without the surrounding objects becoming a horizon, and so vision is an act with two facets." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68. The community of things guarantees the possibility of material reality since no subject can perceive the material field from all perspectives. The hiddenness of every subject from the perspective of the perceiving subject is displayed to other subjects within the material horizon and the total of perception from a complete horizon allows a world to persist. Vision can only occur because the wider horizon, or *in communion*, using Berry's terminology, allows things

To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can “see;” the back of my lamp is nothing other than the face which it “shows” to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each of them treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and a guarantee of the permanence of those aspects by their presence.²⁷

Thus, it is important to emphasize here that perception is not simply the power of a perceiver that is somehow separable from the dynamism of the individual perceived, let alone the dynamism of the entire field comprising the horizon of all material reality. We do not just have relationships between singular existents, but a perpetual communion of the totality. As such, it is incoherent to suggest that any singular existent might exist at all apart from the whole, residing somehow as a static object not contributing something equally important to embodied encounters as all things engage in perceiving and being perceived. Each existent radiates its own being and as such provides a crucial dynamic to other existents that are able to feel the presence of the other. And yet, without a wider community to feel the subject as it reaches out, there could be no world at all and nothing that we perceive as individual relationships between distinct subjects. It is only because the totality of existents perpetually reach

that display themselves to be present as a whole within the world. Despite no subject being able to be perceived absolutely from all angles, the sum total of the horizon guarantees the totality of any singular body.

27. *Ibid.*

out into the world actively and simultaneously receive and feel the material presence of the other passively that perception can occur within embodied space-time events. The moment of communion between existents occurs as each subject lends its body to the other thereby exchanging the inseparable organizational power that simultaneously reaches out into the world within active dynamism while feeling-for-the-other with a complimentary passive dynamism.²⁸ “The sensible” according to Merleau-Ponty, “gives back to me what I lent it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place.”²⁹ Thus, there is simultaneously an active as well as a passive dynamism organizing and articulating the world within all embodied encounters. In such events, each existent touches and is touched by the other in a co-creative synthesis not attributed to separate existents but their relation as a totality. Such a relational ontology blurs the boundaries of sensuous and sensible centers of creative subjectivity, as each thing is created through its self-display to a cosmos that can “see,” “touch,” and “feel” such manifestations from every angle.³⁰

This intersection of bodies is eventually described by Merleau-Ponty as a chiasm of the flesh.³¹ In the chiasmic nature of materiality, as beings touch and are touched by one another, they actualize differentiated being in relational, co-creative events. The chiasm of the flesh is an event connecting each subject as both perceiver and perceived resulting in the emergence of new being as the embodied horizon of each differentiated existent crosses over into the other thereby drawing forth space and time. Materiality thus emerges

28. See Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68-72; 207-242.

29. *Ibid.*, 214.

30. Since nothing can perceive the whole, organizational, articulating power, what Berry calls subjectivity, can only be present as a totality. There is a sense then in which subjectivity, as organizational power that brings reality into being, can only exist as a communion. Nothing is itself without everything else. “The house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden.” *Ibid.*, 69.

31. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Claude Lefort, *The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130-55.

within the communion of the active and passive dynamisms characterizing all materiality in its capacity to perceive and be perceived.³² Cosmos and Earth are the result a communion of subjects wherein relationship co-creates reality thereby drawing forth differentiated subjects in an infinite plurality of developing forms.

In this chiasm of the flesh, however, as bodies co-create one another, they do more than cross or touch at some rigid boundary beyond which they cannot pass. Instead, through perception, bodies “plunge” into one another and “inhabit” perceived bodies.³³ As subjects emerge within a relational matrix, they carry all those who co-created them within their bodies, which exist as the result of a communion of subjects both past and present. The being of any subject is thus understood to include the being of all those subjects who lent their co-creative power to bring potentiality into phenomenal actuality. A differentiated body is thus not a self-generated individual emerging simply from an inner autopoietic power in response to an outside world; the body of any existent is a relational event, is relationship itself. The trace of outside alterity is ontologically present within all existents, ontologically constituting being through the becoming of the subject as they respond to sensible and sensuous others, carrying in themselves all those who co-create them.³⁴ “The world and I,” in the thinking of Merleau-Ponty, “are within each other.”³⁵ Thus, with Merleau-Ponty, “as I contemplate” the world,

32 Cf., With David Abram’s description: “It is this open activity, this dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself), that we speak of by the term ‘perception.’” Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 50. See also, Reynolds, “Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and the Alterity of the Other,” 68-69.

33. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 67.

34. “Thus, the positing of one single object, in the full sense, demands the compositive bringing into being of all these experiences in one act of manifold creation. Therein it exceeds perceptual experience and the synthesis of horizons—as the notion of a *universe*, that is to say, a completed and explicit totality, in which the relationships are those of reciprocal determination, exceeds that of a world, or an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication.” *Ibid.*, 71.

35. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 123. David Abram describes bodies in this vision as having porous membranes, allowing others to pass in

but particularly now, the green of the tree within a Toronto park as I write this essay, “I abandon myself to it” as the green presents itself to me within our shared earthy matrix. I feel the green within my human horizon knowing that it is not less, only differently, dynamic than myself, as we both reach out in self-presentation while firmly rooted and passively perceived, each according to its own kind. In this entanglement of the flesh, “I plunge into this mystery;” this green “thinks itself within me” as we “are drawn together and unified.” I am, in a sense, the tree, “saturated within this limitless” green.³⁶

IV. Re-Articulating the Communion of Subjects

Our tenuous relationship with Earth will remain so long as we continue to embrace mechanistic cosmologies while relying purely on the capitalist driven projects of modern science and technology to heal the anthropogenic harm done to the planet. The universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects. Such is the “central commitment” of the New Story and the mythic vision that must fuel the necessary psychic shift needed among humanity

and out of each other, while paradoxically maintaining difference between the two even as the two create one another. The boundaries of bodies are porous, “like membranes [more] than barriers.” Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 46.

36. This section is entangled with Merleau-Ponty’s words found in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, 214. It highlights not only the spacious entanglement between existing bodies, but the entanglement of bodies throughout time without regard to space. Merleau-Ponty, or a ghostly form of his former vibrancy, is carried into the present through his writings and as I read him he comes to reside within me as I write, blurring the lines of subjectivity and authorship. This is a “middle ground,” we saw Merleau-Ponty advocate above “where the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together,” impossible “to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each.” Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 159. The full quote from *Phenomenology of Perception*, 214, is found here: “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery; it ‘thinks itself within me.’ I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my conscious is saturated with this limitless blue.”

if Earth is to approach the Ecozoic era.³⁷ A poetic, yet critically realist mythos of cosmos and Earth teeming with vibrancy expressed through the active and passive dynamisms of a renewed understanding of subjectivity are necessary as we move toward the future. "One cannot," according to David Abram, "enter into a felt rapport with another entity if one assumes that the other is entirely inanimate. *It is difficult, if not impossible, to empathize with an inert object.*"³⁸

While a communion of subjects is a necessary framework to understand cosmos and Earth, much remains unsaid within the framework as it now stands. Thomas Berry's communion of subjects must be re-articulated with a mind toward the unthought nuances present within his New Story. Such ideas remain faithful to Berry's thinking, though they are not clearly articulated within his extant texts; rather they emerge through the trajectory he sets upon and the dialogical nuance added through conversation with other thinkers. As I have suggested, the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty provides a beginning to this re-imagined communion of subjects in line with the unthought-of dimensions of the New Story. Yet, it would be naïve to see Merleau-Ponty as merely providing nuance to Berry, without Merleau-Ponty's own work being transformed through the drawing out of the unthought-of within his own framework. Merleau-Ponty, writing in the mid-twentieth century, was not concerned with cosmology and relational ontology for the sake of a wider ecological ethic. He also possessed anthropocentric biases in his work, perhaps placing too much distance and difference between human and non-human flesh. As such, his work is read in light of Berry's ecological framework just as much as Berry is read within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework. While my explicit focus is not transforming Merleau-Ponty, it is assumed in what follows as I construct a renewed cosmology and communion of subjects where authorship is blurred within a "middle ground" where philosophers "are present

37. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 243.

38. David Abram, *Becoming Animal* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2010), 44. If such a "childlike" perception of existents in their active and passive dynamisms were encouraged, "this early collusion with things would quietly deepen and mature into a nuanced respect for the manifold life of the world, a steady pleasure in the profusion of bodily forms and the innumerable styles of sentience that compose the earthly cosmos" *Ibid.*, 40.

together,” rather than isolated into distinct centers of subjectivity.³⁹

I suggest two specific means of reframing and rearticulating the communion of subjects within the dialogue outlined in this essay. First, we must be careful to avoid locating subjectivity simply within the bodies of individual existents. While “everything speaks itself” within a sensible “universe of beings which *display themselves*,” such existence is meaningless and ontologically incoherent apart from the wider sensuous community which hears, sees, and responds to each existent touching back as soon as they are touched.⁴⁰ The “force of gravitation,” says Berry, “holds the differentiated universe together, enabling it to be a universe of individual realities distinct from, but intimately present to, one another.”⁴¹ Such a presence-to, or presence-within as I would articulate it in light of Merleau-Ponty, speaks to an ontological intimacy among existents that co-create one another as they take up residence deep within the sensuous tissue of materiality. While Berry’s articulation of co-subjectivity and co-presence within such statements is somewhat vague, he seems to embrace such a blurred line when he says that “the Earth acts in all that acts

39. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 159. In the working notes of *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes of the flesh, “my body is made of the same flesh as the world...and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world” (248). He notes later (250) that the flesh of the world and human flesh are different, as the latter has sentience, or self-awareness. While there certainly is a difference, such a simple bifurcation of self-awareness and non-self-awareness seems inadequate to describe the difference, and in a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s work we could demonstrate this as the unthought-of within his own thinking. Yet, we must remember that this work was not finished when Merleau-Ponty died in 1961 and this thought necessarily needs development. Merleau-Ponty describes this ultimate direction for his project in the final pages of the working notes in *The Visible and Invisible*. Just two months before his death in 1961, he writes that his work “must be presented without compromise with humanism, nor moreover with naturalism, nor finally with theology—Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures.” *Ibid.*, 274. Merleau-Ponty’s trajectory suggests that such a reading presented within this essay is faithful to him.

40. Thomas Berry, *Befriending the Earth*, 15-16; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 68. Berry and Swimme say further that the subject is “meaningless outside of this enveloping web of relations.” *Universe Story*, 77.

41. Thomas Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 71.

upon the Earth.⁴² Such a blurry, messy and infinite understanding of subjectivity and interior co-presence likewise appears to be present, yet still unthought-of, when Berry asserts that “all the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted as a single quantum—a singular gift—existence. If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time.”⁴³ There is an ontology here, though not fully articulated, wherein reality consists of differentiated though not utterly distinct existents emerging from the unified and shared creative energy unfolding in cosmogenesis and epigenesis. As such, subjectivity becomes impossible to reify, resisting our attempts at totalization through its perpetual retreat toward infinity.⁴⁴ Subjectivity then can only refer to the shared creative power of articulation present in all things through relationship and, as such, must in a sense be collectively shared by all differentiated, though not absolutely distinct, existents.

We require then a mythic framework of a chiasmic communion between differentiated but entangled subjects; we require a communion wherein the inner and outer do not occupy separate space alone, but paradoxically mingle in a mysterious mutual penetration that decenters as much as it locates differentiated being. Such subjectivity would thus speak not of self-organization but co-organization through co-creative power, and each existent within the cosmos would ontologically constitute a microcosm of the whole. In this framework the subject exists as a chimera whose power to actualize material reality is more than an inner response to an outer stimuli; it is the entangled, co-creative communion penetrating deep into the reality of each sensible and sensuous existent whose subjectivity becomes infinite, incalculable, and impossible to locate beyond relationship itself. Subjects would thus not simply be present to one

42. Ibid.

43. Berry and Swimme, *Universe Story*, 17.

44. Merleau-Ponty describes this as revealing to us “the perceiving subject as the perceived world.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 72. Not even our own bodies resist such conflation as we recognize that what we are is the result of the same co-creative event of cosmogenesis.

another, but present within one another as perpetually new constitutions of being that paradoxically preserve the alterity of differentiation within a deeper unity.⁴⁵

Second, our framework for communion must likewise be rearticulated in greater specificity. Through a phenomenology of perception incorporating all flesh we might understand existents not as mechanistic, static, and inert objects, but as dynamic, sensuous presence, poetically capable of living, breathing, and speaking within a relational material matrix. Such is a cosmos where a thing sees and is seen, touches and is touched back; it is a world where “everything speaks itself” and is acted upon by “every particle of the universe.”⁴⁶ Through perception, each existent would radiate its own being, actively reaching out into the world as it simultaneously feels the presence of other subjects in ways unique to the particulars of specific forms of embodiment. This vision imagines all materiality is inherently sensible as well as sensuous and conceives of subjects within an active as well as passive dynamism that is once more infinite and not restricted to any one form of embodiment. Pure objects as static and inert things that simply receive the action of others would not exist in such a cosmology, nor would things that simply act and reach out into the world. In such a framework, both the subjectivity present as a whole and in its differentiated parts would com-

45. This is not a fusion of subjects eradicating difference, yet there is a real sense that bodies do not have rigid boundaries, but reach out into the world to reside in the other. Cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of the “Omega Point,” where such an ontology exists. Omega, for Teilhard, is a monistic matrix where differentiation paradoxically exists and resists eradication. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *The Human Phenomenon* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 167-208. While I regard this as the default ontology of cosmos and Earth, Teilhard helpfully articulates a similar union in a future Omega point by asserting “the more together, they become the other, the more they become ‘themselves.’...a system whose unity coincides with a paroxysm of harmonized complexity.” *Ibid.*, 186. While Teilhard is uncomfortable with the language of “blending,” I see this as an inevitable consequence of this thought that promotes intimacy, unity, and, also diversity. Yet, in the context of his argument, Teilhard seeks to avoid pantheism and an undifferentiated monism, and so I take this to be the blending he eschews, not a paradoxical unity in differentiation.

46. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, 15-16.

prise distinct elements of both active and passive dynamisms that are able to act within the boundaries of their capacities while unable to utterly transcend their bodies and ignore the impact of other beings.

Within such a framework, we must embrace the vast differences of perceptual power here in all of its forms without normalizing any one way of being as definitive of relational subjectivity. Each existent possesses certain abilities to actively hold itself together and fulfill its dreams, respond to other bodies, and present itself to the wider communion of subjects. Yet, each also possesses a complimentary passive side. Existents are created by the wider community, are acted upon in ways they are helpless to avoid, potentially preventing the fulfillment of their dreams, and they touch the world only insofar as they are touched back. All these dynamics comprise subjectivity and communally co-create the matrix of cosmos and Earth. Within such dynamics of active agency and passive receptivity, a world of relational subjectivity emerges in all its beauty, diversity, and vulnerability.⁴⁷

As we move toward the Ecozoic, we must pay special attention to this final element. The communion in whom (declaring subjectivity as communal) we live is a vulnerable communion of vulnerable subjects (declaring subjectivity as individual). Since each existent has its own active dynamism expressed in particular abilities, and simultaneously exists within a passive dynamism, expressed as inabilities, vulnerability becomes a fundamental metaphysical characteristic of materiality. While existents speak and reach out into the world, they are also unable, utterly unable, to fulfill themselves in creative tension without the wider community.⁴⁸ Such a relational ontology allows the world to pursue its dreams, while allowing for the constant potential for such dreams to be altered and thwarted. The communion of subjects must carry itself toward the Ecozoic;

47. Inability does not enter into Berry's account of what constitutes the subject.

We must move away from a subjectivity that reduces dynamism to active agency and voice, and embrace the reality that inabilities, just as much as abilities, constitute the co-creative power of the subjective.

48. Of course existence within creative tension also presupposes natural violence and interruption that contributes to the flourishing and unfolding of cosmogenesis as well as epigenesis. Berry and Swimme helpfully outline this thermodynamic necessity in the *Universe Story*, 47-61.

and the human role in this is to recognize what the wider communion can and cannot do for itself, and respond to the summons of material vulnerability insofar as our power allows us to act on behalf of the other. It is this vulnerability emerging from the nature of the communion of subjects that we must attend to, understanding that despite the radical difference from ourselves, the myriad of subjects within cosmos and Earth summon us as our empathy meets the non-power of a vulnerability that paradoxically constitutes the dynamic summons calling the human toward the Ecozoic.⁴⁹

49. Additional exploration of the dynamics of non-power or radical passivity would benefit from the ethics of Emmanuel Lévinas and what he refers to as the “resistance that has no resistance—the ethical resistance.” Lévinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194. Such a study would also benefit from the ethics of Jacques Derrida who develops a non-anthropocentric view of Lévinas’ ethic. See especially Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).