ECOLOGICAL RITUALS FOR THE DEEP WORLD

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In October 2020, a group of solemn figures dressed in red gowns and veils, their faces painted white, silently processed over a fire-scarred landscape of ash and dead trees in southern California. They were members of the Red Rebel Brigade, associated with Extinction Rebellion Los Angeles, at the Lake Fire burn site in the Angeles National Forest, north of Santa Clarita, California. According to Extinction Rebellion Los Angeles's Facebook page, one participant observed that, "The destruction of the forests and all life that has been wrought by climate change, and in this case, by the devastating wildfires, was so deeply palpable as I looked out into the barren and desolate landscape." The post continued: "The Red Rebel Brigade both acknowledges the deep grief that the destruction of earth and life causes us to feel, while also reminding us that we MUST change, and that CHANGE IS POSSIBLE."

The Red Rebels' procession across a devastated landscape is one example of many kinds of spiritual but not explicitly religious contemporary rituals addressing environmental grief. Ceremonial practices that mourn the loss of nonhuman life due to human actions express sacred relationships with the other-than-human living world, although these practices often take place in secular spaces, such as public parks, town squares, urban streets, and even highways.

Much of my research has focused on spiritual expressions found outside institutional religious settings at nature sanctuaries, ecstatic dance events, ancestral skills gatherings, transformational festivals like Burning Man, and environmental protests. I am particularly interested in how ritual practices responding to environmental grief express relationships with other species. In the article "Ritual Responses to Environmental Apocalypse in Activist Communities," I describe these practices as *ecological rituals* that draw attention to our interconnected relationships with the other-than-human world. Of course, many other ritualized activities, such as land restoration practices, are also ecological rituals, but it is those responding to grief that I want to discuss in this essay.

In a 2003 article "Ritual Theory and the Environment," ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes describes some ways in which people are turning to rituals such as tree ordination, symbolic walks re-enacting the story of evolution, and ritualizing prairie burnings for restoring ecosystems as "effective means of saving the planet from environmental destruction." But in what ways are these rituals effective in "saving the planet"? Grimes published another essay in 2002 about ritual and the environment that was based on a performance piece, "Performance is Currency in the Deep World's Gift Economy: An Incantatory Riff for a Global Medicine Show." Grimes' "riff" is on an anecdote that poet Gary Snyder recounts in his book, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), in which a woman asks Snyder, "If we have made such good use of animals, eating them, singing about them, drawing them, riding them, and dreaming about them, what do they get back from us?" "Excellent question," replies Snyder, "The Ainu say that the deer, salmon, and bear like our music and are fascinated by our languages." "So," continues Snyder, "we sing to the fish or the game, speak words to them, say grace. Periodically, we dance for them. A song for your supper. Performance is currency in the deep world's gift economy." I would add, "We grieve for them" to Snyder's list. Following Snyder and Grimes, what might performances like the mourning procession of Red Rebels across a fire-devastated landscape mean for the "deep world" of other-than-human beings?

Ecological rituals bind human lives to the other-than-human world by calling into question boundaries between self and other (the living and the dead, human and land, human and other animal). Rituals for the deep world involving actions, gestures, fake blood, animal masks, coffins, red robes, and other props, make, re-make, erode, transcend, and cross species boundaries. These ecological rituals express kinship relationships between human and other-than-human and, *at the same time*, constitute these relationships.

The Red Rebel Brigade procession mourned losses due to a devastating wildfire: a forest gone, homes destroyed, animal lives lost. The procession pointed to larger losses due to climate-change-fueled disasters around the

world—the "destruction . . . wrought by climate change." How do we relate and respond to huge and often distant climate-related losses? Perhaps we do so through our relationship to more intimate losses, the ones we encounter directly: a burn scar near our homes or a dead animal at the side of the road. We might mourn by getting involved in direct action to draw attention to climate change We might mourn through ceremony. Grief in this case is an expression of deeply felt bonds with other species and is a significant factor in creating those bonds and encouraging us to take action.

Take roadkill for example. The well-known nature writer Barry Lopez (1945-2020), author of *Horizon*, *Arctic Dreams*, *Of Wolves and Men,* and many other books, had a habit of removing dead animals from highways. He made ceremonies for them with burial and prayer. In 1998 he published a slim book, *Apologia*, about his experiences with roadkill on a 1989 trip from Oregon to Indiana:

> South of Broken Bow, at dawn, I cannot avoid an immature barn swallow. It hangs by its head, motionless in the slats of the grill. . . The raccoons and, later, a red fox carry like sacks of wet gravel and sand. Each animal is like a solitary child's shoe in the road. Once a man asked, "Why do you bother?" You never know, I said. The ones you give some semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, may have been like seers in a parallel culture. It is an act of respect, a technique of awareness."

In another tender piece of writing on roadkill, "The Doe's Song," an essay published in *Orion* magazine, author Leath Tonino describes how he began tallying dead animals on the road during his travels across country, organizing his tally by species. He writes, "I have tried to say goodbye, I have tried many ways, many times, to say goodbye. The most we can do is pause, pray, give thanks, apologize, make ceremonies, make them a part of the very life that kills other lives." One night he was driving with a friend who hit a doe on the road. He can offer no solace to his friend, nor to the doe. He wonders: "

> And what if the doe by the side of the road is not a deer. What if the doe is an aquifer, an ocean, the night's very darkness? What if the doe is the once black soil? What if the car that hit the doe is a light switch, a faucet, a new shirt? What if the car is our everyday experience, our reality, our modern way, and what if it is constantly murdering the smooth brown bodies we love?"

In the end he sings a song: "I sang that gentle tune, the tune for the doe, the song of goodbye, which I still remember today, years later."

Like Lopez's burials, the doe's song is a performance for the deep world, a rite of loss and mourning. Such ceremonies or "techniques of awareness," as Lopez calls them, constitute relationships of respect, include care for nonhuman others, and encourage identification with these others as belonging to a network of kin. Lopez's and Tonino's stories of ritually caring for animal kin killed by cars and environmental-protest performances like the Red Rebel procession, model ways of acting in the face of grief for the suffering of other species. They honor nonhuman lives that have been destroyed by human actions, but they also aim to have an impact on observers. Images of Lopez burying roadkill and Tonino singing for a doe change how we see roadkill. The sharp contrast between the Red Rebels' blood-red robes and an ashen landscape makes a striking image, beautiful and tragic, of climate-fueled disaster. It sends a message to participants and observers that change is necessary and draws attention to the scarred land as something sacred, worthy of grieving.

In a similar fashion, holding funerals for other animals at environmental protests reminds us of our connection to other species and our responsibilities to them. In 2018, Extinction Rebellion (XR) protests spread around the world, beginning in the United Kingdom by blocking bridges and roads with crowds of protesters and demanding attention to the climate crisis. These XR protests featured various performances, such as throwing fake blood on public monuments and buildings and staging die-ins and funerals for extinct and

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endangered species. Large and small-scale XR and other climate protests received significant media coverage around the world for the two years before the pandemic and have continued to attract public attention since 2021. XR was especially visible at COP 25 (Conference of Parties: a gathering of world leaders to work on climate issues) in Spain in 2019 and COP 26 in Scotland in 2021. XR's website lists groups in eighty-six countries and protests by these groups may include a few people or thousands.

The bodies of protesters acting together on city streets, in museums, and in front of town squares, embassies, and stock exchanges transformed public, secular spaces into sacred spaces of commemoration, just as Barry Lopez transformed a highway shoulder into a ceremonial site. "Our Earth is Dying," read the lament on a Youth Climate Strike website, inspired by then 14-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's 2018 school strike for climate. In January 2020, as Australia burned, youth-led climate strikes and XR protests called for vigils to bring attention to the dead and dying, human and nonhuman, as well as the destruction of important spiritual and cultural places of Indigenous Australians. The so-called "Black Summer" bushfires of 2019/2020 killed billions of other animals and at least thirty-three humans. In November 2021, Extinction Rebellion Australia held a koala funeral march that included a person wearing black clothes and a black veil tolling a bell, some Red Rebels, a funeral band, and a huge koala puppet called Blinky, composed of a koala head, and a skeleton with fur peeling off, screaming and smoking as if on fire.

Funeral processions like the koala funeral march are a striking ritual tactic employed by XR and other protest organizers that emphasize our shared endangered future and our kinship with other animals. In Bath, England in 2024, XR and the Red Rebel Brigade organized the Funeral for Nature procession that included four hundred Red Rebels in flowing red gowns and hundreds of mourners in black. A funeral bier with a white figure lying in a bed of moss and plants represented Mother Earth and was carried by pallbearers dressed in green robes. Drummers played a funeral march as the procession made its way through the city to an ancient abbey. Sarah Fraser, a participant interviewed for an ITV news story, made black hats with animals on them to wear in the procession. She explained, "It's great to bring the species that we're talking about into the procession with us." These funeral-protests challenge assumptions about what and who is of value, reminding participants and observers of our interconnected relationships with other species by using practices of identification.

This kind of kinship and identification with the other-than-human world is expressed especially clearly in Red Rebel Brigade performances at environmental protests. Red Rebels are performance artists with origins in the 1990s. Although their performances are totally silent, Red Rebels communicate through emotion. At one protest/performance, Red Rebels circulated a flyer that read,

> We are your blood; that of our planet, the blood of all extinguished species, of our burning forests, our dying oceans, our polluted rivers. We are the blood of all the past and future casualties of climate, of the war against the planet. . . . We are the blood of the Indigenous people fighting for their right to exist, to preserve their culture, to save our world. We are the children and the animals. We are trees and the flowers. . . . We mourn our losses now to help you awaken."

For Red Rebels, kinship is expressed with the idea of shared blood as well as sacrificial blood of the "casualties of climate." Processions in which protesters identify with dead and dying animals intend to "awaken" observers to the ways in which we are always connected to and in relationship with other species.

In other rites of mourning organized by XR activists, identification with other species is expressed by the way participants position themselves as vulnerable bodies, lying on city streets, drawing attention to vulnerable species. Cyclists filling the air with the sounds of bees swarmed the Tate Modern Museum in London in 2019 and collapsed at the entrance to symbolize colony collapse. In 2023, die-ins were staged at the New York Natural History Museum near a statue of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. In Frome, England, in 2018, funeral processions with pallbearers wearing felt animal masks made by a local artist carried a coffin draped with the XR logo while musicians played a funeral march, and one protester read a list of extinct and endangered species.

XR was not the first organization to hold such funerals. Some years before the founding of XR, the first International Remembrance Day for Lost Species was held in 2011. According to Nick Hunt's blog, "A Bell for Lost Species" on the *Dark Mountain Project* website, annual observations of this day have included "funeral pyres for the great auk in Scotland and Wales, a candlelit vigil for butterflies in Belgium, and cairns for lost species appearing from Sweden to the Galapagos Islands." As rites of grief, these funerals and die-ins bring the concerns of nonhumans visibly and audibly into public spaces and ritually constitute our relationships of care for them.

Protesters express ultimate values with their vulnerable and precarious bodies: values such as the integrity of the planet and our intimate connections with other species facing extinction, who, like us, deserve a livable future. Climate activists make visible the disruptions of climate change and other forms of life on Earth that are being affected, as well as identifying Indigenous communities and poor communities disproportionately bearing the brunt of climate change. Often invisible "others," humans and other-than-humans, are brought into public view when activists' bodies assemble in the streets, referencing the lives of suffering others, symbolized by masks of or coffins for extinct animals, mournful music, and blood spilled performatively.

By processing through and occupying public spaces, using blood and ritualized actions such as lying in front of statues to disrupt everyday routines, these activists' performances bring grief and endangerment into public awareness. In the essay "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," philosopher Judith Butler argues that protesters' bodies moving together transform the meanings of public spaces. Butler explains that protesting bodies create *alliances* that express the society protesters want to bring into being and temporarily sever the order that exists between public space and state power. According to Butler, "Bodies . . . find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time those material environments are part of the action." Funerals for extinct species and other climate protests occupy and reconfigure secular spaces, such as museums and city squares, into sacred spaces of mourning, demanding we respond to the climate crisis.

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As rites of grief (and hope for change), climate protests consecrate the streets and act out utopian aspirations in public view. Through the physical process of dressing like extinct species, carrying Mother Earth on a bier, identifying with other species and with marginalized human communities, climate protesters enact the social order they want to bring about. Their actions are interventions that turn streets that carry cars burning fossil fuels into sites of mourning and hope for a different future. Ecological rituals, from praying and burying roadkill to marching in funeral processions for extinct species, are responses to eco-grief that have the potential for healing individuals, communities, and relationships, especially after climate-fueled disasters such as catastrophic wildfires. Whether intimate care for roadside dead or global climate actions, these rites of grief are gift offerings to the deep world and to ourselves.

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