

Encounters with Trees:

A Study of Extraordinary Experiences in Nature

By Chelsea Brady

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of a Master of Arts in Ecology & Spirituality

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

There has been much focus in recent years on plant intelligence and the possibility of communication between trees, but very little on the possibility of communication between humans and trees. This dissertation centers on people's encounters with trees—moments of connection during which ~~a~~ humans experience the 'beingness' of trees. I use the definition of 'encounter' given by Stephan Harding as: 'the being, coming forth from itself as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that's beyond your intellect, in a way that's much more deeply intuitive, and much harder to express'.¹ Employing semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological approach, this research aims to discover what these encounters can entail and how they affect the people who experience them.



I found that people were having profound experiences with trees that were sometimes as extreme as changing their perception of physical reality. Other experiences were more like casual conversations, but some nevertheless had effects as significant as changes in career. While existing research explores the communication between trees and the attitudes of humans concerning trees, this study brings new context to the interactions and rich relationships between humans and trees, as well as the effects these encounters may have for both the humans and trees involved.

Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest in the field of plant communication, particularly concerning trees and their ability to share resources and information. Suzanne Simard's book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, demonstrates how trees use underground networks of mycorrhizal fungi to share resources, identify their kin, and even send warning signals.¹ The book is a bestseller, and her TED Talk, "How Trees Talk to Each Other" has over 2.3 million views on YouTube, demonstrating significant public interest in trees and their capabilities.² Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate — Discoveries from A Secret World* was also a New York Times bestseller, and Richard Powers' tree-centered novel *The Overstory* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2019.³ It is clear that trees are drawing the attention of audiences in the West, generating interest in how they function and what is happening beneath the soil.

Despite this affinity—and the developing evidence that trees are capable of communication—there is currently less attention focused on interactions between trees and humans. This dissertation explores the experiences of people who reported having interactions with trees. I collected their stories through semi-structured interviews and took a phenomenological approach to their analysis. I designed these interviews to

¹ Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021), p. 160, p. 254, p. 277.

² Suzanne Simard, *How trees talk to each other* [video]. 2016 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un2yBgIAxYs> > [accessed 9 September 2025].

³ The Pulitzer Prizes, <<https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/richard-powers>> [accessed June 30, 2025].

investigate what happens during encounters with trees—in other words, moments in which humans perceived trees as more than inanimate objects, and in some cases as conscious beings. I will first explore existing scholarship around plant intelligence, including the types of experiments that have been conducted in recent years and the evidence in support of plant communication and awareness. I will also highlight several of the preeminent authors exploring this space today. I will then examine foundational literature surrounding spiritual experiences and more modern scholarship focused on anomalous or paranormal experiences. To conclude my literature review, I will explore the presence of sentient trees in folklore and pop culture. I will then present my methodology for this qualitative research, which includes the use of semi-structured interviews, a phenomenological approach, and thematic analysis.

In the discussion of my results, I will present my research findings and will analyze the shared qualities and patterns that emerged in the course of this research. The shared qualities of these experiences include the time of year they happened, their unexpectedness, and their duration. The shared patterns include the perception of gender, voices, ages, and senses of trees. I will also explore what participants shared regarding the timescales of trees and their apparent willingness to help or be helped. I will explain the effects of these experiences on the participants before sharing a personal reflection. Lastly, I will summarize the research and its contribution to scholarship in the conclusion.

Reflexivity & Academic Rational

It is commonly known that trees produce the oxygen, which we inhale, and absorb the carbon dioxide we exhale. However, this connection between humans and

trees goes far beyond the physical exchange of molecules. Humans throughout history have shared a connection with trees, as demonstrated by folklore and nature-related beliefs all over the world. In Scandinavian folklore, Yggdrasil is the name of the World Tree, which connects dimensions. The Tree of Life is a concept shared by many cultures all over the world.⁴ To historic druids in Celtic parts of the world, trees were considered sacred. We also share a common evolutionary ancestor with trees—we have both a biological relation and a cultural relationality.⁵ These examples demonstrate a long history of connection between humans and trees.

Although the climate crisis may seem to imply that modern peoples have lost some of this reverence for trees, this is not universally the case. In the last twenty years, courts in multiple countries have begun to grant legal rights to natural entities. In New Zealand, for example, a former national park called Te Urewera has been recognized as a ‘legal entity’ with ‘all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person’.⁶ New Zealand also recognized the Whanganui River as a ‘legal entity with standing in its own right’, granting the river legal personhood.⁷ Nature as a whole has been granted legal rights in Ecuador as well—according to the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008, nature ‘has

⁴ Margaret Davies, ‘The Consciousness of Trees’, *Law and Literature*, 27 (2015), 217-35, (p. 220).

⁵ Moody, E.R.R., Álvarez-Carretero, S., Mahendrarajah, T.A. *et al.*, ‘The nature of the last universal common ancestor and its impact on the early Earth system’, *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, 8 (2024), 1654-1666

⁶ Te Urewera Act 2014: section 11(1) cited in Sophie Caillon, Georgina Cullman, Bas Verschuuren, and Eleanor J. Sterling, ‘Moving beyond the human–nature dichotomy through biocultural approaches including ecological well-being in resilience indicators’, *Ecology and Society*, 22 (4): 27 (2017), section: ‘Nature Should Be Given a Voice’.

⁷ Tūtohu Whakatupua, Whanganui Iwi and the Crown (2012) section 2.1.2 cited in Caillon et al., ‘Moving beyond the human–nature dichotomy through biocultural approaches including ecological well-being in resilience indicators’, section: ‘Nature Should Be Given a Voice’.

the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution'.⁸ Though these kinds of cases are still rare, it is possible they could set a precedent when it comes to the rights of nature and the way humans consider the forms of life therein.

I was compelled to do this research because of my personal curiosity about the intelligence of the natural world and because of an encounter I had at a Neolithic site in France. During a Sacred Geography lecture some weeks before, a professor had made the suggestion to listen to stones, saying that we would hear them. Though this was not a personal belief of mine at the time, I wanted to keep an open mind and I was curious about what she meant. One day, as I was at a site with numerous megaliths, I decided to try to listen to a stone. I did not expect anything to happen, but I did experience what I perceived as awareness and communication on the part of the stone. On the way out of the site, due to my nearsightedness, I briefly mistook some sheep in the field for stones. This made me consider why it is that I consider sheep to be alive, but not stones. I wondered if it was perhaps their human-like characteristics that led to this assumption. For example, sheep breathe, they bleed, they have lifecycles we witness—as opposed to stones, who appear mostly unchanged to us over our human lifetimes and do not appear to be subject to the same limits as humans, animals, or even trees. This unexpected encounter deeply affected the way I regard organic forms in nature as well as what I consider to be alive and conscious. It made me curious to learn whether other people had had similar experiences.

⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, Title II, Ch.7 'Rights of nature': Art.71, cited in cited in Caillon et al., 'Moving beyond the human–nature dichotomy through biocultural approaches including ecological well-being in resilience indicators', section: 'Nature Should Be Given a Voice'.

For this dissertation, I chose to focus on trees because of the surge in public interest over the past decade and the emerging research on plant intelligence. Additionally, I had not had any encounters with trees at the time and I believed this would minimize bias in my research. In an unplanned turn of events, I was able to meet up with a research participant some months after our interview and we went to see the oldest tree in the city where I live. Though I did not perceive any direct communication from a tree, we did have a shared encounter that I will explain in the analysis section of this dissertation. Because of my experiences with the stone and the tree, I recognize that I may be biased toward seeing the experiences of my research participants as true or real events. I have kept this in mind in conducting the interviews and writing my analysis. In any case, I do not attempt to assess the reality or validity of these experiences; my approach is to present them in the research participants' own words and evaluate them from an academic perspective using a phenomenological framework.

Literature Review

The primary source material for this dissertation is the set of twelve interviews I conducted with participants throughout the world. The following is a summary of secondary sources, which include previous scholarship in the fields of plant intelligence, tree-related lore, and spiritual experiences.

Plant Intelligence

I began by researching plant intelligence to gain an understanding of the field and the arguments being presented for and against tree communication. Monica

Gagliano is an ecologist in the field of plant intelligence; her sometimes-controversial experiments have advanced and challenged ideas of what plants are capable of and what kinds of intelligence they possess. She acknowledged that by and large, 'plants are still generally considered to be passive and insensitive organisms, or, worse, simply not important'.⁹ This represents a common bias in the western worldview known as *plant blindness*, a term coined by botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, which they define as:

- (a) the inability to see or notice the plants in one's environment;
- (b) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs;
- (c) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms that belong to the Plant Kingdom; and
- (d) the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of consideration.¹⁰

Plant blindness gives a name to the way Western culture can be dismissive of plants and regard them as insignificant. In *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, author Matthew Hall similarly warns against the dismissal of plants, explaining:

The backgrounding of plants is dangerous because it severs opportunities for dialogical interaction between humans and the environments in which they live. Lacking in meaningful relationships of kinship, care, and solidarity, we risk complete human ecological dislocation.¹¹

From this perspective, appreciating and developing relationships with plants allows us to engage with the ecosystems around us as part of a community. Hall encourages

⁹ Monica Gagliano, 'Seeing Green: The Re-discovery of Plants and Nature's Wisdom', *Societies*, 3 (2013), 147-57 (p. 149).

¹⁰ James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, 'Preventing Plant Blindness', *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (1999): 82-86, p. 82.

¹¹ Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (SUNY Press), 2011, p. 14.

readers to see plants as active members of this community as well. He argued, 'Like other living beings, plants actively live and seek to flourish'.¹² His views align with those of Gagliano, who challenges the view that plants are merely passive organisms. Gagliano wrote, '...plants, like all *living* organisms, are very sensitive and active...using numerous signaling systems to sense, assess, respond and even facilitate each other by *actively* acquiring information from their surroundings'.¹³ Both she and Hall emphasize the active nature of plants, providing a contrast to the interpretation of plants as passive organisms. Gagliano explains that plants are able to detect light, use chemical signals to communicate with other plants in their environment, and can even 'detect and respond to sound waves or vibrations in their environment'.¹⁴ These kinds of capabilities suggest an active intelligence and awareness in plants, which could challenge traditional Western views of plant life.

Monica Gagliano's book *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* details her laboratory experiments with plants interspersed with stories of shamanic experiences with plants and native peoples in Peru, Australia, and the United States. She also presents the argument that plants are capable of communication, explaining that, '...plants are capable of processing information about their neighbors, both above and below ground, and of sharing information about the resources available in their

¹² Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 13.

¹³ Gagliano, 'Seeing Green', p. 149.

¹⁴ Gagliano, 'Seeing Green', p. 150-151.

surroundings.¹⁵ Gagliano includes thorough explanations of her experiments that showcase these capabilities. She also discovered that plants have memory, meaning they can learn and adapt their behavior, through her experiments with mimosa plants.¹⁶

Both Hall and Gagliano highlight the ways that humans have a tendency to measure intelligence by human or animal standards. In *Plants as Persons*, Hall wrote, 'While such studies of moral consideration for animals proliferate, studies that focus on arguing for the moral consideration of plants are rare'.¹⁷ He also explored the reasons for this, investigating how this 'zoocentric' bias developed and why it persists to this day.¹⁸ He argues that Western humans have long held a bias toward seeing animals as intelligent, but have left plants out of consideration entirely. Gagliano focuses more on human-centric bias, writing, 'We seem to have a longstanding tradition of differentiating ourselves from nonhuman others through the things that those others lack'.¹⁹ She points out the way we position ourselves as humans in relation to these nonhuman others, describing '...our deep-rooted anthropocentric habit of using the human as the reference point, the gold standard from which to measure "down" and pass judgment on the nature of those others'.²⁰ From Gagliano's perspective, modern science is often writing off or

¹⁵ Monica Gagliano and Suzanne Simard, *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* (North Atlantic Books, 2018), p. 27.

¹⁶ Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, p. 65.

¹⁷ Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, p. 69.

²⁰ Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*, p. 69.

ruling out new evidence for plant intelligence because in Western minds, this has long been considered impossible or even ridiculous.

Anthony Trewavas, another prominent author on plant intelligence, demonstrates this anthropocentric bias in his paper 'Aspects of Plant Intelligence'. While he makes a case for the intelligence of plants—Hall even called him 'plant intelligence's most vocal proponent'—Trewavas nevertheless describes plants as 'lower organisms' and measures their intelligence in human terms.²¹ He argues that humans are 'clearly more intelligent' than other species, possessing 'superlative capabilities'.²² This seems to encapsulate the 'measuring down' that Gagliano referred to, though he does ultimately urge readers to appreciate plants and their success as a life form. He wrote, 'For centuries, plants have been regarded as passive creatures...yet they dominate every landscape, representing 99% of the biomass of the Earth'.²³ He failed to specify that this does not apply to all cultures; there are many cultures—namely Indigenous ones—that consider plants to be intelligent beings. And yet even in the Western world, Trewavas explains, '...the investigation of plant intelligence is becoming a serious scientific endeavor'.²⁴ Thanks in large part to the mainstream success of books like Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree*, as well as advances in related scientific fields, experiments around plant intelligence are indeed becoming more common.

²¹ Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 12.; Anthony Trewavas, 'Aspects of Plant Intelligence', *Annals of Botany*, 92 (2003), 1-20, p. 1.

²² Trewavas, 'Aspects of Plant Intelligence', p. 1.

²³ Anthony Trewavas, 'Plant intelligence: Mindless mastery', *Nature*, 415 (2002), p. 841.

²⁴ Trewavas, 'Plant intelligence: Mindless mastery', p. 841.

Hall has similarly called for deeper appreciation of plants and their significance. Unlike Trewavas, Hall highlights that Indigenous knowledge systems have long acknowledged the idea of plant sentience. He echoes Trewavas, however, in that significant changes are taking place in the scientific community.²⁵ It may be that there is enough evidence emerging to turn the tide of common belief—perhaps a first step in eradicating plant blindness. Hall also explained what it means to see plants as persons, stating:

As persons, plants are not naively thought to have human faculties. They are understood to be living beings with their own perspective, and with the ability to communicate in their own way.²⁶

That is to say, viewing plants as persons does not require seeing them as human people or even measuring their abilities by any human scale—it means appreciating them for their own unique capabilities.

From this perspective, we do not have to view plants as having a particular level of human intelligence the way an animal behaviorist might contextualize the intelligence of a dog—i.e. that a border collie possesses the intelligence of a human child.²⁷

According to Hall, to see plants as persons requires viewing them on their own terms and as possessing their own kind of intelligence. Among these Western researchers and writers, some support the concept of sentient, even thinking trees—an idea many Indigenous communities have accepted as truth for thousands of years. The criteria for personhood in much of Indigenous thought is not limited to the possession of human or

²⁵ Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 135.

²⁶ Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 106-106.

²⁷ John W. Pilley and Alliston K. Reid, 'Border collie comprehends object names as verbal referents', *Behavioural Processes*, 86 (2011): 184-95.

animal traits. Ojibwe people, for example, view plants as persons ‘because they themselves behave as such’. This point of view enables a wider definition of personhood without such anthropocentric or zoocentric biases. In much of the Western world,

Trees in Popular Culture

Sentient trees have long existed in folklore throughout the Western world. Perhaps the best-known example, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy featured the ents, a species of intelligent trees who could speak. They are portrayed as wise, slow-moving beings with the ability to communicate in their own language as well as with humans and other beings.²⁸ *The Magic Faraway Tree* by Enid Blyton features a tree that connects the earth and the heavens—much like Yggdrasil, the world tree of Norse mythology.²⁹ As Margaret Davies explained in her article *The Consciousness of Trees*, ‘For non-Indigenous culture, a wide spectrum of ideas about trees and forests as dangerous, magical, nurturing, or as economic resources, have been developed and represented in many classics’.³⁰ This again demonstrates our stories history with trees—even for non-Indigenous cultures, the fascination or affinity with trees persists. Because of their massive cultural impact and lasting influence, these stories could be considered as priming people in some way or cause them to be more likely to see trees as living beings, capable of communication. In more recent times, James Cameron’s

²⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of the Lord of the Rings* (HarperCollins, 1997), p. 450.

²⁹ Enid Blyton, *The Magic Faraway Tree* (Egmont, 2014).

³⁰ Margaret Davies, ‘The Consciousness of Trees’, *Law and Literature*, 27 (2015): pp. 217-35, p. 219.

film *Avatar* featured a sacred tree at the center of a culture wherein nonhuman people went to the tree for ceremonies and healing.³¹

Avatar was released in 2009 and became the highest-grossing film of all time.³² With that level of cultural resonance, it could be interpreted as having influenced the collective consciousness in the modern West with regard to people's views of trees and their connections to them. In a 2018 study by Martha Norkunas titled 'Are Trees Spiritual? Narratives about Human-Tree Relationships', one participant commented:

I believe anything that is living is sacred, including trees...When asked about the spiritual aspect of trees, I recall *Avatar*, a movie where one central tree is the life support for an entire species.³³

This quote shows that popular movies can inform people's belief systems. Even if this was already a belief this person held, *Avatar* made enough of an impression that they recalled the film when considering the intersection of trees and spirituality. Bron Taylor also explored the effects of this film in his book *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*, as he saw it as 'especially significant' and felt it could be a powerful vehicle for advancing nature-based spirituality.³⁴ The participant in Norkunas' study seems to confirm this belief.

Though perhaps not on the same level as *Avatar*, nonfiction and scientific research regarding trees have also made their way to mainstream audiences. In recent years, the Japanese practice of forest bathing became a popular topic of interest to

³¹ James Cameron, *Avatar*, Twentieth Century Fox, 2009.

³² 'All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses', Box Office Mojo, 21 July 2019, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190721143157/https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>> [accessed 7 July 2025].

³³ Martha Norkunas, 'Are Trees Spiritual? Narratives about Human-Tree Relationships', *Narrative Culture*, 4. (2017), 169-84 (p. 178).

³⁴ Bron Taylor, 'Prologue: *Avatar* as Rorschach' in *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

Westerners with the presentation of evidence regarding its many benefits for human health, including stress reduction and disease prevention.³⁵ Suzanne Simard's book *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest* also made a significant cultural impact. Simard is a scientist and author whose discoveries helped bring knowledge of mycelial networks and tree communication to popular culture. As previously stated, *Finding the Mother Tree* was a bestseller. Simard herself was named one of *Time Magazine's* '100 Most Influential People of 2024', demonstrating that her influence has been noted by mainstream publications.³⁶ Though her book was based on her experiments and forestry science, it reached a wider audience and evidently sparked general cultural interest. Simard also shared the wisdom she received from friends in Indigenous communities including the Coast Salish people, who believe trees have personhood; they see them as teachers who are 'contributing to this earth'.³⁷ Though this belief precedes modern science around plant intelligence, it also aligns with Gagliano's assertion that plants are active participants in their environments.³⁸ Throughout her decades of research, Simard has come to believe that this kind of Indigenous worldview is the way forward. She explained, 'This begins by recognizing that trees and plants have agency...They cooperate, make decisions, learn,

³⁵ M. Antonelli, G. Barbieri, and D. Donelli, 'Effects of forest bathing (shinrin-yoku) on levels of cortisol as a stress biomarker: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *Int J Biometeorol*, 63: 1117-34 (2019); Q Li, 'Effects of forest environment (Shinrin-yoku/Forest bathing) on health promotion and disease prevention -the Establishment of "Forest Medicine"', *Environ Health Prev Med* (2022), 27: 43.

³⁶ Jeffrey Kluger, 'The 100 Most Influential People of 2024: Suzanne Simard', *Time Magazine*, <<https://time.com/6964217/suzanne-simard/>>, accessed July 5, 2025.

³⁷ Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*, p. 66.

³⁸ Gagliano, 'Seeing Green', p. 149.

and remember—qualities we normally ascribe to sentience, wisdom, intelligence’.³⁹

Simard’s book not only presented her research, but urged readers to view trees as more than the resources they are often perceived to be; she called for this ‘transformative thinking’ as a way to address the climate crisis.⁴⁰ Though Simard does not report any religious experiences in her book, it is clear that decades spent in forests have had a significant impact on her worldview.

Extraordinary Experiences & Encounters with Trees

Contemporary discussions of spiritual experiences will likely include the writings of William James, whose 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remains one of the foremost texts on the subject. James wrote, ‘by their fruits ye shall know them’—meaning religious experiences are recognizable by their effects on the people who lived them.⁴¹ Though the experiences described in this dissertation were not necessarily classified as religious, his criteria help to frame these accounts and provide a way to evaluate them from an academic perspective. These criteria, which James believed to be the markers of religious experiences, are ‘ineffability’, a ‘noetic quality’, ‘transiency’, and ‘passivity’. Of ineffability he said, ‘...it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words’. In other words, mystical experiences are hard to describe; people often lack the vocabulary to express what they have personally experienced. As for the second attribute, ‘noetic quality’, James explained, ‘...mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are

³⁹ Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*, p. 294.

⁴⁰ Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*, p. 294.

⁴¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (New American Library, 1958), p. 34.

states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect'. That is to say, these experiences show or teach experiencers something that they did not or could not otherwise know based on common knowledge. The third quality James listed is 'transiency', and he explained, 'Mystical states cannot be sustained for long.' He elaborated that most mystical states do not persist for more than two hours, 'except in rare cases'. This shows that James viewed time as a significant element of mystical experiences. The fourth criterion is 'passivity', the feeling that a person's 'own will' is 'in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power'.⁴² James believed that people having mystical experiences may feel as though they are not in control, or there is a sense that some other power is in control. David B. Yaden and Andrew Newberg followed on the tradition of James in *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives*. Their book elaborates on James' work in a modern context and explores other scholarship regarding spiritual experiences, including that of Rudolf Otto.⁴³

Rudolf Otto was a German philosopher who is another of the best-known authors on religious experience, and most famously originated the idea of the 'dual character of the numinous consciousness'—that is the idea that what he called 'numinous' experiences are often marked by either a sense of fear or a sense of bliss. He named these aspects '*mysterium tremendum*', the quality that would invoke fear and trembling, and '*mysterium fascinans*', for its quality of fascination and allure.⁴⁴ Similar to James'

⁴² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 292-293.

⁴³ D.B. Yaden and A. Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴⁴ Rudolf Otto and J.W. Harvey, *The Idea of the Holy* (OUP USA, 1958), p. 31, 140.

criteria of religious experience, Otto's qualities of numinous experiences can also be used to evaluate the encounters described by research participants. Both of the aforementioned philosophers specifically considered religious experiences, however, and the experiences described in this research could also fall into the category of paranormal experiences.

Jack Hunter is one of the foremost academic experts on the paranormal, high strangeness, and anomalous experiences. His book *Manifesting Spirits* details his research and field work with a spirit lodge in Bristol, UK, which includes his own brushes with spirit possession. His chapter 'High Strangeness and Anthropology: Ontological Osmosis in a World of Many Worlds', in the book *Paranormal Ruptures: Critical Approaches to Exceptional Experiences*, examines the anomalous experiences of three anthropologists who blurred the typical lines of researcher-subject and participated in rituals or cultures they studied. During their time in the field, they witness extraordinary, sometimes unexplainable events. In the aforementioned chapter, Hunter puts forth the idea that the remarkable events they experienced may not have been 'paranormal ruptures' but rather a 'form of osmosis through permeable membranes'.⁴⁵ This perspective would suggest that multiple realities exist and they may somehow overlap or bleed into each other.

On the other hand, there is also the possibility that all so-called extraordinary experiences are not literally happening, but are merely human perception or

⁴⁵ Jack Hunter, 'High Strangeness and Anthropology: Ontological Osmosis in a World of Many Worlds', in *Paranormal Ruptures: Critical Approaches to Exceptional Experiences*, ed. by Jacob Glazier (2023), p. 84-85.

imagination. Stewart Guthrie, author of *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, posited that:

We animate and anthropomorphize because, when we see something as alive or humanlike, we can take precautions. If we see it as alive we can, for example, stalk it or flee... If it turns out not to be alive or humanlike, we usually lose little by having thought it was...⁴⁶

Guthrie believes that our minds assign these attributes to what we see or experience in order to make ourselves feel safe and to make sense of the world around us. In other words, people's religious or paranormal experiences are not happening in a literal sense—they are only projecting humanlike traits onto nonhuman entities or objects so they will seem less unknown or unknowable. The application of the null hypothesis—the proposition that there is no effect or no relationship between phenomena or populations—would suggest that in fact, nothing at all is happening in those moments of perceived encounter.⁴⁷ From this perspective, all extraordinary or spiritual experiences including those in this study would be seen as hallucinations, figments of people's imaginations, or simply a human tendency to create meaning where there is none.

Based on existing research, it seems that humans do have a tendency to give meaning to their interactions or relationships with trees. Researchers L.M. Pearce, A. Davison, and J.B. Kirkpatrick interviewed citizens of a suburb of Melbourne, Australia

⁴⁶ Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Anne Marie Helmenstine, 'Null Hypothesis Definition and Examples', *ThoughtCo*, 9 June 2025, <thoughtco.com/definition-of-null-hypothesis-and-examples-605436> [accessed August 9, 2025].

about their encounters with trees in their own gardens. Their findings showed that ‘trees were experienced as active participants in urban life’.⁴⁸ They elaborate that:

Residents shared stories of how trees in their lives operated as friends, loved ones and teachers, and with whom there were enduring emotional bonds that contributed to a sense of mental well-being.⁴⁹

This shows that the perception of trees as more than inanimate objects, at least in the human perspective, is not unheard of even in a Western cultural context. People regularly experience trees as more than objects. Pearce et al. wrote that trees were seen as ‘significant others’ to many of their participants, and as ‘distinct living beings’.

Of one participant, they explain:

...As a child, Alison would play with trees, “feel them breathing” and “hear the blood running in them”. She referred to the fingers in the branching hand coming out of her Oak and wanted to plant a smooth barked gum because of the “...human-ness about it, the flesh tones, and the forms”...’.⁵⁰

This is another example of anthropomorphizing trees—what Guthrie would likely describe as ‘attributing to things and events more organization than they have’.⁵¹ The research participant cited above recalled the ‘fingers’ and ‘hand’ of a tree, but her perception of trees as being more-than-inanimate does not appear to be unique. Pearce et al write:

Participants primarily experience trees as active agents, as “doers” rather than as objects...⁵²

⁴⁸ L. M. Pearce, A. Davison, and J. B. Kirkpatrick, ‘Personal encounters with trees: The lived significance of the private urban forest’, *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 14 (2015), 1-7, (p. 1).

⁴⁹ Pearce et al., ‘Personal encounters with trees’, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Pearce et al., ‘Personal encounters with trees’, p. 4.

⁵¹ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 6.

⁵² Pearce et al., ‘Personal encounters with trees’, p. 5.



This research presents a challenge to the common Western view of trees as passive entities; it demonstrates that there are those who see trees as beings in their own right, with agency and conscious presence. This could be due to their cultural priming—reading ancient legends or *The Lord of the Rings*, or simply watching *Avatar*. In any case, for these research participants, their interactions with trees were significant enough to remember even decades later. They related to trees in the same way they related to significant human beings in their lives, which could be a result of the influence of popular stories, a genuine mutual connection with trees, or some combination of both.



Martha Norkunas' study on the spirituality of trees also explored people's relationships with trees. The results of these student interviews found that most participants did not believe trees have souls, because, 'they "were not self-aware and did not have a personality" or that they did not interact or talk back when you spoke to them or they could not hear, think, or talk'.⁵³ In other words, these participants saw human-like qualities as the criteria for having souls—much in the way that Gagliano and Hall assert that many people view human-like qualities as criteria for intelligence. Norkunas also pointed out responses from Saudi students, who similarly viewed human-like qualities as criteria for having souls—but this led them to believe that trees do have souls, due to their commonalities with human bodies. One participant even perceived trees as having blood, similar to the participant from the study by Pearce et al. noted above. Norkunas explained:

⁵³ Norkunas, 'Are Trees Spiritual?', p. 172.



...three Saudi men believed that trees have souls because they mirror the life processes of humans. “I do feel like trees have a soul because when you hit a tree, a liquid comes out of the tree. This is the same way with people; when you hit a person blood comes out”.⁵⁴

The idea that humanlike qualities indicate the presence of a soul was shared by a second Saudi participant—notably, another non-Westerner:

“I think trees have souls and can feel what is going around them. That’s why when they are not exposed to the sun they get sick, exactly like humans. Moreover, as drinking is important to us, it is also important to trees to grow”.⁵⁵

These quotes illustrate the way humans often anthropomorphize trees, especially as a qualification for the possession of a soul. Unlike the other participants in the study, however, the non-Westerners saw trees as having humanlike qualities, and therefore saw that as proof that trees *do* have souls. In other words, some of those that saw trees as being un-humanlike believed trees did not have souls, while others who saw trees as human-like believed they did have souls.

This was not unanimously the case, however, as others in the study saw trees as having souls without having to compare them to humans. One American man, for example, believed ‘trees do have souls...trees make us more aware of our connection with something larger than ourselves’.⁵⁶ This demonstrates that not every Westerner sees human traits as necessary qualifiers for being ensouled. Two participants in the study, one an American, even described the use of paper as an ‘abomination’. Both of these participants also believed that trees have souls, and expressed their view that

⁵⁴ Norkunas, ‘Are Trees Spiritual?’, p. 174.

⁵⁵ Norkunas, ‘Are Trees Spiritual?’, p. 174.

⁵⁶ Norkunas, ‘Are Trees Spiritual?’, p. 177.

humans need to change the way we interact with the environment.⁵⁷ These studies provide a sample of the vast range of views people may have when it comes to trees.

Defining Encounter

This dissertation examines the experiences of those who report having encounters with trees. For the purposes of this paper, the definition for this kind of encounter will come from the late ecologist Stephan Harding, who described it this way:

Encounter is when that intellectual structure vanishes, and you actually meet the being, as the being, coming forth from itself as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that's beyond your intellect, in a way that's much more deeply intuitive, and much harder to express.⁵⁸

The participants in this research had experiences that fit this description, and nearly all participants said the encounters were difficult to describe. Harding himself described the concept of 'encounter' based on his experiences researching muntjac deer for his PhD, but he did not limit this experience to animals. In his book *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*, Harding wrote of a forest:

...there was a profoundly healing sense of Rushbeds Wood as an integrated living intelligence...[the wood] in these moments seemed to be quite clearly and obviously alive, to have its unique personality and communicative power.⁵⁹

As an ecologist, Harding brought spiritual insight to his scientific career and background and was influenced by his own experiences in nature.

He also explained Western vs. non-Western views of nature and said the Western mind is of the belief that 'the whole of nature...is no more than a dead

⁵⁷ Norkunas, 'Are Trees Spiritual?', p. 180.

⁵⁸ Empathy Media, *Dr. Stephan Harding on Encounter*, [video]. 2024 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W190qhF2Yr8>> [accessed 18 December 2024].

⁵⁹ Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 23.

machine’.⁶⁰ This aligns with Wandsee and Schussler’s theory of ‘plant blindness’ as well as Hall’s description of the ‘backgrounding’ of plants in Western culture.

Summary of Literature Review



The scholarship cited above explores plant intelligence, representations of trees in popular media, and extraordinary or spiritual experiences, as well as several examples of people’s view of trees and the possibility of their sentience. While the field of plant intelligence is growing, there is still division within the field regarding the intelligence of plants and its relativity to that of humans—including whether this is even a fair comparison to make. Trees in popular media are often represented as having intelligence—either human-like or a unique intelligence of their own. In the case of Tolkien’s ents, for instance, the trees have some human-like qualities such as the ability to talk and walk, but they use their own language and are portrayed as possessing wisdom that surpasses that of humans. In the realm of extraordinary experience, I have explored the philosophies of early scholars such as William James and Rudolf Otto, as well as more modern scholars including Jack Hunter and Stephan Harding. These sources provide the basis for the exploration of modern encounters with trees and the experiences told to me by the research participants in this study. This literature will guide and frame the analysis of research findings detailed in this dissertation.

⁶⁰ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 25.

Methodology

Research Methods

The sources that informed my approach to this research were textbooks including *Qualitative Research Methods* by Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, Alan Bryman's *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, and *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers* by Judith Bell and Stephen Waters. My research was qualitative, consisting of one-on-one interviews conducted over Zoom. My semi-structured interviews followed a predetermined set of questions, but they flowed more like conversations, and I took care to leave space and time for them to unfold naturally. Because I was asking people to share intimate stories of their experiences, I did not want people to feel rushed or uncomfortable. I tried to create a relaxed and non-judgemental atmosphere so that participants felt safe to share what they were comfortable sharing. I believe this approach led to richer interviews and a depth of exploration that would not otherwise have been available. The participants and I were able to converse freely and I was able to dig deeper into stories or comments that participants did not feel were particularly significant. I was also better able to establish patterns among the experiences shared, as we had time to explore details about the circumstances of these encounters. The most significant challenge of beginning this research was finding and recruiting participants, as experiences of this nature are either rare or not commonly discussed openly.

Recruiting Participants

Many Indigenous groups have traditionally viewed trees as sentient or intelligent beings. For the purposes of this research, I wanted to investigate how people in non-Indigenous Western cultures have come to believe in a worldview similar to those of some Indigenous groups, even if they were raised with Christian or materialist belief systems. Thus, the research explores how they came to regard trees in a way that many Indigenous cultures the world over have seen them for thousands of years without the influence of any such teachings.

I interviewed twelve participants who had experiences in countries including the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, Ireland, France, Spain, and the United States. I recruited participants through a variety of means; some were fellow students or acquaintances from nature-focused online classes and several were introduced to me by a member of my extended family. Most of the participants were volunteers from an online channel I belong to wherein people often discuss anomalous experiences in nature. The people in this group tend to have an open-mindedness that lends itself to research of this sort. I had also noticed over the course of our discussions that many of these people spent a lot of time in nature and were having or open to having mystical experiences. I received permission from the host of the channel to ask people to participate in my research. I also gave a short presentation in a Zoom meeting to show people what my research would be about. I clarified that their interviews would be anonymous, any data collected would be protected, and their stories would be treated with respect and care. To that end, all participants were assigned a number and the

pseudonyms used in this dissertation begin with the corresponding letter of the alphabet. For example, the pseudonym for Participant 1 is Andrea, for Participant 2 is Bonnie, and so on. None of the names in this dissertation are the real names of participants.

Semi-structured Interviews

When conducting the interviews for this dissertation, I took an informal, conversational approach. I encouraged participants to take as much time as they liked to tell their stories and include as much detail as they felt comfortable sharing. Bryman wrote of unstructured interviews, ‘a phenomenon like rambling can be viewed as providing information because it reveals something about the interviewee’s concerns’.⁶¹ I allowed time for rambling so that research participants would be able to share whatever was important to them about the experiences. This allowed me to discover what stood out to them about their encounters and what the most significant factors of the encounters were based on their memory of them. I had goals and a set of specific questions, however, so I did not want the interviews to be completely unstructured. For this reason, I went with a semi-structured interview format. In the book *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers*, Bell and Waters explained:

Freedom to allow the respondents to talk about what is of central significance to them rather than to the interviewer is clearly important, but a flexible structure to ensure all topics considered crucial to the study are covered does eliminate some of the problems of entirely unstructured interviews.⁶²

⁶¹ Alan Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 47.

⁶² Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), p. 214.

This explanation sums up precisely the reason I chose this approach—to give participants freedom while covering the subjects that were crucial to the research. With a strictly structured format, I believe I would have missed out on spontaneous revelations and details of their experiences that ended up being some of the most interesting points in the research.

To make sure participants knew they were safe to share this level of detail, I offered to share my own experiences—even those that could be deemed strange or paranormal. I also made sure to follow the lead of each participant when they described their experiences. For instance, if a participant used ‘he’ to describe a tree, I would also use ‘he’ or ‘him’ pronouns when asking follow-up questions about that tree. To use ‘it’ or another neutral pronoun could have been perceived as invalidating their perception or experience. If a participant gave me a name they had received for a tree—‘Grandfather Tree’, for example—I used that name to refer to the tree as well. I wanted to hear about their experiences exactly as they recalled them, without disrupting the memory, so I tried to go along with them as a sort of audience or companion to the memory, receiving the unfiltered recollection of what participants experienced.

This approach was helpful because it also produced new perspectives and spontaneous reflections from participants. Many of them said ‘I’ve never thought about this before’ and went on to give their theories of what was happening during their experiences. This added more dimension and context to the encounters they recalled. This approach also worked well because I was not trying to gather much quantitative data, but memories, emotions, and reactions. However, there are also weaknesses to qualitative research of this sort—for example, it is possible that my own bias could have

affected the interviews and analysis. I did my best to mitigate this risk, but with qualitative analysis there is the possibility. It was also very time-consuming to schedule interviews with people in many different time zones, to record the interviews, and finally transcribe them.⁶³ However, I also found the transcribing to be helpful as I was able to review the interviews and find points of interest that I missed while I was focused on interviewing.

Phenomenology and Thematic Analysis

I took a phenomenological approach to my research, as I did not wish to prove or disprove the validity of any of these encounters. My aim was to analyze these encounters as they were presented to me by participants and discover exactly what they believed they experienced. Stephan Harding wrote, ‘Modern science itself, for all its cool detachment, remains rooted in the soil of our direct sensorial experience’.⁶⁴ It is true that direct experience makes up a significant amount of scientific research, and so this research follows along those lines.

In terms of evaluating these experiences, I found it necessary to approach the analysis with the understanding that all experiences are different. In *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, Yaden and Newburg wrote, ‘...it is misleading...to think that everyone who has had a spiritual experience is describing the *same* experience...’.⁶⁵ As my participants were reporting their own individual experiences, I kept this in mind

⁶³ Bell and Waters, *Doing Your Research Project*, p. 26.

⁶⁴ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 55.

⁶⁵ D.B. Yaden and A. Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 145.

during my interviews and analysis. I also found that while no two experiences were exactly the same, there were notable similarities, and patterns began to form as the interviews continued. To that end, I also employed thematic analysis, as this allowed me to 'capture something important about the data set' and explore the meaning of these themes with respect to the research question.⁶⁶ I created distinct categories based on repeating aspects of encounters that became clear during the course of the research. This approach helped to explore the ways that these moments echoed each other and the ways they differed.

Given the sensitive nature of some of these encounters, I kept as a guiding principle the 'phenomenologically sensitive' approach taken by Yaden and Newberg as well as William James. Yaden and Newberg explained:

...by *phenomenologically sensitive*, we mean the respectful curiosity James shows his subjects...James holds up the dignity of each individual report, never falling into condescension or detached objectification.⁶⁷

This is the approach I took in my own interviews with participants and analysis of their experiences. These participants were often sharing both treasured memories and frightening moments—it was important to me to show respect for what they shared, even if it was beyond my own understanding.

⁶⁶ V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2, 2006): p. 82, cited in Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), p. 38.

⁶⁷ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, p. 8.

Discussion of Data

Findings

I conducted twelve interviews with participants around the world, all between the ages of thirty and sixty. Their experiences took place in Australia, the UK, mainland Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America. Ten of the participants were women and two were men. Before conducting these interviews, I expected to hear unique stories from people in a variety of environments. I did not expect the amount these encounters had in common nor the patterns that emerged in the process of the research. Though they occurred in different ways with different tree species and in different regions of the global West, several trends came to light. For example, every encounter reported was experienced while the participant was alone. There was also an aspect of perceived gender across the board; every participant described the tree they encountered with the gender pronouns 'he' or 'she', though several noted they thought trees could probably be non-binary as well.

Participants presented a range of encounters across a spectrum of experiential intensity. For some participants, their experience was merely a feeling of awe and reverance, noticing trees as beings for the first time. For others, their encounters went as far as changing their perception of physical reality and altering their senses.

Analysis

When analyzing these experiences from William James' criteria of mystical experiences, many of these encounters meet some or all of the criteria. Nearly all of the



encounters were passive—for the most part, they happened spontaneously, without prompting. In the encounters during which people experienced communication with a tree, at least three were in fact unaware of where the voice was coming from or what was happening in the initial moments. The vast majority of experiences were also transient, except in the cases where participants developed lasting relationships with trees that they maintained or continue to maintain. In those cases, the experiences could be considered to be long-lasting or at least regularly occurring. They also lose the quality of passivity, as participants could be said to be instigating the subsequent encounters.

Ineffability was another common trait. During our conversations, most participants described their encounters as being hard to describe or understand—ten of the twelve participants said something to that effect. For example, Fiona stated, ‘I can’t even express these, this is really difficult to verbalize’. Others also struggled to convey the details of their experiences and sometimes expressed frustration at not being able to find words that made sense to them. Perhaps this is due to the rarity of their encounters, not having much to compare them to, or simply a mystical quality that surpasses explanation with language. Lastly, the noetic quality James described was present in several encounters shared in this research. While not as common as the three criteria discussed above, several participants reported the receipt of knowledge or the revelation of previously unknown truths as a result of their encounters.⁶⁸ Though I cannot say why this was the rarest of James’ qualities among my research participants, it is possible that the encounters themselves were so striking that participants did not

⁶⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 292-293.

find themselves able to take much in beyond the fact of their happening. It may also be that more participants did in fact experience something noetic, but did not share this in interviews.

James also insisted that the ‘fruits’ were the most significant markers of mystical or religious experiences—i.e. the effects of these encounters on the people who experienced them.⁶⁹ In that respect, there are a few significant cases to report. Three participants made major career changes as a result of their experiences, either changing careers completely or finding ways to incorporate more nature and ecological approaches in their everyday work. One participant quit her job and wrote a book based on her experience. For others, the effects were not as outwardly extreme, but led to an increased awareness of the natural world and a change in the way they perceived and considered trees.



Plant Blindness

Two participants noted that their experiences happened after overlooking trees for most of their lives. This aligns with Wandersee and Schussler’s theory of ‘plant blindness’, Matthew Hall’s thoughts about the ‘backgrounding’ of plants and trees, and Stephan Harding’s view that ‘we tend to think of anything non-human as somehow inferior...as somehow not really *alive*’.⁷⁰ Isaac described his own sort of plant blindness prior to his experience, explaining his first time practicing mindfulness and truly noticing trees for the first time:

⁶⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Wandersee and Schussler, ‘Preventing Plant Blindness’, p. 82., Hall, *Plants as Persons*, p. 14., Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 252.



I felt like I've ignored trees for my whole life really...I don't recall moments of awe with trees as a child, whereas I have moments of awe with other creatures...and all of a sudden it was just like: how could I ignore these incredible strange mysterious things when they're so huge and they're everywhere?

For Isaac, practicing mindfulness brought an end to his plant blindness. His account also points out the bias Matthew Hall⁷¹ described as 'zoocentrism', given the participant said he had had 'moments of awe with other creatures'.⁷¹ This experience with trees, however, was 'like a thunder bolt' as he described it. It also came as a surprise to him, fulfilling James' criterion of passivity in mystical experiences.

For Kristen, it was her return to her home country after several years away that inspired her to notice trees in a new way. She had witnessed older and much larger trees while living in a different country on the other side of the world, and when she returned to the UK, she felt a new motivation to learn about the trees of her native land as a way to reconnect. This began a journey of connection with trees and the end of her plant blindness—Kristen now has rich relationships with several trees near her home, including one with whom she shares her dreams.

Spontaneity of Experiences

As most of these encounters were described as unplanned and unforeseen, I wondered how participants arrived at the conclusion that it was a tree talking to them. In interviews with participants who reported receiving communication from a tree, I asked what made them believe it was a tree they were hearing from, as opposed to a voice from their own imaginations. Andrea told me:

⁷¹ Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, p. 4.

How do I know it's real and not in my head? The knowledge shared and the secrets...but I asked them to prove it to me. I said, "How do I know this is not me? Please prove it to me," and they did...After that I could never deny what happened.

This experience reflects Williams James' criteria of a noetic quality in mystical experiences. In Andrea's account, she received knowledge from the trees, which was what made her believe that what she was experiencing was truly happening. It was this particular quality that led her to believe that receiving communication from trees was an undeniable truth.

Other participants cited other influencing factors—for the majority of them, it was simply a strong sense or intuition that convinced them they were receiving communication from outside their own psyches. Eleanor explained what made her believe she was hearing from a tree:

I think it's the sense of knowing...It's not so much what it said to me because that you would think "did I imagine that?" But definitely feeling something like a loving presence. And just a knowing that something is communicating with you somehow.

Most other participants answered along similar lines. Fiona described it as a 'sensation' and detailed the physical effects of her encounters, including the unique vibration from the trees, stating 'I get a sensation on my chest area...I think it's the energy I'm feeling...'. In her experience, there was a sense of picking up on a feeling that is unique to trees. The theme of seeing, sensing, and feeling as trees was another pattern that emerged in the course of these interviews. In terms of what exactly they were picking up on, several other features of these experiences provided more information about the trees that participants encountered.

Gender and Voices of Trees

Another prominent theme among encounters was the use of gendered, familial language in reference to the trees—names like Mother Tree, Grandmother Tree, and Grandfather Tree. For several participants, the gender association was due to the tone of voice they heard in their minds. The presence of a familial human role or a human-like voice in these accounts brings to mind a participant in Norkunas' study, for whom 'the human-like qualities of trees could serve as a pathway for humans to relate to trees'.⁷² It could be that for these participants, the perception of gender, family roles, or human voices created a stronger sense of connection with these trees. Carl explained, 'It's the tone of voice...I just said "Hey, good morning oak tree, how are you?" and he was like, "good morning" in like a really deep manly voice.' Several others also noted the tone of voice as an indicator of gender to them. Others noted the way the voice of a tree would convey its personality, as Fiona explained:

...the oak doesn't sound like the elder...thinking about elm, and deep, deep...like a whale would sound...It's a real rumble...I mentioned about the blackthorn...much lighter, [sings] dee dee dee...the olive—again different...mid-tone.

These descriptions show that some participants received information about trees—namely genders and personalities—through the voices they perceived. From Guthrie's point of view, this could be seen as people anthropomorphizing trees in order to make meaning of their experiences or feel safer in their environments.⁷³ As he put it, 'Animism...aims too high, attributing to things and events more organization than they

⁷² Norkunas, 'Are Trees Spiritual?', p. 173.

⁷³ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 5.

have'.⁷⁴ It is possible that the people who heard these voices were doing just that—assigning human traits to these non-human beings, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, it is notable that they did not hear them in the same way that they hear other humans speak. This may imply they were not anthropomorphizing—as they did not hear audible human-like voices—so much as they were perceiving personality traits through non-physical means.

In another notable trend, all of the participants who experienced communication with trees heard the voices in their heads, not their ears. 'A voice just lands in your head...but it does feel like it comes from other,' Daphne explained, '...it's an interior voice, but it's another'. Heather said something similar, expanding on how she knew this voice in her head was not her own:

You know when we've got our own consciousness...we sort of know what it sounds like because we're used to it...and it wasn't that...because when it's my consciousness I hear my voice talking and it wasn't my voice.

In other words, they did not report hearing audible human-like voices, but rather received the communication telepathically, in a way that felt to them as though it was coming from outside of them. Fiona explained, 'I hear, but not physically, I hear it in here [pointing to head]'. Yaden and Newburg wrote, 'some life-changing moments seem to come wholly from another source, appearing as...altered states of consciousness from either deep within a person's mind or, perhaps, a source beyond the self'.⁷⁵ Much of this idea aligns with these participants' experiences of hearing tree voices, however, none of the participants mistook the voice for their own internal voice. For those who heard a

⁷⁴ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 6.

⁷⁵ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, p. 3.

voice in their minds, they unanimously perceived it as an external source and the identification as such was immediate.

This perception arrived in numerous sensory modes. Jasmine described the way that trees ‘call’ to her, though for her it was something she felt in her body rather than heard in her mind:

Normally it’s quite physical...like kind of gut instinct to a certain direction... I tend to feel things through my body more than hear things.

This would indicate that people can still perceive a voice or a call, even without the sound normally associated with those. It can also arrive as an instinct felt in the body—it may simply depend on the individual and the senses they feel are strongest within them.

Tree communication among participants was not always perceived in the form of language, though it often began that way. Greta stated:

Yeah so it’s not words, you don’t hear it with your ears...it’s like an energy in your mind...it’s like a mind-meld, like a consciousness transfer, like so when the willow tree spoke to me... I did have words form in my mind— “Can you see me? Can you hear me?” and then when I said “Yes”, then it went into this other mode of just giving me images like a story, like a movie.

These experiences demonstrate the variety of ways people can interpret or perceive the conscious presence of trees—through words, images, or a pull felt in the physical body.

Though many heard voices communicating with them, that was not the only human-like—or perhaps being-like—quality that participants reported.

Age of Trees and Timescales

Another significant commonality was the age of the trees in these encounters; among the experiences that included communication with a tree, nearly all of the trees were estimated to be at least one hundred years old. Several participants perceived the

maturity of a tree to be a key factor in whether a tree would or could communicate.

Andrea explained that she is unable to speak with young trees, elaborating:

What it seems like is it's not their job. It's not their responsibility to speak with us. It's really like this, as you become an elder, you have certain responsibilities. And one of those is to communicate with people...or try to inspire people...

She was not the only participant who expressed the belief that young trees seem to have another focus. Fiona also said that her experiences happened with more 'mature trees' and noted the differences in personalities, explaining, 'I think...a young sapling is growing and focusing on doing that, maybe the character is there, but it needs time...'. Her interpretation aligns with Andrea's—that young trees have a different focus.

To have two participants make similar observations about this would be significant on its own, but seven of the twelve participants shared notable differences in their perception of young trees and old trees. Lucy elaborated on her view of trees, explaining:

So...all these birch trees...they're quite young and they would always wave in the wind and I used to always think of them as a group of teenagers, like these young swaying bodies...I used to think like as they get older their presence strengthens...but for some reason when they're younger...it's not as strong in presence in a sense.

Given the amount of participants reporting this difference, it would seem to imply that a change happens at some point in the life cycle of a tree. Though Carl believes that trees of any age could communicate, he explained the specific age range wherein he senses a shift:

The old trees feel like they are awake and they are a single unified being...So I'm not sure if that means as a tree gets old enough or if it's a certain type of tree that lives a long time it grows its own soul...I've been through forests where I felt like

that glow of energy in a tree that's maybe forty-to-fifty years old and I'm like, "Ah, it's almost woken up,"...I feel like it's about to hatch.

As a botanist with decades of experience working with trees, it is likely that Carl has the knowledge and experience to estimate the ages of trees. However, this sense of a coming shift was felt through an internal awareness. This theme of sensing and perceiving continued throughout other interviews, with participants expressing various impressions of the trees they encountered and how that affected their view of trees in general. It also affected the trees they would approach if they wished to communicate—in Andrea's case, for example, she would narrow her focus to larger, more established trees that appear older.

When participants discussed the age of trees, the conversation often continued into a discussion of the life spans of trees and how that may affect their behaviors and experience of life. Many species of trees live for hundreds or even thousands of years. Some participants felt that because of this, trees operate at a difference pace than humans in general. Fiona explained, 'That's the thing about the trees, they can be a little slow on the response. So you need to give them time to say what they want to say'. She elaborated:

Do you remember Tolkien with the ents when he says it takes a long time for them to say anything?...I'm sure Tolkien was onto something there...and my feeling would be with the trees, particularly the older ones...everything's slow. Even trying to get up the energy to talk to you is slow...everything is a deep breath. Everything is...putting the energy into communicating.

Her perception of trees as living on different timescales ties back to Trewavas' words about the difficulties in studying plant behavior. Trewavas wrote of plants, 'timescales differ from those in animals. Whereas human beings operate in seconds, plants usually

operate in weeks and months'.⁷⁶ Fiona believes that humans may be missing messages from trees because of our lack of patience and unwillingness to operate at their timescale; Trewavas believes we may be missing key scientific observations for the same reason. It is possible that this is a contributing factor in the time it has taken for the science around plant intelligence to emerge—the lack of patience and observing at a plant's pace. It could also factor into the seemingly rare occurrence of encounters with trees; perhaps humans are simply not taking enough time to listen.

Another participant, Kristen, specifically mentioned timescale when she mused on the way she wished to interact with trees in the future. She noted that the next time she found a tree she wanted to enter into relationship with, she would attempt to operate in a more tree-like way.

I hope I would be a little bit more aware...I think there's something in honoring the timescale of trees so that it's not just like well I've got time to come and see the tree so I'm going to go and do it...

It is significant to note that this participant, like Fiona, also mentioned Tolkien and the influence of the *Lord of the Rings* books on her view of trees. Margaret Davies wrote that humans have a 'tendency to anthropomorphize trees...this is hardly surprising, since trees are commonly figured as quasi-human' and cited ents as 'one of the more famous examples from 20th-century literature'.⁷⁷ Both participants mentioned the slow pace of the ents and asserted the need to consider the timescale of trees in our relationships with them. This may imply that their familiarity with Tolkien's stories affected their perception in some way. On the other hand, it could also have allowed

⁷⁶ Trewavas, 'Aspects of Plant Intelligence', p. 16.

⁷⁷ Davies, 'The Consciousness of Trees', p. 220.

them to consider an aspect of tree experience that they may have otherwise overlooked.

Trees Through the Seasons

Throughout the course of these interviews, it became clear that many of the encounters being shared had occurred during the same time of year—often even in the same months. Though this was not a question included in the initial interview protocol, I began to ask participants when their encounters happened after noticing a pattern by chance. It emerged that most of these experiences had happened during spring and summer, particularly in May and June. After the first few interviews where this information came up naturally, it occurred to me to start asking whether participants remembered the dates or seasons of their experiences. Their responses revealed that the significance of the season was something most participants had not previously considered—it only occurred to them when prompted during the interview.

When I prodded as to whether they thought there might be any significance to the time of year, several shared the same theory: the trees were resting in autumn and winter. Though the participants had not considered the significance of this prior to our interviews, most nonetheless had theories as to why this might be the case. Fiona shared:

In the autumn and in the winter particularly I believe the trees are sleeping...but come the early summer, the late spring...they put on these beautiful leaves, and they're alive and interacting and awake, awake, awake! I think it could be that, it's just simply they're...more open and receptive to what's around them.

She mentioned their leaves specifically, which came up in another interview as a significant factor. Andrea, was even told by the trees to finish asking her questions because she did not 'have much time'. She shared:

I went to Mother Tree and said look I'm really worried, why has [that tree] said that there isn't much time? And her response was very like Mother Tree, "Oh don't worry it's just because we're losing our leaves." ...They can't communicate if they don't have leaves.

As Andrea has a background in biology, she tried to make sense of this in a chemical sense, wondering if it was perhaps the chlorophyll in leaves that allows trees to communicate with humans. She had not come to any definitive conclusions at the time of our interview, but she did say the trees went quiet after their last leaves fell. The following spring, when their leaves returned, she began to hear from them again.

While no other participants received the same insight about the leaves, they formulated similar theories about the trees resting in the darker, colder seasons of the year. Eleanor shared, 'I have noticed that in autumn especially easing towards winter, generally they're quieter and they don't want to talk as much, because they're going to rest'. Greta and Heather's encounters also happened in the spring and summer. Carl, however, believes that encounters can happen any time of year, explaining:

I've seen so many conversations...about oh it was Imbolc, it was the solstice, it was this, and I've looked back through my notes over these decades and there's no correlation I can see of any kind.... I mean I feel magic all the time...even when I was in New York City I felt spirits so I just feel like...the world is alive and we're here too.

For Carl, mystical experiences are possible everywhere in the world at any time of year.

Though he has had many exceptional experiences in nature, the season did not seem to be a significant factor in his mind. This is one of several examples that highlight

Yaden and Newburg's point that not all spiritual experiences will share the same features.⁷⁸

Helping and Healing

Eight participants shared experiences of feeling as though they received help or healing from trees. Others shared experiences of trees asking them for help, and the ways they were able to intervene on their behalfs. Fiona shared the way she was able to perceive a cry for help from the olive tree in her backyard. She recalled, 'I remember hearing "help, ill, help, ill," those words and this distress I think is what I could feel'. By chance, the next day she was sharing photos of her olive tree with an acquaintance who was an expert on trees, and he told her the tree looked as though it had a fungus or infection. He gave her precise instructions on what to do to treat the olive tree, and told her that the tree would have new leaves by the following year if she followed them correctly. She shared, 'true to his word...the following year, the tree really started to take on its former glory and the following years after that it even produced fruit'. Again, James' noetic quality appears here—Fiona reported receiving information from the olive tree that was then verified by someone with knowledge of tree diseases and how to treat them.⁷⁹ Carl similarly relayed a story of being able to help a tree who was at risk of being cut down. He instead removed a limb that was causing trouble, and the tree was left standing.

⁷⁸ Yaden and Newburg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, p. 145.

⁷⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 293.

In most cases, however, it is the humans who report receiving help or healing from the trees. Of her experience with an elder tree, Daphne shared:

It felt supportive, it felt like it was offering me like a therapy...to my body just to sort of release... And in that moment it was like "...I'm glad I've done this because there is something beneficial happening".

Daphne's experience brings to mind Pearce et al.'s observation that 'the participants did not so much report their experience *of* trees as their experience *with* trees'.⁸⁰ In this case, Daphne perceived the tree as actively participating in the interaction by offering her support. In fact, she perceived the tree as not only a participant, but as the one who initiated their encounter. Daphne described standing at the base of the tree and sensing an 'invitation', as though she was being invited into the tree by the tree itself.

Several other participants reported similar cases of being emotionally soothed or assisted by trees. Heather spoke of a chestnut tree she often visits, explaining, 'I just feel that tree is healing...when I've said to it I'm feeling sad or down and having a feeling that that was ok if I did that'. Bonnie described the deep bond she has with a tree she calls Grandfather Tree, whom she views as a guardian of both her land and family:

...it's a constant connection and if there's anything particularly going on that's sort of like a destruction, change, challenging things...he's kind of who I turn to and I have a feeling that it's all ok no matter what when I tune into him.

Her relationship with this tree echoes the 'enduring emotional bonds' described by Pearce et al. in their study of people's encounters with trees in their home environments.⁸¹ Bonnie quit her job to write a book about her experience, and she describes the book as being 'written in collaboration' with Grandfather Tree and other

⁸⁰ Pearce et al., 'Personal encounters with trees', p. 5.

⁸¹ Pearce et al., 'Personal encounters with trees', p. 4.

plants. It is clear from her experience and others that people perceive being helped by trees in numerous ways, not only with emotional matters but practical ones as well. In Greta's case, she once asked a lemon tree for help concerning an issue between her dog and her chickens. She recounted that tree gave her advice, she took it, and the problem was solved. 'She never went for the chickens again', she recalled. Like Bonnie, Greta has developed lasting relationships with the trees on her land and encounters like this have become common—she regularly sits with Grandfather Tree and speaks with him. Though these encounters have a gentle tone and a sense of comfort between the humans and trees, other experiences reported in this research fell on the more extreme end of the spectrum in terms of their experiential aspects.

Experiencing Tree Sense

For most participants, their encounters with trees were experienced through the perception of character traits, a sense of presence, or communication in words, images, or feelings. For three participants, however, their experiences went beyond the external, and actually affected their physical realities. Greta, Carl, and Andrea shared vivid encounters wherein, according to their reports, they saw, felt, or experienced reality as the tree they encountered. Greta recounted her encounter with a tree in the backyard of a home where she had been attending a party. She explained that the tree called out to her, she heard a voice in her mind, and she approached the tree. She initially reached out as she felt tempted to pick some of its pods, and then hesitated as she had not asked the tree for permission. At that point, she recalled that the tree said to her in an encouraging sense, 'That's ok, you pick my fruit to feel my pain'. She continued:

And so I did, I went out to reach I put my hand out to pick the pods and as I touched the tree, my hand started to feel different, it was not my hand anymore, and it was began to sort of like very gently creep up to here [pointing to wrist] and then it got to my elbow and I freaked out and I stopped it from happening.

This sense of her hand being under the control of another consciousness echoes Jack Hunter's experience in the Bristol Spirit Lodge, when he experienced his hand moving without making it happen. This moment demonstrated to him that:

...at the very least, there are genuine experiences that seem to suggest to the experiencer that the physical body can be temporarily controlled by something that...feels as though it is an external controlling intelligence.⁸²

This would appear to describe Greta's experience as well, as she described it as feeling as though it was no longer her own hand. This was not simply a sense of numbness or absence of control, however—she felt as though the tree was actually controlling what was happening, and that the tree had a specific intention. In other words, it felt to her like a 'controlling intelligence' as Hunter described it.⁸³ As our interview continued, Greta said she believed the tree was attempting to show her what it felt like to be that tree.

She explained:

I surmise that it it was wanting me to experience what it was like to be a tree in this world when everything's cut down and humans are just everywhere...and not very respectful to other beings...I think that's what it was on about.

This experience evolved from a telepathic voice to a physical experience. It calls to mind Stephan Harding's theory that while we perceive the natural world, the natural world perceives us as well.⁸⁴ Greta's experience went beyond the touching of skin or

⁸² Jack Hunter, *Manifesting Spirits: An Anthropological Study of Mediumship and the Paranormal* (Aeon Books, 2020), p. 213.

⁸³ Hunter, *Manifesting Spirits*, p. 213.

⁸⁴ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 54.

bark to actually feeling as the tree felt, at least in the way she perceived it. Her account includes the tree's perception of her as it first called her over and prompted her to pick its fruit, as well as her subsequent ability to perceive the tree in a physical, experiential way.

Two others reported encounters wherein they experienced an absolute shift in reality and believed to be perceiving the entire environment around them in the same ways as the trees they encountered. The following encounter, shared by Carl, describes a version of experiencing an alternate reality:

I felt extremely drawn to this grandmother oak...And when I got up there she really said a nice "hello"...I said "Hi, how are you?"...And she said, "If you don't move your feet again and you can jump under my lowest branch, I'll take you to another world"...And I leapt and I landed right under that branch...when I opened my eyes there was a wide path there...but then...everything else was different. So the sky was not blue, it was pink. The clouds were not white, they were orange. The grass was not green, it was purple and brown...everything was different. There's a little stream down just at the bottom of the hill...it was silver not blue...And the other thing it was the first time in my life where I saw 360 degrees around me with my eyes closed. And I saw everything, I was like "what the hell"...and all of a sudden...I saw with that 360-degree vision there's this silvery being creeping around the corner of this path...and...it was the first time the hair literally stood up on the back of my neck like a cliché in a book or something...I opened my eyes and my body was running down the hill, like it was like primal fear. And I said to the tree, "How the hell do I get out of here?" and she said, "I'm sorry, I thought you knew what you were doing" and she said, "If you don't know how to jump back through me, you need to cross a body of water". And...I just ran as fast as I could and when I got to the middle of the stream, everything switched and it went back to normal...And I didn't look back I just ran and ran until I got in my car and I just took off. That was as close as I ever got to being completely freaked out.

This experience provides an apt representation of Otto's idea of the '*mysterium*

tremendum',—the type of 'daunting and repelling' numinous experience that illicit

fear.⁸⁵ Otto described the type of effects this kind of experience, stating: 'The awe or

⁸⁵ Otto and Harvey, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 140.

“dread” *may* indeed be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making the man’s hair bristle and his limbs quake’.⁸⁶ This is similar to what Carl described in his experience with the hair on the back of his neck standing up. The overwhelming sense of this experience for him was fear, and his first instinct was to put an end to it.

Not all reported reality-bending experiences provoked a fearful response, however. Andrea shared an encounter with a tree on the property where she lives that evokes Otto’s idea of the ‘mysterium fascinans’—the opposite aspect of numinous experiences, with beautiful, ‘alluring’ qualities.⁸⁷ Though she also experienced a sort of distorted reality or altered perception, and heightened senses, it was such a positive experience for her that she did not want it to end:

I go over to [this tree] and I put my hands on him to say hello as I always do, to see if anything comes through and up until this point not much had. I’d got a sense of some things but not much. And suddenly...the entire place changed. So, I’m on the tree, I feel like I’ve disappeared in a way, my physical body, very profound, very extreme, the air changed, the sound changed, the colors around me were so green. I’ve never seen green that green...I could see the light coming through the leaves, I could feel the light coming through me, I felt like I was possibly the tree. I was seeing things as nature not as a human, I could literally taste the water of the stream that was near...my senses were like super, super pronounced. It was just bizarre. I could hear things I’ve never heard, I could hear mice walking in the distance, I could hear birds for miles. The whole atmosphere had shifted...And my feelings changed. My thoughts changed. It was still me, but I wasn’t me. So that was amazing! But I didn’t know what this was...Back then it was like, I’ve seen through the eyes of the tree...it was magnificent. It didn’t last very long, a minute at the most, although it felt like hours because I was just like looking at every little thing through this whole new vision. And not just vision, it is everything, sound, taste, smell, inner sense, everything. So this happens, and I come out of that into my human body, so it does feel like I’d come out of this physical body...I came into this physical body again and seeing things as I did before

⁸⁶ Otto and Harvey, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 16.

⁸⁷ Otto and Harvey, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 140.

and I went “Oh no! I want to see as I did!” and I actually begged, I was like,
“No, no, no, I want to go back to that, I really really want to see that again,” and
honestly I wish, but my begging was not answered.

Andrea’s encounter encapsulates two of James’ criteria, namely ‘passivity’ and
‘transience’.⁸⁸ Her experience did not endure for very long, and she did not feel that she
was in control, though she wished she was able to extend it. It is notable that in
Andrea’s encounter, no other beings were present aside from her and the tree, thus she
may have maintained a feeling of safety or calm that Carl did not have during his
experience.

Both Andrea’s and Carl’s experiences bring to mind Jack Hunter’s theory that
‘different worlds may overlap, interact, and osmose into and out of each other’.⁸⁹ Both
Carl and Andrea’s experiences could be described as a blurring of realities, or perhaps
an overlapping of worlds—that of the human and that of the trees. Carl reported the
world around him physically changing; paths and creeks were different widths than he
had experienced in normal reality. It was a place he felt he needed to get out of, though
he was not sure how. Andrea did not necessarily report entering a different reality, but
she did experience her normal reality as altered enough to have different colors, with
access to tastes and sounds beyond anything she had experienced before.

These experiences pose a challenge to some of the participants in Norkunas’
study. She wrote, ‘...a Ukranian man in his twenties felt that the absense of interaction
meant trees did not have souls’. He deduced that trees are ‘just objects’—they do not

⁸⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 292-293.

⁸⁹ Hunter, ‘High Strangeness and Anthropology’, p. 84-85.

have souls because they do not respond when people interact with them.⁹⁰ If interaction is the basis for a soul according to this participant of Norkunas' study, it begs the question of whether an encounter like those reported in this dissertation would change his belief. If he did hear from a tree, or experience it as interacting back, would he believe it to be ensouled? Would he believe all trees are? These kinds of effects, or 'fruits', are what William James believed to be the most significant components of mystical experiences.⁹¹

Effects of Encounters

For many participants, the effects of their encounters were minimal—many already had great respect for trees and even viewed them as sentient beings with awareness of the world around them. Among research participants in this sample, the effects of their experiences ranged from subtle behavioral changes such as bringing offerings to trees or approaching them with more reverence to effects as significant as a change in career. For Andrea, the change following her encounters was profound:

I also felt connected by a golden cord type thing with the tree. From that point on my senses shifted. So I could communicate from that point on very easily, I could hear things very easily, I could smell or see or sense things differently. So whatever happened in that experience changed me as a human...you can't go back to being the person you were.

This experience demonstrates the degree of impact an encounter of this nature can carry. After her experiences communicating with trees, Andrea enrolled in a series of nature-focused courses and started her own business to help others connect with

⁹⁰ Norkunas, 'Are Trees Spiritual?', p. 172-173.

⁹¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 34.

nature more deeply. Isaac also shifted his career path as a result of his encounter with trees. He explained, 'I wanted to find some way of sharing that with people...that set me basically on the path I'm on now really...so it all yeah I guess stems from this experience'. Although Isaac did not report having communication with a tree, the experience of awe was enough for him to make a significant life change. After his experience with mindfulness in the park and noticing the presence of trees, he went from working for a helpline in a 'dungeon' to teaching a nature-based mindfulness course. Similarly, Bonnie quit her job following her encounters with Grandfather Tree and went on to write a book that included her experiences.

Andrea's, Isaac's, and Bonnie's accounts—and the changes they made to their careers as a result of their experiences—would fulfill what James believed was the most significant aspect of religious experiences.⁹² The fruits, or effects, of Andrea's encounter included a career change in her external world and a sense of being changed as a human in her internal world. For Isaac, it was simply a desire to share the joy of what he had experienced with others that led him to change his career. Likewise, Bonnie left her job to pursue something she really enjoyed and felt compelled to share the extraordinary experiences that happened in her own garden.

Personal Reflection

As a researcher, I also experienced firsthand the effects of a tree encounter. In an unplanned turn of events, I was able to meet up with a research participant in person, who happened to be visiting the city where I live. We decided to meet for a

⁹² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 34.

coffee and go to see the oldest tree in the city. While there, the participant I was with shared that she was hearing from the tree and began to act as a sort of tree translator, passing along messages to me, including the name of the tree and the fact that he—we both felt a masculine energy from the tree—recognized me, and was even aware of my research. I had in fact visited the tree before and even introduced myself, but I did not feel or perceive any kind of communication. At one point, this participant asked me if there was a market that happened in the square where the tree is, because the tree was telling her that he really enjoyed it when there was a busy market in the space. I told her I was not sure, as I am not familiar with that area of town, but it did not seem like an obvious space for a market. We later looked it up and discovered there is a popular Christmas market that takes place in that square every year. This experience yet again highlighted the ‘noetic quality’ described by William James and noted by other research participants. The experience of receiving knowledge we did not have before—but did have the means to verify by way of a quick internet search—brought me, the researcher, into the research focus and I became a kind of accidental participant. The visiting participant also received a word she could not place at first, but she spelled it and we typed it into a Google search. It turned out to be the name of a place in Massachusetts, which we first guessed could be the place the tree came from, as we knew he was brought over from the United States several centuries ago. And then suddenly, before I had registered having the thought, I heard myself say, ‘That’s his name. I think he’s telling us his name,’ and the participant agreed that must be it. Like many of the research participants in this study, I could not explain what had happened in that moment. Like the community-embedded anthropologists Jack Hunter cited, I was

able to enter into the experience of a participant in this research and gain context and perspective. My own sense in the moment was that of *mysterium fascinans*—there was a feeling of suspension, of the in-between, of experiencing something extraordinary. The worlds of researcher and participant blurred just as the worlds of human and more-than-human did.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the experiences of people who shared their encounters with trees. The research has shown that while many people view trees as passive inanimate objects or simply resources for humans, there are those who view and experience them as much more. The participants in this research see trees as living beings, at the very least, and in some cases as conscious persons with senses, voices, and personalities. Their experiences challenge the stereotype of plants as ‘lower organisms’, as Trewavas put it—many of the participants in this study see trees as persons, just as humans are.⁹³ There are multiple cultures in the world where nature itself or parts of nature are seen as worthy of legal protections and granted personhood. It is possible that one day, trees or forests could be granted the same rights as those nature entities already recognized by countries like New Zealand and Peru. There are also those in the scientific community, such as Monica Gagliano and Suzanne Simard, advancing the field of plant intelligence and discovering previously unknown modes of plant communication. Continued studies like theirs could bolster the case for these

⁹³ Trewavas, ‘Aspects of Plant Intelligence’, p. 1.

kinds of protections and for the argument that trees have significance beyond their material value as timber or providers of clean air for humans.

This study also demonstrates that there are those who experience trees as capable of communication with humans, even outside of Indigenous cultures. Even for people who were not raised with any particular spiritual beliefs regarding trees, some are having profound moments of connection, which often occur spontaneously. Not every encounter had particularly significant effects—many participants in this research already viewed trees as having awareness or ‘being-ness’, and these experiences only confirmed their beliefs. For those participants, it is possible that their beliefs brought on these experiences or simply made them more open to having them. However, many of these encounters had profound effects on the lives of people who experienced them, sometimes as significant as a change in career or an expansion of their physical and non-physical senses. For some participants, the trees offered what felt like therapy, moments of respite, or helpful advice. Still others described a deepening of their connection with nature as a result of their encounters. In any case, these effects may provide some insight into what would happen if, as Stephan Harding suggested, more Western people started to consider ‘the Earth and [the] living beings that inhabit her not merely as objects, but as subjects, as feelingful beings’.⁹⁴ Many of the participants in this research regard trees as beings who feel, and treat them accordingly—they bow to trees, listen to them, and in some cases even step in to help if they perceive a tree to be in distress.

⁹⁴ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p. 44-45.

These kinds of findings add context to previous scholarship on the relationships between humans and trees. Whereas existing research presents the sentiments and attitudes of humans regarding trees, this dissertation explores interactions between humans and trees as well as the effects these experiences can have. These accounts also bring another layer to studies on plant intelligence. While perhaps not measurable in the way some tree-to-tree interactions are, tree-human interactions such as these may provide some credence to the work of those who argue that trees have the ability to perceive and respond to external signals. The patterns that arose in this study could also support those who seek to have their own encounters with trees. For instance, they may focus on trees who are older than one hundred years old, and try to reach out or listen in the spring and summer, as those were the seasons when most of these encounters took place.

Though there is currently no way to verify the literal reality of these encounters, this research demonstrates that people experience them as real—real enough to change the course of their lives, in some cases. It shows that there are people who perceive trees not only as living beings, but as active participants in the world. This study may represent only a small sample, but it is enough to prompt the question of how common these experiences are, and what their global effects might be if they became more common. How might it impact the climate crisis, for example, if more people encountered trees as living, conscious beings? It is also possible that these encounters are already fairly common, but many people do not wish to share them. The most challenging aspect of this research was finding people who had had these experiences and were willing to talk about them. This could be for a number of reasons, including a

fear of ridicule; trees are not generally seen as being able to speak, at least in most Western cultures. Perhaps if these experiences are indeed common, it is possible that people dismiss or interpret them as brief hallucinations, figments of their imaginations, or as Guthrie supposed, an act of anthropomorphizing in order to make meaning where there is none.⁹⁵ This would be a line of inquiry for further research.

Another research opportunity would be to broaden the scope and interview more participants who have had encounters like these—perhaps not only with trees but with other entities in nature such as rivers and stones. More research into the effects of these encounters could also be explored with regards to behavioral changes, whether people become more engaged in climate activism, for example, or simply develop deeper feelings of connection with nature. As Norkunas summarized her own research, ‘Focusing on human relationships with an individual tree...may provide a roadmap to reconceptualizing the human-nature continuum that encourages stronger feelings of responsibility for the natural world’.⁹⁶ If these types of encounters can encourage people to see trees as more than passive, inanimate objects, it may influence the way they feel about the environment as a whole, and their desire to protect it.

⁹⁵ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Norkunas, ‘Are Trees Spiritual?’, p. 181.

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