

Heavenly Discourses – our conversation with the sky

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The Heavenly Discourses module of the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology is team-taught every year in the May-August semester by Bernadette Brady, Nick Campion, and Darrellyn Gunzburg. Although all of the modules consider the sky to be a cultural resource, Heavenly Discourses is the only module in the MA where students actively engage with the sky as a primary document through documenting what they see, hear, and experience in what is the heart of the module, the sky journal. The sky journal research is undertaken over the course of a month. Students formulate a question and then ‘interview’ the sky in a variety of different ways. They may observe clouds and cloud shapes, take note of the nature, colour, visibility and/or horizon location of sunrises or sunset, take account of the nightly shifts of constellations or planets, or perceive the sky via its relationship to the landscape, the trees, water, hedges, fields, or lighthouses that visually connect sky with earth. The notation of this month of observation occurs through writing, drawing, and/or photography and this then creates the students’ field notes, and becomes their primary source. Using this raw material, the students then draw out themes from what they have observed and felt, all the time situating these themes within the context of other literature. Some students use a reflexive methodology; others approach it ethnographically by talking to others about their responses to the sky. Whatever method the students choose to take, one thing emerges for all of them: they are all deeply changed by the experience of connecting directly with the sky in this way.

Here are two examples, whose text and photographs, used with each person’s permission, show the extent of that transforming sky conversation journey.

Grace Cassar chose to use her sky journal as a qualitative, reflexive exploration of clouds. She considered her essay under four themes: the phenomenology of land- and skiescapes; the power of colour; assigning meaning to light; and sacredscapes and animism. Grace was clear to note that her location was the Mediterranean Maltese Islands and the time of year was July, yet despite her willingness and her sharp-eyed surveillance, the harsh reality of the Maltese summer brought its own agenda. Armed with pencil, notebook and mobile phone for taking photographs, on 1 July, Grace wrote in her sky journal:

Summer and July. Summer *is* July! The sky seems to welcome its arrival with wide open arms. A cloudless sky. (Fig. 1). Actually, I was not prepared for this, but I am glad to notice the different layers of blue. They all dovetail into each other, gradually, smoothly. Devoid of clouds, the sky feels pure and timeless, grounding me to a peaceful now. It is special to be here. The moment is infinite.

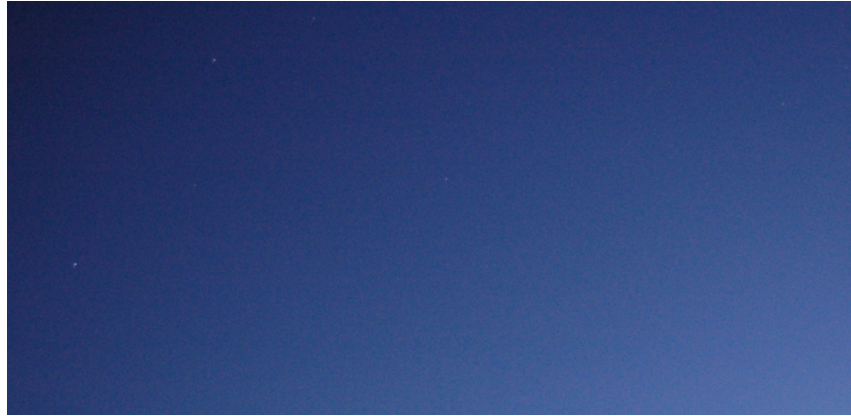


Figure 1. The cloudless sky. Wednesday 1 July, 18:27 – on a rocky beach. Photo: Grace Cassar.

On 9 July, 6:38 pm, Grace wrote in her sky journal:

I am lying on my back on smooth clay rocks, sky-bathing; I would say cloud-watching if there were any! Watching the sky from this horizontal position alters my manner of observation. I realize I cannot see the horizon as I am only looking upward, seemingly deeper. Thoughts of distance and journeying cross my mind. The clouds seem to have evaporated. Is it the heat? There is a thick haze, it must be the humidity. I wait and take some photos, and soak up the beauty.



Figure 2. A road in the Mdina, the Silent City. Saturday 18 July. Photo: Grace Cassar.



Figure 3. The hues of dawn. Wednesday 8 July, 5:38am *Photo: Grace Cassar.*

Over the course of her month, the clouds continued to elude her. On 29 July- 8:03pm Grace wrote in her sky journal:

Another crystal-clear evening. I decide to observe the sky from the pontoon of a yacht marina. I look up and scour the sky; I see nothing that resembles feathers or tufts of curls. I seem to be focusing on what is missing rather than what is. I take a deep breath and take in the sight of the boats and the reflection of squiggle-curved masts floating on the blue of sky and sea.

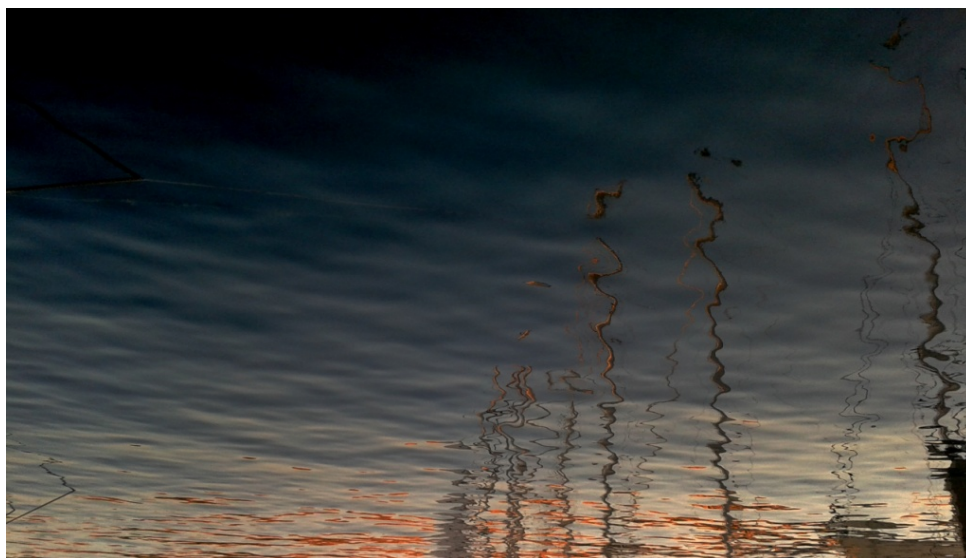


Figure 4. Reflections. Wednesday 29 July, 7:55pm. *Photo: Grace Cassar.*

This lack of clouds lead Grace into a different discovery. Situating her thoughts and reflections of blue in the sky into the literature, Grace concluded this section of her paper with the following insight:

To summarize this part of the essay which deals with the phenomenology of the land- and skylscapes, in my sky journal I noted the following realizations: first, that a cloudless sky is full of different layers of blue; and second that the sky feels pure and timeless, and infinite; and third, that this timelessness grounded me to a peaceful now. In seeking secondary support for these realisations in the works of Lane, Renfrew and Bahn, Eliade, Lawrence, Benke, and the artworks of O’Keeffe, I become aware, that while anticipating clouds, I was actually ‘attending’ to what Lane described as a ‘phenomenological reality’ of the here and now.¹

Grace had further insights as she wrote up the other themes of her paper. Above all she realised that, whilst she had been approaching her sky journal with one focus — the desire to document clouds — through real time experience something else was occurring due to the time of year (summer) and her location (Malta). This opened her eyes to the reality of her clear blue Maltese sky and, by situating those realisations into the literature, she obtained a deeper comprehension of what she had been experiencing.

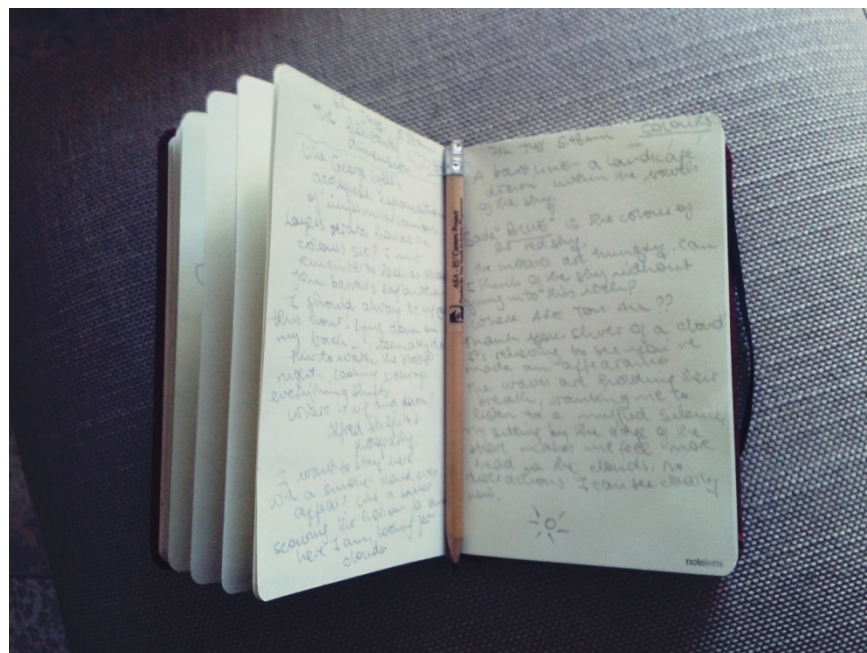


Figure 5. Grace Cassar’s Sky Journal. Photo: Grace Cassar.

¹ Britta Benke, *Georgia O’Keeffe: 1887-1986: Flowers in the Desert* (Köln; Los Angeles: Taschen, 2011), p.55. Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality*, Expanded ed. ed. (Baltimore, MD; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p.ix.

Not everyone, however, revels in the clear blue. A second sky journal example, also using a reflexive methodology, highlights this contrast. Based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Teresa Alfonso recognised that she had a personal resistance to engaging with the sky:

Keeping my sky journal, my first realization of this behaviour came in the form of my dislike of blue skies. On 6 May 2015 I wrote: ‘Blue skies in Johannesburg (Fig.6)... like almost every day in late autumn and winter. It reminds me of Irving Berlin’s *Blue Skies*. “Blue skies smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see.” I never liked that song. And neither do I like blue skies.

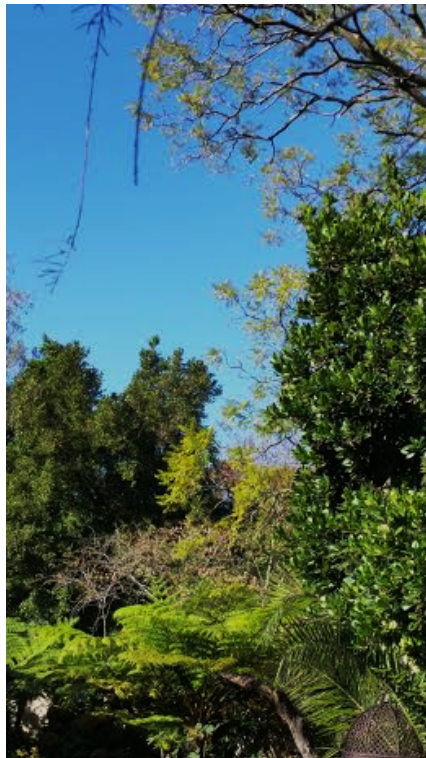


Figure 6. Blue skies above my garden in Johannesburg, 6th May 2015, 8.07 a.m. Photo: Teresa Alfonso.

After similar observations a few days later, Teresa gained an understanding that this dislike came from a younger self, one who was six years old and living on the family farm in the Karoo:

I have a clear picture in my mind of my father squinting his eyes against the sun in search of clouds. At night I would lie in my bed listening for the first whisper of wind in the drooping branches of the peppercorn trees near the house. Because the wind meant clouds. And the clouds the hope of rain. But mostly the last sounds I heard were my parents’ distressed discussions about their poor prospects and the dry barking of baboons in the deep ravines to the west. In the end the clouds never came and we had to abandon the farm and move to the city where my father carried engine blocks in a car manufacturing plant and we lived in a small flat where my room had no windows... This is why I hate blue skies.



Figure 7. A digitally adapted drawing from my Sky Journal of our farmhouse in the Karoo at night. A peppercorn tree is to the right of the house and the water tank I mention in my journal entries is to the left. My bedroom window was the first one to the front of the house. Image: Teresa Alfonso.

Added to this harsh childhood environment, Teresa came to recognise that her culture as an Afrikaner also played a significant role in her estrangement from the sky, that Afrikaner culture contained little if no sky lore, since heaven was God's domain and not to be intruded upon with sky stories or folktales.² As Teresa observed, 'the Afrikaner's Calvinistic variety of Christianity compounded an inherent Platonic dualism, whilst also discouraging projection onto the heavens.'

With such insights Teresa sought, through her sky journal, to understand how she could become an inhabitant of what Tim Ingold called the Weather-World where, rather than feeling separate from the earth and sky, she could feel woven into it by sun, moon, stars, rain, thunder, and wind.³

The phenomenological approach my journal facilitated, allowed for greater self-awareness and new perspectives with which I could, as Levine says, 're-insert [myself] into the sensible world'.⁴

By situating her findings into the literature, Teresa gained a deeper understanding of where that journey had led her. She wrote: 'I realized the courage needed and the difficulty of developing a new cosmological approach to an interconnected life.'

² Pieter W. Grobelaar, (ed.), *Die Afrikaner en sy Kultuur*, (Cape Town: Tafelberg-Uitgewers, 1974).

³ Tim Ingold, 'Earth, sky, wind, and weather', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13(2007), S19-S38, p.S20.

⁴ Paolo J. Knill, Ellen G. Levine, and Stephen K. Levine, *Principles And Practice Of Expressive Arts Therapy: Toward A Therapeutic Aesthetics* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), pp.22-23.



Figure 8. My own drawing inspired by Selina Wagner's *Walking into the Wind* to illustrate the personal difficulty and mental struggle and perhaps even fear I have in my departure from dualistic thinking to immerse myself in the weather-world. *Image*: Teresa Alfonso.

The Heavenly Discourses module and its sky journal component is the only place in the world that we know of where in an academic situation, a student can explore their personal relationship with the sky. These heavenly discourses are both an active engagement with phenomenology, as expressed by Aristotle, and ekphrasis, found in poetry as far back as Hesiod with his *Shield of Achilles*, and thus fit into a long tradition of sky-watching. As noted above, this gives the students a first-hand experience of seeing and working with the sky as a primary document.

Bibliography

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