

Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible: *A Symposium*

with Kirk Wegter-McNelly, "Religious Hypotheses and the Apophatic, Relational Theology of Catherine Keller"; Carol Wayne White, "Aporetic Possibilities in Catherine Keller's Cloud of the Impossible"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Fault in Us: Ethics, Infinity, and Celestial Bodies"; Colleen Mary Carpenter, "Enfolding Violence, Unfolding Hope: Emerging Clouds of Possibility for Women in Roman Catholicism"; and Catherine Keller, "Theology, Science, and Cloud of the Impossible."

aporetic possibilities in Catherine Keller's *CLOUD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE*

by Carol Wayne White

Abstract. In stressing the beauty of ignorance, of not knowing in the usual manner, Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible* evokes the death of a metaphysical (A)uthorial presence and the dissolution of closed systems of meaning. In this article, I view her text as part of a crisis of modernity that challenges dominant theological pathways, on which certain problematic views of the human have been constructed. In my reading, Keller's *Cloud* enriches humanistic thinking in the West and I explore the themes it shares with my own work in religious naturalism: there is no escape from the radical relationality and the irreducible materiality that structure human existence. I also emphasize that textual strategies are mere seductive, disembodied abstractions without acknowledging the force of materiality. Materiality matters; and I explore ways in which religious naturalism demonstrates how it does. In light of Keller's rich analysis, I focus on a "learned ignorance" that accompanies all of our limited interpretations emerging from the shifting, precarious positionalities as we rethink our relationality to each other and to all that it is.

Keywords: apophatic tradition; chiasmic thinking; deconstruction; evolutionary biology; humanism; Catherine Keller; logocentricism; materiality; relationality; religious naturalism

*I know that nothing has ever been real
without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
and they come toward me, to meet and be met.*

Rilke, *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*

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With subtle, graceful deconstructive readings, Catherine Keller's *Cloud of The Impossible* invites a variety of readers—theologians, humanists, religionists, religious naturalists, and others—to consider possibilities that might emerge once we forfeit the demand and desire for authoritative and prescriptive truth. As a theological tour de force, this work is inspirational and compelling in its evocation of the beauty of ignorance, of not knowing (self, other, or anything that exists) in the usual manner. Entering this theoretical space—that is, also minding the cloud—I celebrate Keller's refusal to pay homage to the idolatries of a Western logocentric system of representation, and to its hubris of full certainty, which began with Plato and runs through and beyond Hegel to the present.

As one enamored of the postmodern turn in the humanities and its focus on language, I notice something invigorating in Keller's cloud imagery. *Cloud*, as one cursory glance might suggest, is determinant of what is unknowable, or what eludes, mystifies, threatens, and prevents full knowledge. Keller's cloud is reminiscent of the mythological figure of the Sphinx, who functioned in ancient mythologies to symbolize knowledge that humans need but remains hidden from them. Yet, in another glance, "cloud" morphs into "could"—suggesting, for me, the import in this work of paying close attention to the provocative ways language structures our perceived realities. With such awareness, I find Keller's apophatic discourse illuminative. The radiance of *Cloud*, or its lure for me, is found in the myriad perspectives enfolding or unfolding within; they obfuscate the familiar ways we (humans) have known ourselves, which have accompanied dominant theological pathways expressed in the doctrinal language of *imago dei*. Consequently, in this article, I explore the creative ways *Cloud* enriches humanistic thinking in the West.

In so much that this *text* conjoins the nonknowable and nonseparable, it inspires some of us to continue asking who we "humans" are and perhaps what we *could* become in remaining truly open to aporetic possibilities. The death of a metaphysical (A)uthorial presence and the dissolution of closed systems of meaning, I argue, generate keener human awareness of our entanglement with each other and with all that is; furthermore, accepting this theoretical move precipitates possibilities of challenging static notions of being. As I hope to demonstrate, Keller's apophatic theological discourse shares an important and fundamental theme in my own work in religious naturalism: there is no escape—no exit!—from the radical relationality and the irreducible materiality that structure human existence. As a religious naturalist drawn to the contemplative life and to experiencing the elusive "isness" of materiality that is often overshadowed by theological and doctrinal abstractions, I find Keller's text honoring a "relation to relation itself" persuasive and significant (Keller 2015, 20). I also celebrate the more complex notion of textuality Keller assumes when appealing to the "... dramatic Cusan swerve into an affirmative cosmology of the

manifold material world as the very *explicans of the complicans*" (Keller 2015, 9).

In what follows, I first explore insights within postmodern textual strategies that challenge logocentric assumptions. I specifically inquire into readings that dispel illusions of an (A)uthorial presence and the notion of readers as atomistic, stable entities. I also emphasize that such strategies are mere seductive, disembodied abstractions without acknowledging the force of materiality. Materiality matters; and I explore ways in which religious naturalism demonstrates how it does. Accordingly, I focus on the ever-shifting interpretive strategies entailed in a conception of humans as value-laden organisms—nature made aware of itself. Human organisms are uniquely positioned to inscribe or give voice to our being here; put another way, I believe that we achieve our humanity through our awareness of being inescapably entangled with all that is. As such, we constantly reinvent distinct forms of humaneness with our rhetorical strategies, thereby contributing to the always-ongoing constructions of human relational knowledge. Through these constructions, I contend, we can support the idea that human organisms are more than mere by-products of genetic determinacy. In light of Keller's analysis, I imagine all of our limited interpretations—fissures, openings, or cracks—emerging from our shifting, precarious positionalities as we rethink our relationality to each other and to all that it is.

MINDING THE CLOUD

In the opening of *Cloud*, Keller asserts: "The very artifact of 'book,' *biblios*, the old bearer of the *logos* and its filial-*ologies*, seems to be dying—as I write or you read—into a cloud of virtual text. The clouds accumulate. . . . I *mind* them. I wonder. I feel the loss of a certainty that I never knew. And I notice a more subtle cloud" (Keller 2015, 15). As Keller demonstrates throughout various chapters, apophatic theological foldings in *Cloud* do not appear (or function) to explicate the logic of certainty as much as they become implicated in the undoing of reified constructions. The loss of certainty that Keller celebrates in *Cloud* is one that I both share and find invigorating as a reader of texts suggested by Roland Barthes. In the wake of Barthesian textuality, "we" read texts anew, with the recognition that we can never fully decipher or decode anything fully. More importantly, in Keller's evocation of the Cusan cloud, I discern the Barthesian aspiration of liberating writing from the despotism of what Westerners have traditionally known as the book and its menacing (A)uthorial presence.

In announcing the death of the author in 1968, Roland Barthes encroached on traditional epistemological terrain in Western intellectualism (Barthes 1988). According to Barthes, the concept of the author has persisted as an alluring fiction in Western thought; as "a modern figure, a

product of our society emerging from the Middle Ages with English Empiricism, French Rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual; in short, our intellectual heritage has posited the individual as always at the center—or, put more nobly, as the ‘human person’” (Barthes 1988, 142–143). In a Barthesian reading, an author is not simply a person but a socially and historically constituted subject existing as a cultural process—what Barthes calls a scriptor, and what Foucault will call an author-function. The author cannot claim any absolute authority over her text because, in some ways, she did not write it. Any subject who enunciates is a creation of language itself, so that meaning belongs to the play of language and is far beyond individual control. As we acquire language, we enter a flow of meaning with broad cultural implications. For example, Barthes writes: “We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 1988, 146).

Barthes’s anti-theological orientation has helped to shape the crisis of modernity, specifically as that crisis is associated with issues of truth, subjectivity, meaning, value, and knowledge. His work signals an emphatic shift away from an all-knowing, unified, intending subject as the site of production to that of language and its rhetorical and fragmentary effects. With the death of the author, the book morphs into provocative textuality, which has enormous implications for thinking about writing and reading religious texts in the current intellectual era. As Barthes asserts: “To refuse to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (Barthes 1988, 147). Furthermore, this conceptual move calls for a kind of reading, doing, and acting that is inexhaustibly open ended. Meaning is indefinite and in flux, as Barthes suggests, because signs can only point to other signs (Barthes 1988, 146). There is no way out of the circle of language. Writing is nothing more than a new mix of what is already written.

Keller’s explorations in this general conceptual space are appealing because her nuanced textual strategies also involve the critical activities of unwriting and unspeaking logocentricism. In my current reading, Keller’s brilliance is especially keen in resisting interpretive strategies that are nothing more than seductive, misplaced abstractions that distract from the immediacies of lived experience, or of our being here, and now. As Keller states:

This peculiar cloud shapes, as this book will suggest, a certain kind of theological space. . . . It does speak God, the word. . . . Theos-logos here makes a plea for a theory of *theos* as a word, a speaking therefore

of—something else, or more than the word *God*. In its living contexts the practice of theology is always more and other than speech. So its theory has offered contemplative sanctuary in the face of the most dire uncertainties: a chance to regroup before the impossible, to practice an alternative possibility, to prepare for—no matter what. It works, when it works, to prepare its public, across manifold, shifting tongues and times, to confront suffering and death, injustice, catastrophe. (Keller 2015, 16)

I appreciate Keller's insight here, which illuminates the apophatic tradition as a strategic ploy that disrupts traditional theology's apparent unity, accentuating its heterogeneous and disorderly aspects, as well as stressing a plurality of meanings and voices. Furthermore, as her concept of *theopoetics* implies, such action is reminiscent of Derridean deconstruction, where language and its aims, limitations, and subtleties are the focal points. As it forsakes transcendental causes as guarantees, "the epistemic intensity of theopoetics as such, bound up with deconstruction, highlights what language itself does, makes, constructs" (Keller 2015, 309). Accordingly, not only can we not get outside of language, but we find ourselves only wandering about in it and exposing its inconsistencies and false assumptions regarding the existence of transcendental signifiers, or stable centers of meaning.

With deconstruction, Derrida challenged the traditional view of language and Western rationality that originates in the Platonic distinction between the rhetorical, imaginative, and irrational nature of poetry (and literature) and the epistemological and ontological truth inherent in philosophical discourse—a belief that eventually led to the modern view that saw literary language as the determinate other of science and philosophy. In "Supplement of Copula," Derrida observes:

Our oldest metaphysical ground is the last one of which we will rid ourselves—supposing we could succeed in getting rid of it—this ground that has incorporated itself in language and in the grammatical categories, and has made itself so indispensable at this point, that it seems we would have to cease thinking if we renounced metaphysics. Philosophers are properly those who have the most difficulty in freeing themselves from the belief that the fundamental concepts and categories of reason belong by nature to the realm of metaphysical certainties. They always believe in reason as a fragment of the metaphysical world itself; this backward belief always reappears in their work as an all powerful regression. (Derrida 1982, 179)

Building on these ideas and returning to the Barthesian theme, I also stress the importance of the reader in the "writing" of a text—each reading writes the text anew simply by rearranging it, by placing different emphases that might subtly inflect its meanings. The ability for each reader to alter an open text opens possibilities of collective authorship that breaks down the idea of writing as originating from a single, fixed source. Any subject who enunciates is a creation of language itself, so that meaning belongs to

the play of language and is far beyond individual control. As we acquire language, we enter a flow of meaning with broad cultural implications, so that Foucault can speak, for example, of stepping into the flow of meaning, and Lacan of our entering, through language, into the Law of the Father, the rule of the governing conceptions of our culture.

Accordingly, the type of religious discourse that I imagine emerging is one that transforms the current religious scholar into the Barthesian scribe who is born with the text. The inevitability of each religious scribe's supplementing—as Derrida might phrase it—already written texts opens possibilities of collective authorship where there is no single, fixed meaning. Furthermore, since we are inside the circle of language, we express its logic, its stereotypes, its rhetorical twists, and its power effects in all we do. As a multivalent system of differentiations and depository of cultural meanings with power-inflected gestures, this conception of language intimates inevitable conflict, or probable impasse. It implies subjectivities vying for expression, often resulting in incommensurable visions and articulations of how best to absorb the fact of our radical relationality. In her text, Keller notes we cannot “escape tensions between the contemplative apophysis and the urgent evolution of more liberatory movements of race, gender, sex, ability, class, ecology” (Keller 2015, 6). I agree. Indeed, various proponents advocating relational integrity show that who says what, rather than what is said, is often a pivotal point. Here, I think of the Foucauldian perspective that Archimedean standpoints have always been shaped in the power/knowledge nexus. Accordingly, absolutism and relativism both ignore the concrete functioning of power relations and the necessity of occupying a position. Our positionality, however tentative and precarious at any given moment, weighs heavily in considering what form of relational knowledge counts as legitimate in historically specific times and places.

Simultaneously, and equally important, as readers and religious scribes, we remain aware that any speech patterns we might use are always borrowed from others. Any notion of a unified language is an enticing fiction, or a ruse of centralized power. In his theoretical work on the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin underscores this insight when discussing a view of language that acknowledges multiple voices and perspectives. For Bakhtin, any concrete discourse or utterance is already and always entangled with other variegated perspectives. As he observes: “The word, directed toward its object, enters into a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, values, judgments, and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group; and this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression” (Bakhtin 1981, 276). Here, as with Barthes, religious scribes are alert to the dangers of harboring residual logocentricism or retaining

metaphysically based views of language as a closed system. We do not simply read texts. We also enact distinct sets of discursive practices that presuppose radical alterity, materiality, and embedded relationality—all insights that our influential theological and humanistic discourses have failed to recognize. This is a shared assumption that Keller and I bring to our religious textual readings.

IMPOSSIBLE PASSAGES/PASSING POSSIBILITIES

Chiasmically speaking, I entitled this section Impossible Passages/Passing Possibilities. I do so to emphasize another compelling element (and perhaps one of the most subtle aspects) of Keller's *Cloud*: the significance of chiasmic thinking in understanding the entangled encounters of the non-separable and the unknowable. In hinting at the possibilities emerging in the unlikely encounters between the affirmations of relational theologies and the (aporetic) movements of deconstructive philosophy, Keller observes, "And so the doubling of tensions—of a deconstructive apophasis and a prophetic relationalism—forms for the book a mobile chiasmus: a co-incident of opposites" (Keller 2015, 9).

In literary theory, chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which concepts, clauses, or grammatical constructions are repeated in a reversed order (ABBA) to produce an artistic effect. As William E. Engel suggests, it is helpful to think of chiasmus as "a rhetorical pattern that makes what is said stand out as being more memorable and, because of the wit displayed, more engaging" (Engel 2009, 3). In chiasmic patterns, the repetition itself implies a change or a shift in meaning that is impossible without the specific rearrangement of the repeated words. As Engel indicates, a wonderful example from Shakespeare is "Richard II's pitiful self-recognition, which, in effect, sums up the substance of his life and the true tragedy of this play: 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me'" (Engel 2009, 2). Here, as elsewhere, a basic function of chiasmus is to provide and project a signifying difference, allowing new meanings to emerge. Closely related to this important component of chiasmus is that it "is derived from the Greek letter χ (chi), which forms a cross. It signals and connotes a crossing" (Engel 2009, 5).

While appreciating its rhetorical effects in literature and poetry, I find the notion of chiasmus adding some new shade of meaning in crossing over quite compelling. This is what Keller seems to be suggesting when she discusses the inevitable tensions that arise in conjoining the demands of liberation discourses with contemplative apophasis. These relational theologies are crucial in maintaining a sense of materiality, and their appearance in Western intellectual thought cannot be underestimated. Yet, for Keller, "without the crossover, the chiasmus, to the apophatic, theology turns for many of us incredible" (Keller 2015, 6). Chiasmus crossing is

a constant reminder of the futility of aiming for full truth beyond the immediacy of relational thinking. Crossing over is also a humbling awareness that relationality structures any and everything we can purport to do here—in such a glimpse, I believe, we contemplate the mystery of existence.

I underscore the functionary power and emotional resonance of chiasmus when considering what is possible or imaginable within the structures of language, as understood by deconstructionists and Barthesian readers or scriptors. The ruptures to metaphysically based theories of language in these frameworks function mnemonically, alerting us to the notion that instability has the potential to be productive. Returning to my opening lines, *Impossible Passages/Passing Possibilities*, I consider the ways chiasmus presents us with possibilities of knowing ourselves differently, tentatively, and always partially. Without ever exiting from that which structures us (relationality), chiasmus mobility inspires readers and scriptors to cross over to that which appears *other*. It raises important questions, too. *Is this passage to the other impossible? Can one bypass such an impossible passage? What passing possibilities may occur in the process of crossing over?*

The inversion (passing possibilities) may provide new ways of seeing that which appears as invariably *other*. For example, chiasmus crossings offer the possibility of challenging static binaries upheld by certain impoverished views of alterity: white/black, divine/human, male/female, human/nonhuman, normal/abnormal, able-bodied/disabled, normal/queer, so on. The lines of demarcation upheld by such binaries cease to hold as we recognize and realize that we pass into the *other*—implying that we are not ourselves as originally perceived. Here, I am mindful of Keller's admonition that we do not equate "not knowing" with "not doing," but rather, with passing possibilities, we encounter the complexities of relationality: "We know nothing beyond our relations. . . . So we hope here not for complete knowledge but an incomplete ignorance. Such an ignorance does not close in on itself in defeat or exhaustion. It finds in the limits, ruptures, and fogbanks of consciousness new relations to—anything that matters" (Keller 2015, 3). Here, I share Keller's cosmological perspectives regarding a radical relationality that extends to infinity: "Nothing in other words is known outside of relation—whether of terror, tedium, or love. Nothing knowable comes constructed *ex nihilo*, void of context. . . therefore nothing is known absolutely. Not God, not me, not you, not truth, not justice, not Earth, not flesh, not photon" (Keller 2015, 20).

In crossing over, I contend, we also lose dominant perceptions of subjectivity (whether symbolized as the aseity of God, the autonomy of the individual, or the full transparency of a stable ego). There is no extralinguistic, transcendental entity that can be known in and of itself, or

classified as independent of its relations. This point is particularly significant when considering the normative discursive frameworks that often structure notions of gender, sexuality, nationality, race, and other markers of human existence. These discourses have often supported only one way of existing and being valued. Crossing over and passing into the other increases possibilities for yet another interpretation, another perspective, another possibility: instead of stasis, we continuously pass (appear and dissolve) into precarious, entangled modes of being. Crossing over—again and again and again—also repositions or destabilizes us, dissolving any illusions of a static sense of being. Here, we are mindful of Latina feminist philosopher Ofelia Schutte’s determination that the other is not only “that person occupying the space of the subaltern in the culturally asymmetrical power relation, but also those elements or dimensions of the self that unsettle or decenter the ego’s dominant, self-enclosed, territorialized identity” (Schutte 1998, 53–72).

In my humanistic framework, chiasmus mobility suggests the appearance of potential fissures and openings that may appear in one moment, perhaps disappear in another, as human animals recognize our messy, never-ending entanglements with all that is. These are the constant conundrums and perplexities we readers face in honoring and attending to alterity and asking who we are. Who are we? Again, Keller’s work inspires me onward in my reflections:

[T]he cosmological explication of an apophatically unfolding God ultimately brought the creation itself into theopoiesis, expanding boundlessly and contracting relationally into each quantum of becoming. Attention to language was acute all along, but mainly in the negation, and double negation, of doctrines far from poetry. Hence the chiasmus that structured this meditation. It invites crossings between its material chaosmos, so vibrant with entanglement, and its linguistic chasm, so precariously, poetically charged—“in a bottomless abyss, Never could I come out of it.” (Keller 2015, 309)

Enticed by Keller’s theopoetics, I, too, stress the impossibility of passing beyond entangled relationality—a key point that I develop in the next section.

STRANGE WONDERS OF MATERIALIST TEXTUALITY

In *Cloud*, Keller raises a crucial question to her theological readers: How does the enfolding of the universe in God and the unfolding God in the universe cultivate a greater intercreaturely solidarity? (Keller 2015, 11, 114–15). When understood within the context of Keller’s acute apophasis, this question becomes an important one for me, as well. As a religious naturalist, I, too, ask about the possibility of enriching creaturely independence in the absence of a transcendental signifier. Addressing this question, however,

leads me to confront a self-serving humanism (or modernist humanistic discourse) that reinscripts itself as the new [A]uthor of life. Anthropocentric discourses have been part of a trajectory of liberal humanism that has valorized an exceptional human nature. This tradition has consistently overestimated the autonomy of human animals, positioning us outside of complex, myriad nature and rendering invisible our inextricable connection to other life forms and material processes. Again, I find Keller's insights helpful when she asserts:

The relations are always too many, too much, dreamy or traumatic, enigmatic or incalculable, impossible to encompass. In the perspective of this book and of its cloud, we—"we"—do evolve, we develop, we select. But we do so in this "consciousness of Relation," this knowing-together, that only knows itself as entangled in the complicated histories, bodies, indeterminate collectives, human and otherwise, that enfold us. (Keller 2015, 3)

Inscripting humanity's material, relational nature again and again requires that we rearrange established, influential positionalities, accentuating new emphases in our enunciations of human desires, dreams, and possibilities. In doing so, we cross over and impossible passages emerge as passing possibilities. Here, I evoke Annie Dillard's provocative passage from *For the Time Being*:

We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight. It lives captive on the face of the obvious—the people, events, and things of the day—to which we as sophisticated children have long since become oblivious. What a hideout: Holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color. (Dillard 2000, 175)

Roaming within this apophatic textuality brings a sense of strange wonder to our consciousness of our constitutive relationality. There is an element of mystery, of not knowing what may unfold in pondering our being here and of actualizing ourselves, as Rilke intimated in the Ninth Elegy of his *Duino Elegies*:

Why, if this interval of being can be spent serenely in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all other green, with tiny waves on the edges of every leaf (like the smile of a breeze)—: why then have to be human—and, escaping from fate, keep longing for fate? . . . (Rilke 1989, 199)

The terrifying beatific vision is the possibility of novelty in a fuller cosmological sense; it is a Rilkean terror that accompanies our sense of the possibility of becoming other than what we are at any moment. The implications are manifold—perhaps even infinite—when we relinquish our idolatries of literalism, of safe, smug certainties of lapidary truth and closed, solid systems.

I consider the potential of apophatic textuality to move us through the shadowy residue of a modernist humanism that has been seduced by the

Cartesian turn to subjectivity and lured by the desire for an Archimedean point or foundation. This episteme of representation has not only established the autonomous, bourgeois individual; it has also reduced the corporeal, relational, moral self to a pure object of knowledge. In denying our inescapable relationality with other sentient life, the scripts and writings of this modern humanistic textuality have been alarmingly violent. A preferable form of textuality expresses the desire to reinscript our humanity as part of a complex web of cultural and cosmic meanings, as a texture of them—even as a text.

These insights lead me, as a religious scriptor, to raise a crucial question for contemporary readers and writers of religious textuality: What is this “human” that is generally implied or assumed in our cultural observations? I believe that religious discourse involves more than a recognition and description of ordinary human behaviors—it is itself an ongoing, constituted celebration of the conundrums, dreams, and desires of the irreducibly embodied, relational human organism. Thus, while acknowledging the inevitable processes of open-ended textuality, I stress a critical point: just as we should not participate in naively essentialist notions of selfhood, we must be careful not to construct insufficient modes of subjectivity. Specifically, we must not be lured by impoverished views of our subjectivity in which historical, material, relational biotic forms are erased by linguistic forces over which they can have little or no control. If we do so, we risk losing sight of those aspects of our embodied animality that are rooted in intimate and concrete social relations, and of something within and among human animals that is not merely an effect of the dominant discourse. Hence, I suggest we pay particular attention to the conventions and structures of writing about selfhood and the other. I also emphasize considering how different models of humanity are conceived and written about in our disciplinary fields of knowledge, as well as how our humanity is subtly expressed in the processes of writing. Additionally, it is also important to take notice of how later texts relate to previous texts, and to consider the ways we speak about various aspects of our human lives and experiences.

Moreover, chiasmus thinking inspires me as a religious naturalist to consider how other life forces, bodies, modes of being—infinately multiplied—share in the capacious entangled web of life and the shifting, ontological orderings that Keller has alerted us to in *Cloud* textuality. Entangled materiality implies an irreducible “thereness,” always something more real than the objectifications of materiality that our conceptual abstractions create. Simply put, we are here even before we can begin to conceptualize how we are here. Accordingly, I introduce in the next section a quintessentially postmodern religious task: tentatively re-materializing the human as an important finite realm of possibilities within unfolding cosmic wonders.

APORETIC POSSIBILITIES IN RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Religious naturalism destabilizes traditional religious methods that purport to establish humanity's desires of actualization on metaphysical views of a superior deity; this religiosity also problematizes the notion that religious ideas and ethical practices are necessarily grounded in transcendental ideals. Rejecting traditional onto-theological claims of reality as the source of our being, this religious perspective affirms value-laden organisms fundamentally coming to terms with life, or making sense of their existence, in relationship with others. It also honors the complex ways human animals attempt to enact our desire for others, fulfilling emotional, physical, and psychological needs. The model of religious naturalism I espouse is not necessarily centered in any specific tradition; rather, it is a mode of experiencing, reflecting on, and envisioning one's relationality with all that is. Here, I evoke the views of Peter Van Ness, who writes: "the spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realizing one's truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is" (Van Ness 1996, 5). Accordingly, my conception of humanity emerges from a naturalistic vision that emphasizes deep interconnectedness among humans and celebrates our kinship with other sentient life, accentuating a modality of existence in which transformation occurs.

Utilizing the tenets of religious naturalism in conjunction with values discourse, I consider humans' awareness and appreciation of our connection to "all that is" as an expression of sacrality, or of what we perceive as ultimately important and valuable. This perspective, as I have argued elsewhere, is possible if, and only if, we continue to keep our focus on artful, material human organisms, or on the efforts of relational humans (White 2016, 119). This means that any truths we are ever going to discover, and any meaning in life we will uncover, are revealed to us through our own efforts as natural beings. My religious naturalism expressly rejects any suggestion of the supernatural—there is nothing that transcends the natural world. This insight is particularly applicable in comprehending humans' need for value and meaning—the realm of nature is the focus (inclusive of both natural processes and human culture). Donald Crosby has provided an elegant summary of the prominent status of nature in religious naturalism:

Nature requires no explanation beyond itself. It always has existed and always will exist in some shape or form. Its constituents, principles, laws, and relations are the sole reality. This reality takes on new traits and possibilities as it evolves inexorably through time. Human beings are integral parts of nature, and they are natural beings through and through. They, like all living beings, are outcomes of biological evolution. They are embodied beings whose mental or spiritual aspect is not something separate from their bodies but a function of their bodily nature. There is no realm of the

supernatural and no supernatural being or beings residing in such a realm. (Crosby 2008, ix-x)

I share with Crosby and other religious naturalists two fundamental convictions in understanding basic human quests for meaning and value: (1) the recognition that nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives, and (2) the sense of nature's richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility. In this context, then, religious naturalism offers an eloquent rendering of human animals' deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world, and it honors the rich diversity of life in which we find ourselves constituted. These insights correlate with the following observations from Keller:

This book will consider how the cloud surrounding what we say about "God" here enfolds the entire crowd of our relations. In other words the ancient *via negativa* now offers its mystical unsaying, which is a nonknowing of God, to the uncertainty that infects our knowing of anything that is *not* God. The manifold of social movements, the multiplicity of religious or spiritual identifications, the queering of identities, the tangled planetarity of human and nonhuman bodies: these in their unsettling togetherness will exceed our capacities ever altogether to know or manage them. In their unspeakable excesses they press for new possibilities of flourishing. (Keller 2015, 5)

The religious naturalism I introduce here requires us to take seriously the idea of our humanity as an achievement, not a given. More specifically, my view compels many of us to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming. Its theoretical appeal is the fundamental conception of humans as natural processes intrinsically connected to other natural processes. This insight helps to blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between other species and us. With Loyal Rue, I endorse a portrayal of human beings as star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviors (Rue 2005, 77). Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence. Rue wrote:

The meaning of human life should be expressed in terms of how our particular species pursues the ultimate telos of reproductive fitness. Like every other species, we seek the ultimate biological goal according to our peculiar nature. That is, by pursuing the many teloi that are internal to our behavior mediation systems, whether these teloi are built into the system by genetic means or incorporated into them by symbolic means. For humans there are many immediate teloi, including the biological goals inherent in our drive systems, the psychological goals implicit in our emotional and

cognitive systems, and the social goals we imbibe through our symbolic systems. Human life is about whatever these goals are about. (Rue 2005, 75)

Appreciating human life as one distinct biotic form emerging from, and participating in, a series of evolutionary processes that constitute the diversity of life has monumental implications for addressing our relationality. Here, the scientific epic becomes the starting point for positing a perspective constituted by a central tenet: humans are relational processes of nature; in short, we are nature made aware of itself. In declaring such, I reiterate that our humanity is not a given, but rather an achievement. Consider that from a strictly biological perspective, humans are organisms that have slowly evolved by a process of natural selection from earlier primates. From one generation to another, the species that is alive now has gradually adapted to changing environments so that it could continue to survive. Our animality, from this perspective, is living under the influence of genes, instincts, and emotions, with the prime directive to survive and procreate.

Yet, this minimalist approach fails to consider what a few cognitive scientists and most philosophers, humanists, and religionists tend to accentuate: our own personal experience of what it is like to be an experiencing human organism. Becoming human, or actualizing ourselves as human beings, in this sense, emerges out of an awareness and desire to be more than a conglomeration of pulsating cells. It is suggesting that our humanity is not reducible to organizational patterns or processes dominated by brain structures; nor do DNA, diet, behavior, and the environment solely structure it. Human animals become human destinies when we posit fundamental questions of value, meaning, and purpose to our existence. Our coming to be human destinies is structured by a crucial question: How do we come to terms with life? (White 2016, 33).

In my religious view, sacrality is a specific affirmation and appreciation of that which is fundamentally important in life, or that which is ultimately valued: relational nature. Humans are interconnected parts of nature, and our sacrality is a given part of nature's richness, spectacular complexity, and beauty. Notwithstanding the diverse cultural and individual approaches of articulating this truth, there is for me, quite simply, the sacrality of humanity's profound interconnectedness with all that is. Finding meaning and value in our lives within the natural order presupposes this fundamental interconnectedness. We can claim and become our humanity in seeking and finding community with others—and with otherness in its myriad manifestations. This is a simple value that religious discourse has advanced and reiterated again and again. As Ursula Goodenough observed,

We have throughout the ages sought connection with higher powers in the sky or beneath the earth, or with ancestors in some other realm. We

have also sought, and found, religious fellowship with one another. And now we realize that we are connected to all creatures. Not just in food chains or ecological equilibria. We share a common ancestor. We share genes for receptors and cell cycles and signal-transduction cascades. We share evolutionary constraints and possibilities. We are connected all the way down. (Goodenough 1998, 75)

The basic conception of the human as an emergent, interconnected life form amid spectacular biotic diversity is a terrifying beauty that involves seeking and savoring learned ignorance. Here, I emphasize the mystery of human existence, even when utilizing scientific theories. In this sense, my religious perspective is not unlike Keller's in reminding us to aim not so much for piercing cosmic wholeness as much as continuing to enfold in its unfolding. In doing so, and in keeping with the ethos of uncertainty that is a part of any interpretive strategy, I bring to mind physicist Chet Raymo's emphasis on epistemological humility as a basic driving force of scientific exploration. While lauding its amazing discoveries, Raymo, also a religious naturalist, nonetheless concludes that science can never deplete the mystery of all that is. Nor can it exhaust reality, or even begin to encompass the complexity of humans' interaction with the more-than-human worlds that constitute our being here.

For Raymo, acknowledging "I do not know" is part of a crucial legacy of thinking that has often embraced the mystery of existence; he associates this cultivated ignorance—"an ignorance that is aware of itself"—with the methodological orientations of such iconic figures as physicist Heinz Pagels, Charles Darwin, Blaise Pascal, Karl Popper, and physician/essayist Lewis Thomas (Raymo 2008, 27–30). In doing so, Raymo augments a key point that Keller ingeniously features in *Cloud* and I advance here: human ignorance can be liberating in the face of the deeper mystery that we are not at the center of all that is, but rather a constitutive part of all that is. As Raymo suggests, "the more we understand about the universe, the more we are faced with an ever-deep encounter with the thing seen only through a glass darkly—the inscape, the absconded God who hides in a cloud of unknowing" (Raymo 2008, 16). Raymo's open-ended epistemology is especially refreshing in the context of discussing human materiality amid the mystery of our coming to be here: "Faced with the mystery of the big bang—which remains as inexplicable as it was in Simpson's time—the empirical naturalist will say 'I don't know.' Perhaps an explanation will come along, perhaps not . . ." (Raymo 2008, 32).

WHY MINDING MATERIALITY MATTERS

Toward the end of her meditation, Keller reflects on the generative power of cloud textuality, alerting us to the illusions of thinking we have arrived at some neat, systematic closure. She observes:

And so the cloud is never enough; it *is* not any of the ensembles elemental or social that it makes possible; *is* not the theology, not the theopoetics. It lets us face an impossibility of our oikos with some new possibility. In the present book the cloud has offered itself not as a home, not as an earth, but as a perspective hospitable to experiments in dwelling differently. (Keller 2015, 310)

The materialist textuality I introduce in this essay offers another perspective (another unfolding, in Keller's vernacular) on the possibility of dwelling differently, as well. Aporetic crossings allow us to experience the strange, relational worlds of which we are constituted. Put another way, honoring our radical relatedness entails a constant yearning for becoming human, for achieving our humanity—a task that can never be completed in an unfolding, mysterious universe. For me, this bit of wisdom marks the language of desire, suggesting an erotic materiality. Likewise, in her text, Keller evokes Whitman's erotic cosmopolitanism as a witness to the possibility of “treating another democratic countercosmos” (Keller 2015, 199). I find Whitman's effusive affirmations of our basic interconnectedness alluring, specifically when he declares:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Whitman 1982, 188)

In another American cultural context, this important sentiment was also voiced by James Baldwin, who valorized fleshly, erotic desiring within a brilliant sense of crossing over into an otherness that defied arbitrary racial constructions (White 2016). At the height of the civil rights movement in the sixties, Baldwin espoused a radical view of love as “something active, more like a fire, like a wind,” not an empty abstraction describing a passive stance before some authorial figure outside of oneself (Stanley and Pratt 1989, 48). For him, embracing embodied love could result in vital flourishing for all North Americans, and he reiterated this theme in a speech given in San Francisco in October of 1960. Addressing the writer's role in American life, Baldwin emphasized and articulated a moral vision that celebrates the potential of newly formed human relationships to create and sustain new possibilities for Americans. In his thinking, humans could displace the traditional God and enact transformation in their lives, redeeming themselves from impoverished, erroneous views of their shared humanity. In rejecting traditional supernaturalism, Baldwin exchanged the external deity beyond nature for the power of love expressed in embodied, material human relationships.

Baldwin's erotic materiality underscores Keller's point, as does Whitman's: minding matter matters. As a site of illumination, Baldwin alerts

us to the dangers of emplacing what is fluid and porous with normalizing discourses. In the fuller expression of his rhetoric of love, one recognizes a form of communal ontology that has been either dismissed or distorted. As he emphatically stated at one point: “It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: Whoever debases others is debasing [him]self” (Baldwin 1998, 334). With this passage, Baldwin anticipated a basic point of my religious naturalism, which emphasizes the deep genetic homology structuring all life forms—what I describe as humans’ interconnectedness with each other and with all natural organisms. This is an idea that is central to Keller’s work, too: “The degraded other already implicates me. For any other before me, any human other I face, confronts me with its own logic of the infinite—and so with an infinite alterity: ‘infinity in the face of the other’” (Keller 2015, 217). A crucial lesson here is that, notwithstanding the cultural and national differences and specificities we construct, humans are all genetically connected and part of a greater whole—any harm done to another human is essentially harm done to ourselves. We are essentially celebrating a relational self that can resist solipsistic tendencies and egoistic impulses: there is no isolated self who stands over against the fields of interaction. Put another way, there is no private self or final line between interiority and exteriority—we always include the other (even if by acting to exclude it). The self is constitutionally relational and inevitably entangled in temporal becoming.

Equally important, in a wider cosmological context, this view of the material, relational human organism invites a peculiar form of religious reflection that adamantly advocates kindness, empathy, and compassion for all natural processes, not just for human others. With the capacity to influence one another and other natural processes, humans also have a responsibility to act in ways that promote the flourishing of all life, and to urge other humans who may be less aware of our interconnectedness to do the same. One possibility of our humanity that passes in front of us, then, is found in Raymo’s sense that we are part of an interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time. As such, “each of us is profoundly implicated in the functioning and fate of every other being on the planet, and ultimately, perhaps, throughout the universe” (Raymo 2008, 98). I daresay that Keller’s *Cloud* does not pass by this passing possibility.

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