From Sacred Grove to Dark Wood to Re-enchanted Forest (Part I): The Evolution of Arborphilia as Neo-romantic Environmental Ethics

Joy H. Greenberg
Independent Scholar
Camarillo, CA
jhg@joyhornergreenberg.com

Abstract
Many human cultures have venerated forests and trees. I argue that the ubiquity of arborphilia across hemispheres, wherever forests have existed, suggests an evolutionary process that allowed adaptation to such arboreal realms throughout the world. Because trees in their constant recycling through the seasons evoke the ambivalence associated with death and renewal, paradoxical perceptions of forests and trees have coexisted throughout history. Depending on the era and culture, such attitudes about forests and groves have ranged from viewing them as hallowed sanctuaries deserving of protection from desecration, to fearing them as places inhabited by Satan or demonic spirits (explored in Part I), to appreciating them as not only aesthetically worthy but crucial for human survival (explored in Part II). An ecocritical examination of some of the many ways that tree veneration has been expressed culturally—through music, poetry, folktales, literature, film, and even jokes and advertising—reveals that loving trees provides a fundamental root for neo-romantic environmental ethics.

Keywords
Sacred groves, tree-pillar, hero quest, mythology, fairytales, Dante, Thoreau, dendrophilia, arborphilia, ecocinema, ecocriticism.
Part I

Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! (Isaiah 4:23).

No other form of pagan ritual has been so widely distributed, has left behind it such persistent traces, or appeals so closely to modern sympathies as the worship of the tree (J.H. Philpot 2004 [1897]: vii).

The King tree & me have sworn to eternal love...sworn it without swearing and I’ve taken the sacrament with Douglass squirrels, drank Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, & with its rosy purple drips I am writing this woody gospel letter (John Muir 1870).

The forest is a kind of archetype of the foundations of the world (Holmes Rolston III 1998: 157).

A tree changes the place in which it grows and makes the place richer because it is growing there (Andy Goldsworthy 1996: 23).

An Arboreal Backstory

Whether known as ‘dendrophilia’, ‘arborphilia’, ‘dendrophily’, or dendrolatry,¹ the reverence for trees is expressed in many ways through diverse media such as literature, poetry, film, music, art, jokes, commercial advertising, and even cell towers. Tree veneration² is also demonstrated by the American States, which all have their State Trees, and by neuroscientists, who compare the cerebral cortex to tree bark, use the Latin arbor vitae (‘tree of life’) for the cerebellum because of its branching, central location in the brain,³ and use the word ‘dendrite’ from the Greek δένδρον (dendron) meaning ‘tree’ as a name for the branch-like projections

1. Here I distinguish between ‘dendrophilia’, the literal meaning of which is ‘love of trees’, and the paraphilia characterized by an individual’s sexual attraction to or arousal by trees, which may or may not encompass sexual contact and/or worshipping them as phallic symbols (Corsini 1999: 263). ‘Dendrophilia’ may have been coined by Lawrence Buell (1995: 120) when referring to Thoreau’s love of trees. P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1891) and others have used the term ‘dendrolatry’ to mean ‘tree worship’. ‘Arborphilia’ has been defined by some similarly to paraphilic ‘dendrophilia’, but I follow Bron Taylor’s articulation of ‘arborphilia’, which ‘was inspired by the notions of biophilia [E.O. Wilson (1984)] and chlorophilia... (Kellert and Wilson 1993)... Put simply, the notion suggests that there is an innate aesthetic affection for life because these are ecologically adaptive traits’ (2013: 239).

2. At the risk of oversimplification, I conflate ‘tree veneration’ with arborphilia, a spiritually felt reverence for trees that may be expressed in a variety of ways, including rituals, myths, hiking, camping, art, music, literature, and so forth.

3. I am grateful to Candy Doran, PT, for pointing out the arbor vitae (cerebellum) to me.
on neurons that electrochemically transfer the impulses from adjacent neurons to the cell bodies. Not surprisingly, the root word ‘déndron’ appears in species names, including that of the giant sequoia, *Sequoia dendron*.

Arborphilia may thus be recognized as a vital component of nature spirituality and through this dynamic as a motivator of ‘eco-spiritual activism’ (B. Taylor 2013: 241; see also Zaleha 2013: 142). Perhaps even more importantly, ‘loving trees’, when examined ecocritically, may be appreciated as not simply symptomatic of a romantic naïveté but as an adaptation that enables human sustainability. In this way, I extend literary ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism—‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’—to include not only literature but all visual and audial arts. In this way, I will explore ‘what cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics’ (Glotfelty 2013).

In ‘The Aesthetics of Forests’, environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston found that the ‘phenomenon of forests is so widespread, persistent, and diverse, spontaneously appearing almost wherever moisture and climatic conditions permit it, that forests cannot be accidents or anomalies but rather must be a characteristic expression of the creative process’ (1998: 158). Rolston further observed that while oceans and deserts may be archetypal in their own right, ‘Forests have more evident and perennial exuberance. The forest is where the “roots” go deep, where life rises high from the ground. Forests convey a sense of life flourishing in more massive and enduring proportions; the vertical contrasts with the horizontal’ (1998: 159). Rolston suggested that beyond forests aiding human sustenance, people are attracted to trees for aesthetic reasons: ‘There is evidence that we are still genetically disposed to prefer partially forested landscapes… A visit to a forest contributes to the human sense of place in space and time, of duration, antiquity, continuity’ (1998: 159, 160).

4. I am grateful to neuroscientist Gian Greenberg for pointing out dendrites to me.

5. See, for example, Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Taylor 2010; Ryan, Huta, and Deci 2008; Dutcher et al. 2007; Terhaar 2009; Emerson 2003 [1849]; Williams and Harvey 2001; Bartkowski and Swearingen 1997; Kaplan 1995; Norton 1990; Beck 1987. Moreover, it has been found that trees provide not only spiritual but physical and mental health benefits: see, for example, Kardan et al. 2015; Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Callicott 2011; Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan 2009; Gottlieb 2006; Tarakeshwar et al. 2001; Schultz and Zelezny 1999; Norton 1990; Naess 1989; Lovelock 1988; Devall and Sessions 1985; Leopold 1949.

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Rolston’s aesthetics and other reasons for human affinity with trees will be further illumined by examining the lengthy, lush, momentous history of sylvan symbolism in several narratives, from the pagan primeval grove and its tree worship, to Dante’s infernal Dark Wood, and finally to the New Age revival of neo-romantic dendrophilia, as exemplified by the HBO series *True Detective* (Fukunaga 2013–14), the play *Tree* (Hébert 2009), and the film *The Tree of Life* (Malick 2011).

Sacred Groves in Antiquity

Chronicling an account of perceptions about trees through the ages may seem esoteric, but, according to Simon Schama, it actually goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality. It is why groves of trees, with their annual promise of spring awakening, are thought to be a fitting décor for our earthly remains (Schama 1995: 15).

The association of trees with both death and rebirth is also a reason why they evoke such ambivalence: the sadness and loss that often accompanies a departed beloved may be at least partially compensated by the acceptance of dying as signifying renewal (e.g., Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 1026-34).

Another reason for arboreal ambivalence is the tree’s symbolizing both the womb and phallus (Jung in Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 1032). As bearers of fruit, nuts, and, seeds, trees are like mothers; in their upright rigidity, they resemble giant penises. Because of these dualities, paradoxical perceptions of forests and trees have coexisted throughout history. As Bron Taylor put it, ‘Emotionally-charged notions of paradise and desecration, utopia and dystopia, harmony and imbalance, health and disease, opportunity and danger, sin and redemption, have long been associated with trees’ (2013: 240). Depending on the era and culture, attitudes about forests and groves have ranged from perceiving them as sacred sites deserving preservation, to dreading them as places inhabited by demons, and to valuing them as not only intrinsically precious, but as indispensable for human survival (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 1026-34). The ubiquity of sacred forests, trees,

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and groves throughout the world supports the contention posited herein that they have long provided mythopoeic imagery for humans (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Map showing a partial listing of the distribution of sacred forests and groves across six continents, 2015 (Michelle Blake, permission granted).

Greek Groves
Much evidence supports the reality of sacred groves in both ancient and historic Greece. Often, a sacred grove was associated with a particular goddess (R.P. Harrison 1992: 178). According to C.G. Jung, countless ‘female deities were worshipped in tree form’, leading to cults that venerated sacred groves and trees (1990 [1956]: §321). Robert P. Harrison points to Greek iconography, which illustrates that

A single tree, or group of trees, would sometimes be enclosed by a wall marking off the space of the temple... Votives would arrive in procession to these sanctuaries and invite their goddess to appear by dancing ecstatically around her sacred tree. At the height of their ecstasy the goddess would reveal her presence. Rituals such as these point to the phenomenon of tree worship, so prevalent among various pagan religions (R.P. Harrison 1992: 178).

Indeed, for those in ancient Greece, to speak of sacred groves was to invoke Artemis, a goddess of primeval Arcadia, who represented all that was wild in the natural world, including its beasts and trees (e.g.,
Hughes 1990). Forest groves were dedicated to her, as well as to other gods and goddesses, and taboos and comprehensive regulations designed to protect these places were established, as J. Donald Hughes said: ‘These rules, intended to preserve the sanctuaries from destruction, were enforced both through civil and religious penalties’ (1990: 193). Tree-cutting was outlawed and hunting and fishing in such sacred places was prohibited.

For the Greeks, then, sylvan sacredness had much to do with their religious and environmental practices. Because of their association of Artemis with the sacred-wood mythologem, forest sanctuaries were established. As a result, Artemis’s presence in the Greek pantheon ‘inhibited human invasion of sacred forests’ (Hughes 1990: 193). In fact, the ‘very name “Artemis” may have derived from the Greek term for a sanctuary, *temenos* [meaning] ‘sacred enclosure’” (1990: 193, italics added). Artemis created in her followers a sense of the wilderness as sanctified: ‘In psychological terms, she was the projection of whatever it is in the human psyche that finds the sacred and the inviolable in nature’, Hughes argued (1990: 193).

*The Roman ‘Nemus’*

What Artemis was for the Greeks, Diana seems to have been for the Romans. An aboriginal Latin deity whose worship dates to prehistory, Diana seemingly originated at a sacred grove in Nemi, Italy, whose nearby lake was called ‘Diana’s Mirror’, according to Sir James George Frazer (2002 [1922]: 1.1). Frazer was impressed enough by Diana’s story as presented in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to elaborate upon it in the first three chapters of *The Golden Bough*, which was named for the sacred tree in Diana’s grove from which no branch could be broken, except by a runaway slave. So taken was Frazer with Diana and her domain that he opened his book with a poetic paean to the scene:

> Who does not know Turner’s picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi—‘Diana’s Mirror’, as it was called by the ancients. No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it… Diana herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild (2002 [1922]: 1.1).

Frazer described a sylvan landscape not dissimilar to Artemis’s realm and noted that Diana Nemorensis—Diana of the Wood—‘was conceived

7. For more on Artemis, see Greenberg 2013.
of especially as a huntress, and further as blessing men and women with offspring, and granting expectant mothers an easy delivery’, all traits attributed to Artemis as well (2002 [1922]: 1.5). By citing Joseph M.W. Turner’s British romantic painting that depicts a scene from Virgil’s *Aeneid*—Sibyl presenting the mythical ‘golden bough’ to Hades psychopomp Hermes—Frazer indicated metaphorically that his book was intended to be a re-romanticization following Virgil as his guide, rather than a theological explication. As a result, romanticism came to be associated with and even considered integral to environmentalism, which helps to account for its prevalence in ecocritical discourse (e.g., Bate 1996; Coupe 2000; Hay 1988), despite criticisms from postmodernists that the romantic outlook is infantile at best and pathological at worst (e.g., Lertzman 2010; F. Harrison 1991; Smith 1992, 2001). In noting the ‘dream-like vision’ effected by Turner, Frazer highlighted another essential aspect of romanticism: its depth perspective (C. Taylor 1989: 481). Just as modernist psychology privileged dreams as the source of our life stories, romanticism embraced what some critics saw as a solipsistic focus on self-expression. Although philosopher Charles Taylor (1989: 461) has labeled anti-romantic theory ‘calumny’, it is prevalent in the academy.

The setting of Nemi as Diana’s domain toponymically references the ‘Latin *nemus*, a grove or woodland glade’ (Frazer 2002 [1922]: 9.1). Diana’s association with sacred groves thus may be likened to Artemis’. But according to Frazer, Diana differed significantly from Artemis in that, ‘Diana of the Wood herself had a male companion Virbius by name, who was to her what Adonis was to Venus, or Attis to Cybele’ (2002 [1922]: 3.2). Diana, in other words, was not a virgin—a radical departure from Artemis, or perhaps an indication of her androgyny. Indeed, Frazer considered the mythical Virbius to be a counterpart to Hippolytus, brought back to life by Artemis after his dismemberment, hidden in fog, and spirited away from Greece to Nemi, which became Italy. In this version of the myth, Diana was a romanized Artemis cognate.

Indigenous German Arborphilia

In addition to Greece and Rome, the indigenous Germans encountered by Tacitus (1996) also venerated forests and were understood by him to be quite different from the Romans: unlike the Christian colonizers, the Germans did ‘not consider it consistent with the grandeur of celestial beings to confine the gods within walls, or to liken them to the form of any human countenance’:

They consecrate woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to the abstraction which they see only in spiritual worship... The belief of their antiquity is confirmed by religious mysteries. At a stated time of the
year, all the several people descended from the same stock assemble by their deputies in a wood consecrated by the idolatries of their forefathers... No one enters it otherwise than bound with ligatures, thence professing his subordination and meanness, and the power of the Deity there... Amongst the Naharvalians [indigenous German tribe] is shown a grove, sacred to devotion extremely ancient. Over it a Priest presides apparelled like a woman (Tacitus 1996).

By the time Tacitus encountered them, ‘the German barbarians were looking back to the forests as the “cradle of their race”, much the way the myth of Arcadia in Virgil’s *Aeneid* looked back to an antecedent epoch when men were born of oaks’ (R.P. Harrison 1992: 177-78). During this period, certain groves were ‘the dwelling-place of the supreme god to whom all things are subject and obedient’ (Tacitus 1996). These groves were often the sites of *theophanies*—experiences of the divine—which lent sacredness to them. During such experiences, a ‘veiled goddess’ might ‘appear to her devotees in a clearing’, often riding in her chariot (R.P. Harrison 1992: 178). For these reasons, Harrison saw in the Gothic cathedral a visible reproduction of ‘the ancient scenes of [sacred grove] worship in its lofty interior, which rises vertically toward the sky and then curves into a vault from all sides, like so many tree crowns converging into a canopy overhead’ (1992: 178). Likewise for Jung, Gothic cathedrals reinforced his impression that ‘Trees in particular were mysterious and seemed to [him] direct embodiments of the incomprehensible meaning of life. For that reason the woods were the place where [he] felt closest to its deepest meaning and to its awe-inspiring workings’ (1963: 86).

**The Cosmic Tree**

In prehistory sacred groves most probably existed in wild, uninhabited forests. As cities were founded and forests denuded to build them, temples and sanctuaries necessarily were located closer to urban areas. The earliest Gaul temples, according to J.A. MacCulloch, ‘were sacred groves, one of which, near Massilia [modern Marseilles], is described by Lucan’, the poet, and is reminiscent of the one dedicated to Artemis in Euripides’s *Hippolytus* (428 BCE): ‘No bird built in it, no animal lurked near, the leaves constantly shivered when no breeze stirred them. Altars stood in its midst, and the images of the gods were misshapen trunks of trees’ (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]: 279). Here the earth groaned and dead yew trees came alive. In addition to being sacred places for worshipping gods and goddesses, these temples often included a sacred tree, such as the fig (*Ficus ruminalis*). Sir Arthur Evans remarked about the special ‘sanctity of the fig-tree’ for Greeks (2008 [1901]: 6):
The Sacred Fig, the gift of Demeter, is well known, which stood on the Eleusinian Way beside the tomb of Phytalos, and gave his spirit an undying habitation. Fig-leaves as religious types appear on the coins of Kameiros in Rhodes and of the Carian Idyma. In Laconia Dionysos was worshipped under the form of a fig-tree. A fig-tree is said to have sprung where Gaia sought to ward off the bolts of Zeus from her son Sykeas, and the prophylactic powers of these trees against lightning were well known (Evans 2008 [1901]: 5).

The fig tree was particularly revered by the prehistoric Peloponnesians and Mycenaeans: ‘In Crete it still grows wild where no other tree can fix its roots, at the mouth of the caves of indigenous divinities and in the rocky mountain clefts beside once sacred springs’ (Evans 2008 [1901]: 6).

Veneration of sacred groves and trees apparently derived from the archaic fascination with natural rhythms, which led many cultures to ‘view the cosmos as a living organism’, according to Mircea Eliade (1987 [1957]: 148). One symbol of this *cosmo-organism*, as Paul Zolbrod (2009) called it, is the Cosmic Tree. Because the ‘mystery of the inexhaustible appearance of life is bound up with the rhythmical renewal of the cosmos’, it was ‘imagined in the form of a gigantic tree’ (Eliade 1987 [1957]: 148). The Cosmic Tree therefore expressed all that archaic humankind regarded as ‘*pre-eminently real and sacred*’ and that was ‘only rarely accessible to privileged individuals, the heroes and demigods’ (Eliade 1987 [1957]: 149). A culture’s Cosmic Tree thus represented its *essence* (Table 1).

**Table 1. Cosmic/Sacred Trees of Ancient Traditions.** Partial list of traditions, their global locations, and the cosmic or sacred trees associated with them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Tree Species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Ancient Greece</td>
<td>fig; alder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaonian</td>
<td>Ancient Greece</td>
<td>oak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old German</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>hazel; tilia (linden)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Norse</td>
<td>Scandinavia</td>
<td>ash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celtic</td>
<td>British Isles</td>
<td>yew; cypress; alder; ash; rowan; hazel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conibo</td>
<td>Amazon region of Peru, S. America</td>
<td>catahua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chumash</td>
<td>California, USA</td>
<td>pinyon pine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cayuga</td>
<td>Eastern USA</td>
<td>ash; oak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abenaki</td>
<td>Northeastern USA; Southeastern Canada</td>
<td>birch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arikari</td>
<td>South Dakota, USA</td>
<td>cedar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ojibway</td>
<td>Minnesota, USA</td>
<td>jack pine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koyukon</td>
<td>Alaska, USA</td>
<td>white spruce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Demeter was to agrarian culture what Artemis-Diana was to the pagans.

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Such was the scientific relevance of the Cosmic Tree to the imagination that Charles Darwin was moved to make it a major metaphor for his revolutionary theories in *On the Origin of Species*:

> As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feeble branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications (2013 [1859]).

Darwin went on to draw his conception in his Transmutation Notebook (B) of 1837 (fig. 2) and to write about the visual metaphor that inspired him to theorize about evolutionary processes as he came to understand how ‘organized beings represent a tree, irregularly branched some branches far more branched—hence Genera—many terminal buds dying, as new ones generated’ (in Eldredge 2005: 103). The genius behind Darwin’s tree trope is further emphasized by the observation that substantial evolutionary accomplishment was necessary to organize the earliest units of life—cells—into organisms as inflexible and colossal as trees.

Figure 2. A page from Darwin’s Notebook B showing his sketch of the Tree of Life, 1837 (Public Domain)

Darwin was not alone in conceiving evolution as a tree; some of the creation myths of the Māori, the indigenous Polynesians of New Zealand, also likened the ‘evolution of the universe…to a tree, with its
base, tap roots, branching roots, and root hairs’ (Best 1922). Additionally, Māori cosmogony often included a list of names that resemble ‘a genealogical table’ (Best 1922). Although there are several extant versions of this narration, most begin with the prename ‘Te’ followed by a sequence of names such as ‘Te Pu, Te More, Te Take, Te Weu, etc., which appear to denote parts of a tree, thus reminding us of the cosmogonic tree of Old-World mythological systems’ (Best 1922). Moreover, comparing the form of a tree with the universe is ‘one of the most natural methods of reasoning’ that can occur to the primordial mind (Philpot 2004 [1897]: 109).

Such comparisons between universal and arboreal growth conjure images of the world-ash Yggdrasill (fig. 3) that hides a man and woman so that they may become parents for a new human race (Jung 1990 [1956]: §367; see also Best 1922; Davidson 1988: 162, 168, 170; Philpot [1897] 2004). According to the same myth, God created humans by ‘breathing life into a substance called tre’, which means ‘tree’ or ‘wood’ (Jung 1990 [1956]: §367). A darker, shamanic interpretation of the Old Norse word Yggdrasill is ‘Odin’s horse’ or ‘gallows’, a construal based on the meanings of drasill (‘horse’) and Ygg (a name for Odin). In the Poetic Edda poem Hávamál the god Odin hung himself in sacrifice from a tree that may have been Yggdrasill while perched on his horse (Simek 2007: 375), making it the ‘gallows tree’ or ‘hanging tree’ as such trees came to be known through the centuries.

Figure 3. The Ash Yggdrasill by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine, 1886 (Public Domain)
Jung elaborated that the Cosmic Tree symbolically represents ‘the way of life itself, a growing into that which eternally is and does not change; which springs from the union of opposites and, by its eternal presence, also makes union possible’ (1980 [1959]: §198). A variation on the Cosmic Tree, the Tree of Life is a common mother symbol that may have been ‘a fruit-bearing genealogical tree, and hence a kind of tribal mother’, according to Jung, who also noted, ‘Numerous myths say that human beings came from trees’ (1990 [1956]: §321).

**The Tree of Life in Cinema and on Stage**

More recently, the Tree of Life has surfaced as an intriguing if enigmatic motif in the film *The Tree of Life* (Malick 2011) and in the HBO series *True Detective* (Fukunaga 2013–14).

In *The Tree of Life* director Terrence Malick associated the Tree of Life with Sophia—the feminine principle; this was most obvious in the scene depicting protagonist Jack O’Brien’s (Sean Penn) fantasy of his mother in the family’s front yard floating around an enormous tree, which as noted previously, is the most prominent symbol of the mother goddess. Sophia is but one of the numerous biblical references in *The Tree of Life*, whose images reveal ‘cosmic correlations...situated within a long visual and religious history’ (Plate 2012: 528). S. Brent Plate pointed out that *The Tree of Life* ‘is simply the latest in a millennia-old project, shared by cultures across the world, of visually reconciling the microcosmos with the macrocosmos [and] finding our local lives situated within the grand scheme of things’ (2012: 528). Plate argued that the ‘contractions of cosmic time’ stretch the audience’s imaginations until they ultimately comprehend that the ‘cosmic imagery’ of films like *The Tree of Life* ‘is not just out there, it is “back then”, in illo tempore, and it impacts life “now”’ (2012: 528; see also Davidson 1988: 181; Eliade 1987 [1957]: 80). In other words, the film takes place in mythic time, which perhaps explains the difficulty many viewers seemed to have making sense of its lack of chronological coherency. But for Plate, *The Tree of Life* validated ‘a direct lineage from the origin of the universe to the origins of the local community’ that extended forward and fleetingly into ‘an imaged and imagined life to come’ (2012: 532). Through this dynamic, director Malick visually postulated that ancient mythologies

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9. See, for example, Rotten Tomatoes (2011) for a comparison of critics, 84% of whom reviewed *Tree of Life* favorably; of the general audience, only 60% liked the film (online: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_tree_of_life_2011/#audience_reviews).
bear on us in the here and now, shaping our lives. Touching down in another place and time, and re-viewing the imagery of cosmic origins, we begin to see an intriguing relation between an evolutionary view of the macrocosmos and the mythic symbols that continue to hold sway in scientific endeavors (Plate 2012: 532-33).

By using mythic and scientific symbols and images, Malick constantly referenced trees that are vibrant, watchful, relatively immutable, and viewed predominantly from the ground looking up.

Similarly to The Tree of Life, the first season (2013–14) of the HBO series True Detective—ostensibly a crime drama-mystery—featured what director Cary Fukunaga called an ‘iconic’ tree that was so integral to its narrative that it was used consistently in a title shot for the series (in Martin 2014). Television critic Daniel Riley argued that Fukunaga was primarily influenced by Malick, citing a scene in episode 5:

Marty’s girls are playing in the yard with this silvery, stormy light... The whole thing feels very sisterly with... The Tree of Life. Audrey torments Maisie by tossing Maisie’s princess crown into a tree, where it’s held in frame as seven years pass in an instant. The camera falls from the tree to reveal Maisie and a friend [now seven years older] in cheerleaders’ uniforms (Riley 2014).

For Riley, this scene provided the second ‘most iconic image’ of the first-season episodes. Like the tree in this scene, and even more symbolic, was the massive oak from episode 1, under which detectives Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) discovered the murdered body of a missing prostitute posed as if praying to the oak in some sort of satanic ritual. This tree appeared so often throughout the episodes that it was more than just a part of the setting; it was a character. Its last image in the final scene of the final episode was actually taken from the first images shot of burning cane fields. According to Fukunaga: ‘So the beginning is the end, the end is the beginning’ (in Martin 2014), demonstrating an understanding of, if not precisely reverence for, trees that in their constant cycling through the seasons embody an essential paradox: from death comes life. That the tree was a southern live oak (Quercus virginiana)—which is considered to be symbolic of the Old South (Bender 2004)—adds even more to the tree’s mystique.

Tree symbolism is further extended in the series through the study of the Tuttle family, who are believed by the detectives to be behind the ritual murders at the majestic oak. By studying the Tuttle family tree, Cohle and Hart hoped to shed light on how the Tuttles and their religious cult had evaded detection for so long. The family-tree trope is
yet another way in which humans have employed tree imagery, in this case to explain ancestry.  

Family-tree symbolism appears in another theatrical work as well: *Tree* by Julie Hébert (2009), which is a play about race that attempts to answer the question ‘What defines a family?’ with more questions: Common blood? Shared experiences? These questions are faced by black Southside Chicagoan Leo (Carl Lumbly) when his white half-sister Didi Marcantel (Susi Damilano) comes knocking on his door to tell him that their white biological father has died. Didi’s revelation of the letters their dad, Ray, wrote to Leo’s black mother, Jessalyn (Cathleen Riddley), before he was born prompts the now-demented Jessalyn to remember long-forgotten encounters with Ray. In this way, *Tree* becomes ‘a metaphor for the roots, branches, and leaves of a family [—] both solid and enduring’ (Lewin 2009), and familial bonds are understood ‘as the roots of our spiritual essence as we strive to come to terms with self-identity and our emotional needs’ (Spindle 2009). Such imagery is ripe for figurative tropes, as one reviewer pointed out: ‘Although Didi is desperate to go out on the limb, Leo is inclined not to turn over a new leaf. *Tree* is an uprooted family secret that affects many branches’ (K. Walsh 2011). Even the play’s San Francisco advertising banner evokes self-as-tree imagery with its double-head profiles forming the branched crown of a tree.

But *Tree* metaphorizes more than family: when Jessalyn’s performance took the audience to the lake where Ray had once sneaked into a nearby tree without her noticing, she re-lived the memory by ‘climbing’ and ‘flying’ from a tree that only she could see. Although her attempted ‘flight’ produced her plummeting to the floor, Riddley’s performance was so captivating that, as a member of the audience, I ‘flew’ and ‘fell’ with her. Indeed, at least two of Jessalyn’s monologues, which moved from crazed rants to poetic eloquence, were devoted to her envisioning Ray in the tree. This re-memory ultimately played a pivotal role in the dramatic arc of Jessalyn’s performance. And the set design of the San Francisco Playhouse production exquisitely evoked the title of the play, with a wooden staircase (tree trunk) rising to a loft (tree crown) where Jessalyn’s bedroom was suspended above the floor and a stack of boxes.

10. The film *A Different Tree* (Caples 2014) involves an eight-year-old girl’s quest to engage her formerly absentee father in the family-tree project her class has been assigned at school.

11. I use the words ‘black’ instead of ‘African-American’ and ‘white’ instead of ‘Euro-American’ to highlight the visual racial polarity so evident in the play’s performance that might otherwise be lost on readers.
The staircase thus evoked a tree trunk growing through Leo’s home, with hanging boxes simulating the boughs of the tree, making Didi’s inspection of the containers littering the set’s floor a literal dig through her family roots. In this way, set designer Nina Ball created a dreamlike Treehouse, which reinforced the theory posited herein that arborphilia is represented ubiquitously in the iconic representations of trees throughout many aspects of American culture.

Commenting on American dendrophilia, ecocritic Lawrence Buell noted:

One would hardly appreciate how pervasive throughout New England was reverence for elms as the emblematic regional tree and the status of particular great elms in different communities as symbols of their history or welfare. Indeed, in some lyrical accounts, elms (and occasionally other hardwoods) had a totemic status in nineteenth-century New England not far distant from the position of, say, the white spruce among the Koyukon of central Alaska (Buell 1995: 210).

Corresponding to this veneration of elms, the giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) in California was so revered by the Scottish-American environmentalist John Muir that he planted one 130 years ago (La Ganga 2013). This specimen is so sacred it is being cloned by a National Park Service horticulturist who is trying to save it from the airborne fungus that is killing it (La Ganga 2013). Yosemite’s Mariposa Grove of 500 2000-year-old giant sequoias was set aside in 1864 along with the valley as the nation’s first effort at preserving scenic places for public enjoyment (fig. 4).

Muir’s arborphilia was legendarily recounted throughout his writing, including *The Yosemite*, in which he rhapsodized about the giant sequoia: ‘The Big Tree…is a tree of life’ (1962 [1912]: 110), and his journals, in which he opined, ‘The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness’ (1988). Given Muir’s veneration of giant sequoias, it is not surprising that the environmentalist Sierra Club, which he founded, chose The Big Tree’s image for its logo, nor that Anchor Brewing chose it for its label, on which appear words indicating the relevance of selecting it for a holiday brew: ‘Since ancient times trees have symbolized the winter solstice when the earth with its seasons appears born anew’.  

12. Cloning the Giant Sequoia may actually be prudent, given that their Sierra groves were being threatened by out-of-control wildfires at the time of this writing (Associated Press 2013).

13. I have purposely left out discussion of the iconic, ubiquitous Christmas Tree in this paper for lack of space and the plethora of extant literature on the subject. See, for
The Sacred Tree-Pillar

In his tracing of ancient Mycenaean sacred grove and tree cults, Evans observed that at some point, the sacred tree became associated with the sacred pillar, a ‘sympathetic conjunction’ that is illustrated today by an alder tree that ‘still stands hard by the King Stone’,14 about which it is told that when the flowery branch was cut on Midsummer Eve, the tree bled, [and] the stone “moved its head” (2008 [1901]: 7). In fact, maintained Evans, ‘The cult objects of Mycenaean times almost exclusively consisted of sacred stones, pillars, and trees’ (2008 [1901]: 6). This tree-pillar cult

example, Geoff Berry’s blog: http://whitefelladreaming.wordpress.com/ and Jason M. Brown’s blog: https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/cosmic-trees/.

14. This site was identified by Evans to be near Oxfordshire and Warwickshire, beside ‘the pre-historic stone fence of Rollright’ (2008 [1901]: 7).
was ‘so widespread that it may be said to mark a definite early stage of religious evolution’ (2008 [1901]: 7). In Evans’s view, tree and pillar cults may be therefore regarded as ‘identical form[s] of worship’ (2008 [1901]: 7). This conflation obtained from his finding of ‘the constant combination of the sacred tree with pillar or dolmen’ (fig. 5):

The same religious idea—the possession of the material object by the numen of the divinity—is common to both. The two forms, moreover, shade off into one another; the living tree...can be converted into a column or a tree-pillar, retaining the sanctity of the original. No doubt, as compared with the pillar-form, the living tree was in some way a more realistic impersonation of the godhead, as a depositary of the divine life manifested by its fruits and foliage. In the whispering of its leaves and the melancholy soughing of the breeze was heard, as at Dodona, the actual voice of the divinity. The spiritual possession of the stone or pillar was more temporary in its nature, and the result of a special act of ritual invocation (Evans 2008 [1901]: 8).

Evans’s archaeological excavation of Crete led him to speculate that trees and pillars were worshipped there by the ancient Mycenaeans. In his analysis of the steatite fragment images (fig. 5), he first acknowledged that the ‘post-like object to the right of the fig-tree...remains enigmatical. It may well be some kind of sacred post or “Ashera”—perhaps the sacral object which recurs with religious subjects on several Mycenaean gems—an upright post impaling a triangle’ (Evans 2008 [1901]: 104). This possibility makes sense given the post-like object’s shape—cylindrical with ‘horn-like appendages’—and the figures juxtaposed with it: the fig-tree, known to be sacred to many cults, and the two human figures on either side of it, one of whom is ‘apparently engaged in sprinkling grain in front of the altar [post]’ (Evans 2008 [1901]: 104).

![Figure 5. Drawing of fragment of a steatite pyxis (small box), Knossus, showing presumed sacred tree (upper left) and djed-pillar-altar (shaded area), from Evans 2008 [1901] (Public Domain)]
Evans’s work thus helped to illumine how both wooden and stone pillars were utilized to protect the souls of sacred trees on Crete. In *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*, Evans reconstructed the rituals involved in transferring the soul of a tree to a column.\(^{15}\) R.P. Harrison believed that this convergence explained why the Greek temple contained such a density of columns (1992: 178). For, as he asked,

> What purpose do the columns serve beyond their architectural function? If a single column once symbolized a sacred tree, a cluster of columns may well have symbolized a sacred grove. What we know for sure is that the temple’s network of columns enclosed a holy shrine where the god’s presence was preserved in his image. A temple was the dwelling place of the deity (R.P. Harrison 1992: 178).

Harrison’s point is well-taken. When the columnar architecture of many temples—including the Greek Parthenon (fig. 6), the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (fig. 7), and the Tholos (circular temple) for Athena at Delphi (fig. 8)—are considered, it does not require a stretch of the imagination to envision them as a forest or sacred grove, which may have been precisely the aesthetic experience the Greeks had in mind. The Parthenon, for example, as a Doric peripteral temple featured a rectangular floor plan with outer colonnades totaling 46 columns; an interior, six-column row before each of two doors; a four-column square in the smaller room; and a 23-column, three-sided, π-shaped colonnade surrounding the statue of Athena inside the second room, or *hecatompedos*. It may well have evoked a feeling, either of entering a foreboding forest as the exterior entrances were confronted, or of finding oneself inside a sacred grove surrounded by columns rather than trees. Might these responses be what the Greeks had in mind when designing their colonnaded temples?

![Figure 6. Parthenon (Temple of Athena) floor plan showing its ‘forest’ (circles) of columns, n.d. (Public Domain)](image)

\(^{15}\) See also Chevalier and Gheerbrant, who averred that the column, ‘together with its normal accessories of base and capital, symbolizes the Tree of Life, the base being its roots, the shaft its trunk and the capital its branches’ (1996 [1969]: 221).
Columns and colonnades have continued to find favor with architects, especially during the Greek revivalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as governments erected buildings that exuded the gravitas and authority that the temples of ancient Greece apparently once did. Examples abound primarily in Europe and throughout the United States of such classicism (fig. 9).
Osiris, Isis, and the Djed Pillar

Like the Greeks, the Egyptians exhibited dendrophilia, particularly in the myth of Osiris, which exemplified the prototypical merging of the sacred tree motif with the sacred pillar (Evans 2008 [1901]: 18). Evans cited a Byblian legend recounted by Plutarch that told how the ‘trunk of a sacred tree’—the ‘divine tamarisk’—became a “pillar of the house” (Evans 2008 [1901]: 18). According to the myth, the trunk of the divine tamarisk had enclosed the chest of Osiris and as a result was cut down and made into the principal support for King Malkandros’s roof. The legendary wooden pillar was eventually transferred to the temple of Isis at Byblos. This narrative thus epitomized ‘the columnar idol of the architectonic type taking its rise in the most natural way from the hewn trunk of a sacred tree’ (Evans 2008 [1901]: 18; see also Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 221). Evans’s observation suggests that columns may have at one time been made from tree trunks. Symbolists Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant put it succinctly: ‘In any case, columns took their shape from trees’ (1996 [1969]: 221), a conclusion also reached by Georges Posener (1962: 50) about Egyptian columns, which were stone copies of supports created from plants, tree trunks, and stem bundles that were once used to prop up the ceilings of wood and clay buildings. Palm trees and papyrus provided the live models for these columns.¹⁶

Jungian scholar Erich Neumann rendered a psychological profile of Osiris, who was revered in Byblos, a coastal port in what is now Lebanon, as ‘the tree’ and as ‘a god of fertility, earth, and nature’ (1973 [1954]: 225; see also Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 221). Yet, Osiris ‘is not just the god who dies to rise again; he is the god who does not die, who remains for ever—a paradox indeed, for he is the “mummy with the long member”’ (Erman in Neumann (1973 [1954]: 225-26, italics added):

This paradoxical double significance of Osiris, evidently present right from the beginning, forms the basis of his development in Egyptian religion. On the one hand, as the dismembered god, he is the bringer of fertility, the young king who passes away and returns; on the other hand, as the procreative mummy with the long member, he is everlasting and imperishable. Not only is he the living phallus, but he retains his potency even as the mummified phallus. As such he begets his son Horus and thus, as a spirit, as the dead man who ‘remains’, his fertility is imbued with a higher meaning. In this mysterious symbol of the fertile dead, mankind

¹⁶. The column or pillar also symbolized the Tree of Life in Celtic tradition (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 222). Extrapolating on the notion of pillars supporting buildings, a ‘pillar of society’ has come to mean a person who upholds the cultural values of a community.
has unconsciously stumbled on a vital factor which it projected outside itself, because no clearer formulation of it was then possible: the everlastingness and fruitfulness of nature (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 227).

With his provocative notion of the ‘fertile dead’ Neumann highlighted how for the Egyptians the myth of Osiris represented a breakthrough in ontological and epistemological thought. Neumann even claimed that the *djed* was the ‘earliest Osiris symbol’ and that Dedu on the Nile delta was ‘his earliest place of worship’ (1973[1954]: 229; see also Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996 [1969]: 221). In general, the ‘*djed* is taken to represent a tree trunk with the stumps of branches projecting to either side at the top’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 229).

The *djed* pillar (fig. 10) was composed of two sections: an upper that correlated with the treetop and its four lateral branch stumps, which ultimately symbolized Osiris’s neck and head, and a lower section that correlated with the tree trunk, or Osiris’s backbone. In this way, the *djed* pillar clearly shows how the original form became anthropomorphized: ‘First it sprouted arms, as on the west wall of the temple at Abydos, then the eyes were painted in, and finally the pillar was equated with the entire figure of Osiris’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 230). In sum, the *djed* pillar represented the re-embodied, immortal Osiris, who can say conclusively, ‘“I have made myself whole and complete”’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 232).

In the myth of Osiris, Isis procured his body ‘enclosed in a tree trunk’ that the king of Byblos ‘had used as a pillar in the hall of his court’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 229). Isis ‘cut the coffer out of the tree’ (Frazer 2002 [1922]: 423), then wrapped the tree ‘in fine linen and anointed it, and right down to Plutarch’s day it was still worshiped in Byblos as the “wood of Isis”’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 229). Osiris’s ascension from earth to heaven and his conquest of death and dismemberment enabled him to become ‘the exemplar of transformation and resurrection’ (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 233). In essence, Osiris was a shaman.

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Figure 10. Late period Egyptian glazed faience *djed* pillar amulet, Brooklyn Museum, n.d. (Creative Commons)
Egyptian arborphilia may be explained in part by the importance of timber for the virtually treeless region. Byblos, on the other hand, was a rich resource for lumber, including the exceptionally large cedars of Lebanon. Such long-lived trees contrast with other vegetation that have much shorter lifespans (Neumann 1973 [1954]: 229). Because trees, unlike most other living things, ‘endure’, it is plausible that the tree came to symbolize the *djed*, suggesting duration (1973 [1954]: 229). Thus for the ancient Egyptians, ‘wood symbolized organic, living duration as opposed to the inorganic, dead duration of stone and the ephemeral life of vegetation’ (1973 [1954]: 229-30). Today the *djed* survives in the statues and monuments dedicated to fallen heroes and in towers.

### Semitic Tree-Pillar Cults

![Figure 11. Assyrian Tree of Life (Asherah-pole). Reconstructed bas-relief in Room B (position B-13) of the NW Palace of the King Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud, n.d. (Public Domain)](image_url)

Asherah-Ashteroth-Astarte was a Canaanite Artemis cognate who preceded the Hebrew religion and whose name in time became synonymous with the wooden images or trees that symbolized her (Philpot 2004 [1897]: 88). According to historian J.H. Philpot, Ashteroth was worshiped ‘under the symbol of an *ashêra*, a tree or pole, decked with fillets, like the May-tree’ (fig. 11) (2004 [1897]: 88; see also Evans 2008 [1901]: 103-104). There are many biblical references to Ashtaroth, who is also called Astarte. The prophet Samuel, for example, made a concerted effort to influence the Israelites to ‘put away the foreign gods and Astartes’ because they were believed to be incompatible with worshipping only Yahweh (1 Sam. 7.3-4). Philpot concluded, however, that the Asherah-Ashteroth-Astarte tree cults were tenacious:
There is no country in the world where the tree was ever more ardently worshipped than it was in ancient Palestine. Amongst the Canaanites every altar to the god had its sacred tree beside it, and when the Israelites established local sanctuaries under their influence, they set up their altar under a green tree, and planted beside it as its indispensable accompaniment an *ashêra* [that] was undoubtedly worshipped as a sacred symbol of the deity (Philpot 2004 [1897]: 8).

Philpot refrained from explicitly describing the physical shape of *ashêrîm* (the plural form of *ashêra*), but that they are said to have been ‘made’ in the Bible ‘indicates that they were artifacts, made by human hands, and not merely natural trees as some scholars believe’ (Patai 1965: 40). Religion historian Rafael Patai deduced from this that the *ashêra* was a carved wooden post that was erected by implanting its base into the ground. It was placed next to altars dedicated to the god Baal and was usually located on a hilltop under a leafy tree. Later a statue of Asherah (2 Kings 21.3) stood in the Jerusalem Temple ‘following the example set by King Ahab of Israel’ (Patai 1965: 44).

The book of Jeremiah alluded to the existence of *ashêrîm*, translated as ‘sacred poles, beside every green tree, and on the high hills, on the mountains’ (17.2-3). Such ‘idols’ were condemned by the Mosaic monotheists, who eventually suppressed the cults of Asherah; their destructive exploits in removing *ashêrîm* were documented in biblical passages that refer to ‘cutting them down’ (Judg. 6.25, 26, 28, 30), ‘hewing them down’ (2 Chron. 14.2), ‘breaking them into pieces’ (2 Chron. 34.4), ‘burning’ (2 Kings 23.15), ‘exterminating’ (2 Chron. 19:3), and ‘uprooting’ (Mic. 5.13). Karina Williamson believes that ‘by a semantic accident’ translators associated sacred groves with *ashêrîm*, thereby relating all groves to ‘heathen idolatry’, endowing them with ‘sinister connotations’ and commanding ‘the children of Israel not only to destroy the altars and images of their enemies but to “cut down their groves” (Exod. 34.13)’ (1983: 464). And in Deuteronomy, Moses ordered his people to destroy the sacred groves of the gentiles: ‘But thus shall ye deal with them: ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images and cut down their groves’ (Deut. 7.5). ‘And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire’ (Deut. 12.3). Furthermore, insisted Moses, ‘Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God’ (Deut. 16.21). Yet each time the tree-pillars were destroyed, the cults would spring forth again, such was their resilience and relevance for their followers (Patai 1965).
Polynesian Tree-pillar Traditions

The ubiquity of tree-pillar cults underscores their cultural significance. Essentially, everywhere there have been forests and humans there have been tree and pillar cults: the Saxons called their ‘high wooden pillar’ at Eresburg that was ultimately cut down by Charlemagne in 772 ‘Irminsul’ (Davidson 1988: 21-22; see also Eliade 1987 [1957]: 35; Philpot 2004 [1897]). Irminsul was described as ‘universalis columna quasi sustenens omni, a universal pillar supporting the whole’ (Davidson 1988: 22). So prevalent were wooden pillars in ancient Germany that ‘they appear to have been frequent features of holy places’ (Davidson 1988: 22). And Māori myth refers to the ‘world-pillar on which the earth rests’ (Best 1922), a concept that is manifested in the structural elements of the carved meeting house, which represented an image of the world: the roof is the sky, the floor is the earth, and the house’s supporting posts are the trees that Tāne, the god of forests, used to pry apart earth and sky (e.g., Best 1922; Māori Info 2012). Perhaps the most intriguing and most ornately decorated of the carved meeting-house posts is the central front one, or ridgepole (tāhūhū), each section of which symbolized a different body part of the important ancestor for whom the house was named. The tāhūhū represented the ancestor’s backbone, and the rafters (heke), his ribs (Māori Info 2012). Coincidentally, these body parts were the same as the ones symbolized by Osiris’s djed (fig. 10).

Similarly to the Egyptians on the other side of the world, the Māori also transmitted stories about the origin and nature of the cosmos related to trees, posts, and pillars. The apparent omnipresence of columns, posts, and pillars, which have been found on virtually every continent, inspired Eliade to identify them as representing the ‘axis mundi’: ‘the cosmic pillar or world tree’ (Eliade 1987 [1957]: 53, 35). On the northwest coast of North America, for example, traditions including the Kwakiutl, Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, and Tlingit elaborately incise, carve, and decorate wooden pillars known as ‘totem’ or ‘crest poles’—the moniker this area’s First Nations peoples prefer (Blackstock 2001: 9). For these traditions, crest poles are a means of communication; each one tells a story, and they collectively represent a ‘magical geography’ of ancestral history (Adams in Blackstock 2001: 15), which is exemplified by the Salmon Totem Pole that was carved and raised in memory of the late environmental and fishing-treaty rights activist Billy Frank Jr. (1931–2014). Located on a historic, ancestral place, the pole sanctifies ground that was associated with struggles to uphold Indigenous Peoples’ right to fish, which led to the 1974 federal court decision linking the right to fish to ‘a people’s cultural and spiritual survival’ (Walker 2015).
In parallel fashion, several Polynesian cultures revered a tiki (fig. 12), which referenced the Māori original man, Tiki, forest god Tāne’s first creation. The name applied to large wooden carvings that often marked the boundaries of sacred sites; today they continue to conjure Polynesian imagery wherever they appear in nontraditional settings, such as the Tonga Room of San Francisco’s historic Fairmont Hotel (fig. 13) and the Enchanted Tiki Room that originally opened in 1963 at Disneyland’s Adventureland.17

Figure 12. A Māori man retouches the painted tattoo on a carved wooden tiki adjacent to a meeting house supported by Tāne post (center ridgepole) at Whakarewarewa Model Village, New Zealand, 1905 (Public Domain)

Figure 13. Tiki near the Tonga Restaurant in the Fairmont Hotel, San Francisco, CA, 2015 (Joy H. Greenberg)

17. Thanks to Bron Taylor for reminding me about the Enchanted Tiki Room. I am also grateful to Dr. Taylor for his excellent comments during the revision period.
Today, *tiki* has come to mean the small carved wooden images that are understood as ‘temporary shrines or abiding-places’ for the *atua*, or ‘spirit gods’ (Best 1922). These small tikis were carried by travelers both on deep-ocean voyages and on land journeys as protective talismans given to them by priests who would imbue the objects with the *mana*, or sacred power, of the particular *atua* ‘in whose care the traveler placed himself’ (Best 1922). I suggest that this type of tiki closely characterized Queequeg’s Yojo of *Moby-Dick* fame (Melville 2002 [1851]). In one particularly memorable passage of the book, Herman Melville, through his protagonist Ishmael (whose racism was apparently intentionally designed as an ironic trope), described Queequeg as

> sitting on a bench before the fire, with his feet on the stove hearth... holding close up to his face that little negro idol of his; peering hard into its face, and with a jack-knife gently whittling away at its nose, meanwhile humming to himself in his heathenish way (Melville 2002 [1851]: 54).18

Evidently, this idol, Yojo, was an ongoing creation of Queequeg’s, who consulted Yojo about which ship to select of the three making preparations to set sail on a whaling expedition, indicating a belief in the tiki’s divinatory power (Melville 2002 [1851]: 68).

Perhaps the best known of all living tree-carvings or dendroglyphs are located on Rehoa, the largest of Chatham Islands near New Zealand. Of these, the biggest group—the Hapupu dendroglyphs—exists in J.M. Barker National Historical Reserve, where a 1998 count showed 82 trees with 98 carvings (Wondermondo 2011). Created by the Moriori, who, like the Māori, are believed to have arrived from Polynesia in the early sixteenth century, these dendroglyphs show more or less anthropomorphous figures, often with disproportionately enlarged heads. It has been argued that because the Moriori people lacked suitable materials with which to build proper meeting-houses like those of the Māori described above, they used the trunks of *kopi* (*karaka*) trees as a means of ancestral worship (Rhys Richards in Wondermondo 2011). Interestingly, all Moriori dendroglyphs are carved on the bark of living *kopi* trees (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*) that apparently were nonnative, having been brought to Chatham Islands by the Moriori ancestors from New Zealand and indicating the *kopis*’ ‘special spiritual significance’, although they also may have been favored for their ‘thick but soft bark’, making them suitable for carving (Wondermondo 2011).

18. Whereas Melville/Ishmael identified Queequeg as a native of an imaginary place, ‘Kokovoko’ (2002 [1851]: 59), Geoffrey Sanborn asserted in ‘Whence Come you, Queequeg?’ that Queequeg was modeled after a Māori chief (quoted in Melville 2002 [1851]: 59 n. 3).
Australian and North American Tree-pillar Cults
Nor are dendroglyphs unique to Chatham Islands: they also exist in New South Wales, Australia, where they were revered by many aborigines, including the Wiradjuri (Black 1941). Although Curator of the Australian Museum at Sydney, Robert Etheridge, Jr., noticed differences in their use, leading him to divide the dendroglyphs he catalogued into ‘taphoglyphs’, which designate burial sites, and ‘teleteglyphs’, which encircle initiation ceremony sites, he was unable to completely decipher their symbolism (1918: 7).

In addition to crest poles, some First Nations peoples, mostly from eastern woodland areas of the United States, made their carvings on living trees. For example, the Cayuga of Cayuga Lake, New York, were known to carve ash and oak trees; the Abenaki of the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada incised ‘pictographic characters and mnemonic marks upon birch bark’ (De Schweinitz in Blackstock 2001: 19). The Ojibway near Red Lake, Minnesota, were also reported to have carved human characters on large jack pines (Blackstock 2001: 23); the Arikari of South Dakota venerated the cedar with an elaborate ritual that involved incising and nourishing the tree and bringing it gifts before cutting it down and sending it down a river (Altman in Blackstock 2001: 19).

Trees, Groves, and Forests of Medieval Narratives
Welcome to our journey into the sacred forest (Blackstock 2001: 3).

With Christianity, a new mythologem appeared: the deep, dark wood that, as Jung claimed, sometimes took the place of the ‘tabooed tree’ and was ‘invested with all the attributes of the latter’ (1990 [1956]: §420). Like the sacred and therefore ‘tabooed’ tree, the dark wood commanded a ‘maternal significance’ (Jung 1990 [1956]: §420): It provided sustenance, if one knew where to look; but it also harbored wild and terrifying beasts, as the legendary Arthurian heroes were to discover.

R.P. Harrison (1992: 61) observed that by the early Middle Ages, European forests ‘were still vast, stretching across the continent like domes of darkness and the indifference of time’. They were ‘foris—“outside”’, and in them ‘lived the outcasts, the mad, the lovers, brigands, hermits, saints, lepers, the maquis [French resistance fighters], fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men’ (1992: 61). In their attempts to unify Europe under the sign of the cross, the Church was essentially antagonistic toward what it considered ‘unhumanized’ nature:
Bestiality, fallenness, errancy, perdition—these are the associations that accrued around forests in the Christian mythology. In theological terms forests represented the anarchy of matter itself, with all the deprived darkness that went with this Neoplatonic concept adopted early on by the Church fathers. As the underside of the ordained world, forests represented for the Church the last strongholds of pagan worship. In the tenebrous Celtic forests reigned the Druid priests; in the forests of Germany stood those sacred groves where converted barbarians engaged in heathen rituals; in the nocturnal forests at the edge of town sorcerers, alchemists, and all the tenacious survivors of paganism concocted their mischief (R.P. Harrison 1992: 61-62).

Although the Church may have been suspicious of these sanctuaries, which it believed to be haunted by demons, fairies, and nature spirits, ‘whose protective shadows allowed popular memory to preserve and perpetuate cultural continuities with the pagan past’, Harrison claimed that ‘Christian imperialism did not take it upon itself to burn down the forests in a frenzy of religious fervor, despite the enjoinder of certain ambiguous passages from the Old Testament’ (1992: 62). That the Christians did not crusade against forests on the basis of such passages is fortunate—for both the forests and ‘for the ancient folklore they fostered and perpetuated’—for ‘when forests are destroyed, it is not only an accumulated history of natural growth that vanishes. A preserve of cultural memory also disappears’ (1992: 62).

Underworld as Upperworld (and Vice Versa) in Grail Mythology
That grail myths first appeared during the late twelfth century is not surprising, given that culture changed dramatically following the Christian conquest of Europe (Campbell 1968: 390). Despite the Church’s power, many of the conquered perceived the new regime as illegitimate because its power had been acquired only through extreme force (1968: 390). As a result, the Church-cum-city-state and its pope-cum-king became subject to widespread heresy and challenges to its authority, especially from the conquered indigenous cultures. The grail mythologies are therefore in part expressions of the crushing loss of pagan traditions.

Chrétien de Troyes delineated the ambiguity of the forest surrounding the castle in ‘The Story of the Grail (Perceval)’ from his *Arthurian Romances*. This *gaste forest*—‘Waste Forest’—was a place where bad things could befall those who entered. Yet, when the young Perceval entered it, ‘his heart leapt within his breast because of the gentle weather and the songs he heard from the joyful birds’ (de Troyes 1991: 382). Wolfram von Eschenbach’s counterpart to Perceval—Parzival—encountered ambiguity in the woods as well. On the one hand, the forest
was still a place of darkness and confusion, where Parzival wandered ‘with no sense of direction and unsustained by any happy feelings’ (von Eschenbach 1980: 235). On the other, however, the forest, or Broceliande, was ‘great’ and ‘wild’ (1980: 235) at the same time that it was ‘deep’ (Pierre Guéguen in Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 187). The woods were now ambiguous: a source of both refuge and revilement arguably representing the syncretism of Christian and pagan notions about trees and forests combined with the growing self-reflective or romantic abilities of the poets (MacCulloch 2003 [1911]: 174).

**Dante’s Infernal Forest in the Commedia**

Dante’s *Commedia*, especially Canto I, *Inferno*, provides an apt inspiration for an expedition that methodologically blends ecology, criticism, and psychology in the quest to find evidence for arbophilia. For, who is not intrigued by Dante’s celebrated Dark Wood in the first canto of *Inferno*? And what about the Wood of Suicides, which extended the vague disquietude that pervades Dante’s pre-*Purgatorio* into a freak show of shade-souls that have been transformed into bleeding, groaning trees in the Second Ring of the Seventh Circle?

From the very beginning, Dante insisted that the woods were no longer the places of refuge described by his pagan predecessors, Virgil and Ovid. Gone were Virgil’s whispering pines and Ovid’s sacred groves dedicated to the deities. Instead, for Dante the Pilgrim—for we must distinguish between at least two of Dante’s alter egos in his *Divine Comedy*—going into the woods meant getting lost in a place of perpetual fear and pain. Specifically, the ‘shadowed’ and ‘savage’ forest, as Allen Mandelbaum translated it (*Inf.* I.2, 5), represented the utter fear of death: a wood ‘so bitter—death is hardly more severe’ (*Inf.* I.7). Juxtaposing the Italian and English versions of *Inferno* (2004 [1980]) alongside each other allows the reader to recognize how Dante the Poet enforced the association between being ‘in the woods’ and being ‘lost’, with the adjectives *smarrita / smarrito* in cantos 1 (*Inf.* I.3) and 13 (*Inf.* XIII.24) to describe *la selva oscura*—the Dark Wood, in the former canto and the Wood of Suicides in the latter. By first re-creating the Virgilian and Ovidian woods in such a completely negative light—or darkness, if you will—and then repeating the motif later on, Dante revisioned them as places of evil devoid of any beneficence.

The mythologem of the ‘dark wood’ is pervasive in literature and art arguably because of its archetypalness: forests can be impenetrable; they enshroud with their trunks and leaves, and one has to take care against disorientation. It is easier to get lost there than in a savanna or grassland where visible trails give a sense of security. Phenomenologist Gaston
Bachelard accordingly wrote, people ‘do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of “going deeper and deeper” into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are… This limitless world…is a primary attribute of the forest’ (1994 [1958]: 185). Because of these qualities, Bachelard viewed the forest as a symbol of the psyche, in which it is also easy to get lost, but which can reveal to us ultimate truths about reality:

One feels that there is something else to be expressed besides what is offered for objective expression. What should be expressed is hidden grandeur, depth. And so far from indulging in prolixity of expression, or losing oneself in the detail of light and shade, one feels that one is in the presence of an ‘essential’ impression seeking expression; in short, in line with…a ‘psychological transcendent’. If one wants to ‘experience the forest’, this is an excellent way of saying that one is in the presence of immediate immensity, of the immediate immensity of its depth. Poets feel this immediate immensity of old forests (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 186).

As with psyche, in the forest one needs to realize one’s limits, to sense one’s vulnerability, and to risk engagement with the sublime. Such a forest is immediately sacred, sacred by virtue of the tradition of its nature… Before the gods existed, the woods were sacred, and the gods came to dwell in these sacred woods’, adding human ‘characteristics to the great law of forest reverie’ (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 186, italics added). Also like psyche, forests were now full of shadows, and this is metaphorically as well as literally true. The darkness shadowing life is as much the source of beauty as is light or life. The word ‘forest’ (a grander word than ‘trees’ in the plural) forces retrospect and prospect; it invites holistic categories of interpretation as yesterday’s flora and fauna pass into tomorrow (Rolston 1998: 164).

‘Shadow’, of course, psychologically signifies depth: thanks to Dante, woodlands as places of darkness, danger, and dubiousness would go on to become a literary tradition for English romantic poets to such an extent that they were considered ‘features of the spiritual landscape’ (Williamson 1983: 465).

For Dante, the motif of being lost was a biblical one that referred allegorically to Jesus’ desert wandering. Like Jesus, Dante the Pilgrim found himself spiritually challenged. Dante the Poet, however, transformed the desert of the Old Testament into a wood, ostensibly to reflect the Italian treeescape that was his home. In so doing, the sacred grove metamorphosed into an infernal forest where the souls of those who had committed the Christian sin of self-murder were eternally damned to inhabit trees that bore ‘no green leaves…only black; / no branches
straight and smooth, but knotted, gnarled’ *(Inf. XIII.4-5)*. The images evoked by ‘black’, ‘knotted’, and ‘gnarled’ are those of death and oppressive pain and imprisonment, both physical and spiritual. For the Christian pilgrim, the wilderness was evidently a place of extreme bewilderment, all the more terrifying because of its unmerciful and constrictive grip on psyche. Indeed, Dante’s ‘interior wood’ *(Mandelbaum 2004 [1980]: 345)* mirrored the pagan underworld with a Christian twist.

Like Virgil and Ovid before him, Dante the Poet relied on anthropomorphism to express mood in the Wood of Suicides. The difference is that for the pagan poets, a range of human feelings, spirituality, and musicality was projected upon their treescapes. Even their underworld settings (Book VI of the *Aeneid* and virtually all of the *Metamorphoses*), while not exactly inviting, gave forests nicer things to do than be creepy. In Virgil’s underworld we find ‘darkened groves’ like Dante’s, but for Aeneas not only ‘the ground roars underfoot’ and ‘the wooded ridges shudder’ *(VI.340-341)*, but nature expresses herself in blissful ways as well, as when Aeneas stumbles upon ‘a sheltered grove and sounding forest’ *(VI.928-935)*. As a result, Virgil’s underworld is more balanced in presenting both pleasant and ominous feeling tones than Dante’s place of doom and gloom, where grotesque trees signal ‘so many voices’ that ‘moaned among the trunks’ *(XIII.26)*, cry out in pain when Dante ‘snap[s] off a branch’ *(XIII.32)*, and beg for ‘greater mercy’ *(XIII.38)*. In the Wood of Suicides there is nothing to ameliorate the pervasive sense of utter dis-ease.

Demonizing the woods seemed to enable Dante the Pilgrim to acknowledge more easily his own emotions as they were evoked by the horrors of what he saw and heard in the underworld, but at the same time, it allowed Dante the Poet in some ways to subvert the Christian perspective through the same personified images he presented. In anthropomorphizing the trees, Dante the Poet evoked pity not only for the souls who inhabited them but for the trees themselves, who obviously suffered from the graphically described wounds inflicted upon them not only by Dante the Pilgrim, but by the disgusting Harpies—another Virgilian allusion—that fed upon their leaves. After all, it’s hard to tell where the tree ended and the human began, which apparently was precisely the poet’s point.

Being lost can also reference a psychological state: depth psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz further elaborated on the woods as ‘a region where visibility is limited, where one loses one’s way, where wild animals and unexpected dangers may be present, and therefore, like the sea, it is a symbol of the unconscious’ *(1996 [1970]: 127)*. Like the forest
which early humans must keep ceaselessly wary, the ‘unconscious is wild nature, which swallows up every human attempt’ (von Franz 1996 [1970]: 128). Understood psychologically, Pilgrim Dante’s being lost in a ‘dark wood’ in the opening lines of Inferno may be understood similarly as Poet Dante’s state of mind, which is one that writers often experience when embarking on the writing process: apprehension to the point of paralysis. Poet Dante felt compelled to write his story but was at a loss, at least at first, for how to begin. Dante’s novel revisioning of the woods—once considered sacred sanctuaries by pagans—into an infernal place of writer’s block and inner turmoil seemingly set the bar for his physical and spiritual transformation that came later.

Harrison saw the infernal forest as ‘an allegory for Christian guilt in general’, and when forests become allegorical as well as theological, as is the case in the Commedia, they become especially ‘treacherous’:

Sinfulness, error, errancy, alienation from God—these are the allegorical associations of Dante’s selva oscura, or dark forest. The forest stands for the secular world as a whole deprived of God’s light, or better, for the perdition of a soul cut off from God’s saving grace... The forest of moral confusion is deviant, pathless, issueless, terrifying, [and] may well be the first occurrence in literature of a motif that will later become archetypical: fear of the forest... It is a vague and indefinite fear verging on existential anxiety (R.P. Harrison 1992: 81).

How better could Dante symbolize his own real-life situation of exile—of being lost both physically and spiritually—than as a peripatetic poet-pilgrim imprisoned in a selva oscura, desperately searching for light, meaning, and return to his beloved Florence? Dante answered this question with a paradox: only when lost can one be found, a notion iterated eloquently by Henry David Thoreau centuries later: ‘Not until we are lost, not until we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations’ (1999 [1854]: 137). By ‘losing’ himself in the woods of Walden, Thoreau famously ‘found’ himself—a discovery confirmed by environmental psychology studies of recreation in natural areas such as forests, where subjects have reported experiences of eudaimonia, spirituality, self-actualization, and transcendence, all of which are theorized by many to inspire environmentally ethical behavior.

19. See, for example, Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Taylor 2010; Ryan, Huta, and Deci 2008; Dutcher et al. 2007; Terhaar 2009; Emerson 2003 [1849]; Williams and Harvey 2001; Bartkowski and Swearingen 1997; Kaplan 1995; Norton 1990; Beck 1987.

20. See, for example, Kardan et al. 2015; Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Callicott 2011; Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan 2009; Gottlieb 2006; Tarakeshwar et al. 2001; Schultz
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