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I have known her all my life, yet she reveals stories to me, and these stories are revelations and I am transformed.

—Susan Griffin¹

I came to academia in mid-life and began writing autobiographical essays grounded in the natural sciences even later. I remember clearly the day I took the turn toward writing. It was a time when, as a mature but younger woman who preferred to hike a trail rather than to sit still, I forced myself to remain on a hillside throughout one afternoon recording all that I saw. Amazing creatures and events from that afternoon still visit me and humble me to the incredible complexity of life within eye's reach.

Although I could not sit still for long, I began keeping in-depth journals of my travels. Once or twice a year I would sequester myself with them and translate the most memorable experiences, those that would not let me be, into essays. I soon learned, as others have observed, that writing is always on the margins. We keep having second thoughts that expand into greater complexities. As I abandoned the prescription of "meaning" that I was taught and had accepted through most of my life, I began discovering the pleasure and understanding that evocative discourse brings. Remembering past significant events, striving to describe them authentically and clearly; invoking, reflecting on, and questioning them; and inviting other voices to enter, was how I chose to participate in the intellectual life. My travels and writing soon began crisscrossing natural and cultural boundaries.

I think back on these journeys. A collage of images erupts and spirals outward, vibrating and expanding at the outermost edges. The spiral is not symmetrical: Opaque, dense areas alternate with transparent, transitional zones filled with turbulence and energy. Ephemeral images emerge that match my dreams and leave me uneasy: Earth and mother, archetypal animal and human forms. Brilliant colors burst forth and send spasms through my viscera, like sunshine through the cobalt blue of stained-glass windows or iridescent reflections from the feathers of a bird. Translations of human ambivalence, these images breach rational barriers and allow me to pour into the world.

Taos Pueblo, New Mexico. Winter solstice/Christmas celebrations. A time when darkness turns toward light and new life:

There is no making sense of it: the words of priest and acolytes, the Indian women standing reverently together, the sounds of the saw organ and simple hymns honoring the dark Madonna dressed as a bride. Linda and I are in the church crowded with people from all parts of the Earth. The light changes, and I turn, expecting to see a procession with lighted candles entering the open door of the church. Instead, beyond the intent faces of worshipers standing at the back, the immaculate white courtyard gate rises into a lapis sky with coral spirals of smoke reflecting dancing firelight from all sides. Vespers ends; the drums begin. A procession bearing the Madonna exits from the church, accompanied by women. One of them reaches over and touches Linda's hand. We follow through the open door of the church into the chill night air. People in regional dress warm themselves by bonfires that surround the courtyard. A dog leaps into the air, snapping at sparks as they descend. Drum, flame, adobe, night sky, and humans mingle.

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On the threshold of that chapel, held for a moment in transition, viewing the incongruent scene—the night sky above, the incredible mix of people, the diverse views of the sacred—I was keenly aware of differences and at the same time embraced by the merging ecological, social, and spiritual aspects of our lives.

Time passes. At this moment, in this holding place, we pause to take a bearing. Past and present mingle; we can see where we have been and imagine what lies beyond. We may rest briefly, contemplating our journey, cataloging our accomplishments and failings. We may cross over with greater maturity and understanding, or go back, retrace our steps and begin again. We also have the choice to remain where we are, fearful to welcome what comes next. Depending on our ken, we may grow wiser or more skeptical and embittered. But if we open ourselves to life in its fullest, we will accept the inevitable ambivalence, our doubts as well as our hopes, and through reflection achieve more realism—and patience with our flawed humanity.

The realization that came over us during the past two decades that the majority of the humans on this Earth² are marginalized should not have been news to any of us, no matter what our race or gender. Although I do not mean to dismiss the vast separation from mainstream culture of oppressed people throughout the world, in a sense we humans are all marginal creatures. On the edge or crossing over, we are held tenderly and tenuously in transition. We know we are separate beings, kept apart from the Earth and from each other. We are repeatedly told that our very selves are split inside from outside. As we grow older or encounter the unforeseen, we find ourselves inevitably on strange edges where the familiar mixes with the uncommon. And ultimately we are faced with the most profound mystery, that fine line that separates life and death. Throughout our lives, we encounter cultural circumstances, changing relationships, and our own growth in these zones of interdigitation of the known and unknown.

In the natural world, edges where differences come together are the richest of habitats. Animals often choose these ecotones, where contrasting plant communities meet, to raise their young where the greatest variety of cover and food can be found. A doe will give birth to the fawn on the edge of a forest, where she can find shelter as well as food in the open area beyond the trees. Transitional species, plants and animals such as those found in tidal zones, have become highly adapted for life "on the edge." Marshes where fresh- and saltwater habitats meet are some of the most productive places on Earth in terms of fecundity and diversity of species. Change is a fundamental part of all natural communities, even those that seem stable, as the cycles of life and death set into play a succession of regenerating events. But at the ecotone change is most evident and inevitable. To an ecologist, the "edge effect" carries the connotation of the complex interplay of life forces where plant communities, and the creatures they support, intermingle in mosaics or change abruptly.

Likewise, margins in social and cultural contexts are not necessarily areas of isolation where we balance between two worlds, looking out or looking in, without legitimacy or equality. Although they can become boundaries that separate—chasms that block our movement toward fulfillment and joy in living, or frontiers where we wage power battles—they may also be dwelling places that connect rather than separate. Much like the ecotones in biotic communities, they may be rich and dynamic transitional zones and may provide great learning as well as suffering. The margin as a cultural metaphor for this edge experience has given us much more than a viewing area from which, oppressed and alienated, we watch mainstream society pass us by or a staging area from which we launch a new course. We have begun to understand with Julia Kristeva that this edge is, in fact, an abode. We "live on the border." We are "crossroads beings."³ Cultural ecotones are the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict

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and change emerge; they are the places where society smooths the wrinkles in her skirts.

When I claim my place on the margins, I am not unsympathetic to or unaware of the great inequalities and oppression suffered by minorities, people of color, and women in particular. Many women, unaccounted for and unacknowledged, live entirely outside of the economics and politics of mainstream society. The ecotone, which, in the natural world provides a dynamic interchange, becomes exceedingly complex as a cultural metaphor and may represent a barrier that blocks some people from their rightful place in the scheme of things.

The blue planet as seen from space gives us a clear picture of the place that is home to all, but it is an icon that misleads. It implies that we are all one, when in fact we are separated by vast differences of circumstance and privilege. We have been reminded repeatedly that global problems must be resolved locally, yet localities are inhabited by uninfluential individuals whose inequalities cannot be explained away by planetary discourses or international rhetoric. On the other hand, emphasis on differences and distinctions erases the commonality that we seek. However trite it may ring, we are all children of the Earth. Our continuation, no matter where our particular home, what our ideology, or how we make a life, relies fundamentally and inextricably on the health of this planet. No technological fix or redistribution of wealth can alter this fundamental premise.

The margin as a metaphor is indeed subject to antithetical interpretations. Yet it serves me well as I examine my own condition and particularly that fuzzy line that separates my selfhood from other creatures and the Earth's environment, that emotional ground and psychic space where existential questions of purpose and self-worth appear. This place of soul-making borders on private, virginal territory, "uncontaminated by man's misconceptions," that I explore "solo," a difficult undertaking in itself that

carries the added danger of my becoming “moonstruck,” too isolated, self-sufficient, and self-absorbed.⁴ On the other hand, this “staying place” between my own particularity and inner nature and the demands and rules of civilization leads me to a recovery of the psycho-physical self and to psychic transformation—a word that denotes a change of mind and heart but does not carry the great imprecision of feelings that accompanies such a metamorphosis.

Undefined land is sought by pilgrims and exploiters alike as well as naturalists who seek wilderness, where Nature is untouched by the effects of civilization. Such areas hold great fascination for “nature lovers” for here they can explore the fecundity of wildness, uncontrolled, chaotic, and pure. It may very well be that wilderness “trips,” in fact, are of the same character as, and an extension of, withdrawals into inner psychic territory, a place where we seek unimagined and fantastic landscapes.

I have chosen the concept of ecotone, then, to represent that place of meeting and tension between diverse and sometimes conflicting aspects of our lives. Underlying the familiar culture/Nature dichotomy is instead a webbing of gender, race, politics, economics, and spirituality that preoccupies wayfaring humans on this planet. Ecotone, that place of crossing over, provides sanctuary, solitude and peace, growth and transformation, as well as isolation and inner or outer conflict. It is all of these as well as a psychological space of natural tension where we transcend our present limitations and move to new possibilities, a time when individuation brings with it a deeper sense of interrelatedness, or a region where we “escape role and status, a crossing of boundaries or margins into an opposite role or perhaps into rolelessness.”⁵



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I have spent most of my life on margins, imposed as well as self-selected. I am the daughter of Italian parents who fashioned a viable sheep ranch on arid Wyoming rangeland. As a child I was embedded in a nonelitist adult world where every action represented a survival game played with the seasons—a world set apart from mainstream American life. As a middle child, I was separated from my two sisters by age as well as temperament. In the evenings I warmed myself and dozed by the wood-burning stove as I listened to parents and hired men speaking in Italian about the “Old Country” and world events far removed from our lives.

The terrain beyond beckoned as my mother in proper fashion increasingly failed to meet my needs and allowed me to wander in other realms of sky and birds, desert scrub and lizard, a swamp filled with frogs in the summer and colossal snowdrifts in the winter. Nature, calling to me, led me down game trails: some of these disappeared into thickets, others circled back, and still others carried me to unheard-of places.

School provided glimpses of the “American way.” Best friends, learning, and play were my main concerns. I liked school; it was that meeting place of the public and private domains where a shy outsider could legitimately mingle with others. I sat at my own desk in the company of others whom I could observe unabated. My early school pictures show a serious child standing to the side of the group looking at the world with what I now recall as a mixture of skepticism and interest. I recognize that look in a recent photo; it still carries those emotions I have felt consistently since those early years.

As a youth I worked at the side of my father and mother on seasonal subsistence and later returned each summer from college to help on the ranch. Following college, where I studied zoology and chemistry, I returned to the place of my birth as a young wife, mother, and teacher. Teaching high school biology provided a sanctuary and personal territory where I struggled

with the complications of my life as students began discovering the meaning in theirs. Countering the bureaucracy of public schooling, I retreated to my classroom, where I fashioned my niche, as animals do in Nature, as I interacted with students through a personally designed curriculum and where I performed a self-fulfilling function in the day-to-day world.

With the ecology movement seen as a fringe activity by the local community as well as the school administration, we moved outdoors to a "laboratory" fashioned from an overgrazed bull pasture that ran from the school down a swale where a permanent spring trickled into a tiny pond.⁶ There we studied "life." The outdoor lab provided materials and impetus for most of the year's curriculum, fashioned by student interpretation from the natural materials at hand, a "poor curriculum" as portrayed by William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet.⁷ During the cold winter months we studied pond water, and in the spring at the end of the school year we returned it ceremonially to its source. The students' naive point of view diminished steadily as the year progressed, and they learned to trust their perceptions and abilities to inquire and to wonder. They were expected to verify their findings, but the fundamental purpose of the course was to show faith in their own experiences, in their powers of observation, and in their records and interpretations of what they had learned. I believed that the natural world offered possibilities for unbridled learning. My plans were constantly revised by the understanding that students brought to my teaching. I learned much, but it would be years before I fully appreciated how that decade of teaching biology molded my pedagogical philosophy, a heuristic search for the untried curriculum transacted between place, students, and teacher outside of traditional settings.

Leaving marriage and classroom, I moved on to a doctorate in education and ecology, the template for much of what I now see, and a university position. The classroom as haven was

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replaced by the intellectual space shared with university students. Under the umbrella of "environmental education," we inquired into natural history of place, ethical action and patterns for change, and reverence for life, topics that fit poorly the subject matter of mandated teacher education. With courageous public school administrators and student teachers, I chose to work on the educational fringe in alternative education programs for disaffected youth. Offered apart from traditional requirements and settings, the "experimental" programs were barely tolerated by the university and public schools. We strained the limits of institutional tolerance as we fashioned master's programs out of the stuff of deserts and mountains and disenchanting youth. Personal narrative became our form of interpretation long before it reached present acceptance.⁸

Constantly challenged by alternative teachers' spontaneity, resistance to traditional subject-oriented methods of teaching, exuberance for life, and disdain for conventional science, I was forced to recognize the uniqueness of each person's relationship to the environment and to consider Richard Rorty's thesis that Nature mirrors our own psychology.⁹ Yet I was unwilling to admit that Nature was merely a social construct and to give up natural-history study for its own sake. From where I stood, the nonhuman world was not simply a sentimental extension of our inner landscapes, not just there for pleasure and edification and utility, not merely an escape from the frustrations of human interactions, certainly not just scenery.¹⁰ She was constant, complex, mysterious, unpredictable, destructive, beautiful, magical, and uncontrolled.

I became increasingly attentive to social implications of my educational encounters and skeptical of theories that did not ring true to my experiences. Insightful analyses by feminists such as Madeleine Grumet helped me to face the keenly felt oppression that went unnamed as I "sentimentalized the powers" I had

"already surrendered."¹¹ Only recently have I been able to recognize the patriline, as shown by Donna Haraway, that slanted my study of the "objective" domain of science.¹² Yet none of these analyses, helpful as they have been, articulate fully the richness and depth of my life as woman, teacher, and naturalist. They do not uncover the inner motives that have driven my preference for margins.



Travel, on the other hand, foregrounded this predilection. I finally ventured abroad, on my first sabbatical to Mexico and Central America and later with my mother to the homeland of my ancestors in the Italian Alps. I felt completely at home in the small villages, especially with relatives, where to my surprise I discovered my forebears had lived for centuries on Italian alpine borderlands where language and custom changed abruptly.¹³ Understanding the historical antecedents of my separation from mainstream culture, I was able to view my childhood, living as I had in the "Little Italy" my parents had created, with more empathy and understanding. With a deepened sense of family, I determined upon returning home to explore the *genius loci*, the spirit of place, in my own life and in the context of my American homeland. I needed to remember my preference for dwelling on ecotones.

As a young mother and teacher I had been socialized thoroughly to woman's role, and later I was too busy supporting and raising my children and establishing a career to become involved in what I considered the frills of assertiveness or awareness training. After years of surviving blatant discrimination, I felt attuned to the plight of women and our survival in a man's world. Traveling and watching other women was more helpful to me than any training I could have received. The images of women

revealed my denial and repression. I began seeing in them what I could not admit to in my own life: Pushed to the side and devalued, women the world over accepted roles that diminished their capacities.

Travel is a great teacher, but it invites self-indulgence. Even as ethnographers we may become colonizers, sacking the villages and countryside for good buys and perfect photos, savoring the food, indulging in differences, coming to conclusions when none are possible. At its best, travel itself provides an "edge effect." With our feet planted in our own culture, we can legitimately venture into another. We may also, as the Dalai Lama has suggested, go forth as pilgrims, humbly, with openness and with questions about our own existence and our relatedness and responsibility to others.¹⁴ Whatever our approach, travel gives us time to think, takes us out of the security of familiar surroundings, and forces us to reconsider differences and commonalities as it awakens memories of home.

Travel gave me courage and pushed me toward maturity. Returning home, I was determined to let my teaching carry me where it would, to the depths of my subjectivity where I could tap the springs of personal experience yet remain firmly grounded in place. I offered graduate seminars where we explored social ecology and new paths of living together and interdependence based on direct engagement with Nature and ecological truths. The crone in me emerged, wagging her finger and offering suggestions for right living. The Original People beckoned as I gleaned from their vision truths that helped clarify my immediate concerns.



Ecotone has unfolded from these explorations on natural and cultural margins that began two decades ago when I divorced, left the church, became a grandmother, and entered academic life. It

is the chronicle of a woman with a bent toward wayfaring. In a reflexive mode, I have considered the context of my lived experiences. Each of the chapters reconsiders an edge experience and the tension and ambivalence, as well as deep learning, that accompanied it.

With chapter 2, "Flesh of the Earth," the book takes up a class reunion in my home town. Much more than a foray into the nostalgia of rural America, the reunion provided a temporal boundary between past and present where we could remember our formative years, take stock of where we had been, and contemplate where we were going. It led us to the brink of our present existence, forcing us to deal with our own aging and mortality. Although I rejoiced in revisiting my childhood, reflection during the weeks that followed led to some tension as I considered how far I had wandered from the conservatism of my formative years.

In chapter 3, "Navajo Tapestry," I reconstruct a field seminar with students in which we explored a zone of difference, the cultural boundary between mainstream American and contemporary American Indian life. To our untrained eyes, Navajoland at first provided a textured, harmonious landscape. We achieved more realism in the border towns, where the impact of cultural disruption was laid bare as indigenous values and the appeal of mainstream materialism clashed. Likewise, the incongruence in stories of *The People* at times revealed the tension between traditional and nontraditional ways. Out of this curriculum journey, an ethno-ecological view began to emerge, one in which culture and ecosystem interacted as place. Our experiences accentuated not only the inadequacy of the maps and books we had been using to educate ourselves for the journey, but the diversity of views within our group. I emerged from the experience profoundly changed: Henceforth I would be preoccupied with the application of First People's cosmology and ecology to modern life.

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Abiding interest in indigenous peoples and their interaction with place drew me to Alaska, where land and culture were relatively less disturbed than in the "lower forty-eight." Two graduate students, Carolyn Frerichs Benne and Fred Edwards, joined me. Carolyn and I carried what we needed in backpacks. We intended in six weeks to see all that we could, to write extensive field and journal entries, to interview people along the way, and to eventually collaborate on a paper. Fred joined us part of the way and then continued on his own.

What began as a joyous unfolding ended in tragedy. Shortly after returning home, Carolyn died suddenly. Desolation and sadness entered my life as it had not before. A reconstruction of our journals and journey, chapter 4, "Indwellings," explores the mystery of life as it unfolds at the interface of place, relationship, and death. I gained a new appreciation for friendship, that realm where, in the company of a trusted companion, we explore new ground.

As I traveled and taught and reflected and wrote, my mental map was crisscrossed with other places and different cultures. I had moved slightly toward an Earth-centered ethic, but life would not stand still for me. New tensions arose at the university as I began assuming administrative duties. At first I was filled with idealism and visions of a social ecology that could transform our department into a nurturing community. But I became progressively more disappointed with the results of my hard work. There was always more to be done, another problem to solve, something to change. The constant round of necessity seductively intensified my need to achieve. A tremendous expenditure of energy led me further from common understanding with the faculty as I retreated into efficient management, isolated myself behind administrative protocol, and increasingly pitted my power against theirs.

Little of what I had learned as teacher and mentor, environmental activist and naturalist, householder and mother seemed

to apply to the subtle struggles for power that drive academic lives. The irony of this episode in my participation story poses an interesting question for all women: How can we, as we move between dissimilar social and political contexts that elicit differing responses, maintain integrity in our sense of person and of place?

"You'd better get out before it kills you," advised my good friend, Dolores LaChapelle.¹⁵ Getting out of administration did not heal the anguish that persisted, as I was unable to forgive myself for failing and unable to understand why knowledge of self, relationship, and place did not transfer to administrative life. As portrayed in chapter 5, "The Shape of Things," it took a change of perspective, a shift in attention and a new way of seeing, to save my life. This new vision came unannounced as one day I gazed upon a primal form sculpted by Henry Moore. No longer able to face abstractions, I was drawn to pure forms and the spaces that lay between them. I returned to Alaska, to the edge of civilization. There, in the presence of wildness and the healing power of the bear, I began a regenerative process. A new partner entered my life, and new interests emerged from archetypal images of woman. Henceforth, wherever I looked, in Nature, art, or the social milieu, I would see Her.

After an extended leave, I returned to the university with new interests in women's studies, but much to my chagrin I discovered that I had not yet dispelled the nagging guilt of failure. James Hillman explains our need to return repeatedly to "deep hurts." "[T]he soul," he says, "has a drive to remember."¹⁶ I was determined to interview faculty members concerning my "failed leadership." Chapter 6, "Minerva's Owl," grew out of those interviews and my attempt to uncover the subtle, strangling hold that patriarchal society has on us all, women and men alike. More importantly, the writing of this chapter of my life cracked my defensiveness and bitterness and brought me insight as to my

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part in the affair. Rather than an open sore, I now have a scar to remind me of the self-defeating behavior that I reverted to in the face of political situations when I was unable to call up skills of persuasion and negotiation.

Ecotone ends with chapter 7, "Equinox," the autumnal equinox, that time of year when daylight and darkness are in balance and the Earth glows in mellow light. In the ambience of changing seasons and the Wyoming landscape, I consider my return to my homeland as I pose the question: What does it mean to be a woman living in relation to the Earth and to others? In this final chapter I speculate about biocentric communities founded on Western interpretations of American Indian mythology and cosmology and Goddess literature.

Facing the problem of being human, I end on a tentative note. Social and psychological theories, political philosophies, and "five-year plans" won't suffice. Although we may never get things just right, we must continue trying. We have arrived at a new frontier, where we acknowledge the ecological, social, and spiritual basis of our lives. The polytheistic Taos Pueblo ceremonies, as celebrations of ambiguity and hope, come to mind. Our greatest challenge will be to replace bureaucratic, institutional, rational, and arbitrary worldviews with those grounded in ecological wisdom and responsibility where difference is played out in healthy social contexts that are dynamic and pluralistic.