ENCOUNTERING LANDSCAPES: A METHODOLOGY

FOR SELF PUBLISHING

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Shaina, Indigo, and Lucia Rico

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

This reflection begins as summer is waning. The temperature is beginning to dip below ninety degrees for longer stretches of time. Dead leaves are accumulating in greater numbers along the ground.

When I was a child, for a brief time during the summer before we moved from our home in Worthington, Ohio, my brother and I would play in a thin strip of woods that bordered the edge of the backyard. In this landscape we were transported to a different world, one that existed outside the parameters that defined our routines. Our imaginative space expanded, and everything became embedded with metaphorical potential—from the trees we climbed to the mundane chain-link fence that bisected the space between our yard and the neighboring property. Throughout the past year I have approached landscapes informed by that memory. I moved through and with them, spending time observing, noting, walking, sleeping, and photographing. I sought to explore Martin Shaw's question "Where is your liminal forest?" (2020, p. 22) and where the threshold to the Otherworld beckoned (Blanton, 2014). I documented what was encountered there.

2. SUBJECT & DISCOURSE

At the core of my practice are three essential questions: how do I encounter landscapes, how am I transported through these encounters, and what connections and memories are elicited? The primary vehicle of this inquiry is the self-published artist's book, as well as prints and a recent exploration of moving image and sound. Some projects evolved into extended meditations, others occurred in spontaneous bursts, ephemeral and fleeting. Conceptually, this work explores the publication as a form; the relationship between text and image; fiction and narrative; and the Risograph printer as a reproduction tool.

Collectively, this body of work documents landscapes and the moments, traces, and visions that occur there as a means of exploring what Simon O'Sullivan refers to as "art's mythopoetic function" (2018, p. 143). In the essay "Fictioning Five Heads (On the Art-Anthropology Hybrid)" he defines this function as "its capacity to produce other narratives and image-worlds out of the 'what-is'" (2018, p. 143). O'Sullivan goes on to describe the relationship of landscapes to myth, writing, "In fact, it is often the way in which landscape—broadly construed—is itself fictioned that helps produce myth: images and narrative can be overlayed on a given terrain in order to animate it in different ways" (2018, p. 143).

To enact this mythopoetic process, my work combines documentary photographs, written reflections, found text and conversations. I overlay text and image and sequence them together in publications as a way of complicating immediate or direct meaning. The work is neither completely about the documentation of a place nor is it about the exact recollection of a moment or memory. By placing text and image together neither can operate autonomously from the other. The text is always mediated through its proximity

to an image, and the image is complicated by a text that does not necessarily describe it. The presentation of the landscape is never a direct representation, but an evolving space of exploration and insight into ways of being, and the ideas and stories generated from there.

Mythopoesis can involve a particular way of approaching landscapes, which David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan refer to as *fictioning the landscape* (2019). Included as examples of this idea are case studies examining the land art and writing of Robert Smithson, and *On Vanishing Land*, a collaboration between Mark Fisher and Justin Barton. The latter is an example of what Burrows and O'Sullivan refer to as "docufiction," which they state, "operates on a porous border between fact and fiction" (2019, p. 134). In particular, this project, which Burrows and O'Sullivan describe as an "audio dérive along the Suffolk coast," (2019, p. 138) points towards a process and practice that I undertake in landscapes. They go on to write that *On Vanishing Land* presents "an idea of the landscape as composed of different times and presences that are … actualized by a performance" (2019, p. 138). The performance according to Burrows and O'Sullivan is a walk (2019, p. 138).

I encounter, observe, note, drive, and dream with landscapes. Historically, this way of working and making has roots in the Situationist practice of Dérive. In 1956, Guy Debord introduced this concept in his essay, "Theory of the Dérive," in *Les Lèvres Nues #9.* Debord defines this as a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" (Situationist International Online, n.d.). To partake in this practice, one explores a location and "the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Situationist International Online, n.d.). My mind wanders, making connections, recalling memories, forming new ones, thinking.

How do you design the way night sinks into the horizon? Design for obscurity, design for impermanence. Quiet, failure, longing.

An encounter can take many forms—Saturn in view over a lake, an elephant seal asleep along the Pacific, night descending while driving along the highway—but collectively they signal a shift where the boundaries between oneself and a space begin to breakdown and new meaning and connections form. According to Anna Tsing, encounters involve a response to "the presence of another," (2016, p. 46) writing, "Response always takes us somewhere new; we are not quite ourselves anymore … but rather ourselves in encounter with another. Encounters are, by their nature, indeterminate; we are unpredictably transformed" (2016, p. 46). The work of this thesis seeks to document these moments when we experience the sensation of being "unpredictably transformed." The "another" (2016, p. 46) I am responding to is the landscape. These could be plants, trees, rocks, animals, a memory, a story, an old brick, or dirt. According to Eduardo Kohn, Kawsak Sacha, an indigenous term that means "Living Forest" (2020), "recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves ... these selves, ... are persons (runa)" (2020). He continues, "Kawsak Sacha is where [we] interrelate with the supreme beings of the forest in order to receive the guidance that leads [us] along the path of Sumak Kawsay (Good Living)" (2020). In encounters, the landscape responds to me as well, offering insights for transformation.

To be open to landscapes as they present themselves. To find a spiritual practice through design, daily habits, repeating and evolving.

When I encounter landscapes, I encounter the spiritual in several ways. In an interview with *Emergence Magazine*, Suzanne Simard refers to the forest as a "deeply connected, reverent place" (2022). She speaks further to the spiritual later in the interview stating,

> "My Granny Winnie, … lives in me, and her mum, my great-grandmother Helen, lives in me as well, … The aboriginal people talk about seven generations before and after, and that we have a responsibility to our previous and forward generations" (2022).

Autumn Richardson and Richard Skelton echo this in writing about their poem *Wolf Notes*, and what they state is "a rift between the desire to invoke and celebrate what is here, and the duty to catalogue and mourn the passing of what has disappeared" (2018). My publications seek to place the reader in this headspace and to create a space for reflection on their own relationship with the past, present, and future. Language is one way in which I attempt this. My language is distilled down to a few words. Questions are asked and remain unanswered. Spirits are called, the invisible invoked. Running through this language is an undercurrent of an unnamed longing. The typesetting choices enhance this feeling. The intentional use of whitespace and scale establishes a sense of reverence around the text, memorializing the encounter in the publication.

Various processes of abstraction contribute to the elusive quality of my publications. I make images with an iPhone zoomed in to 10x, blurry, in motion, at night. Details are either removed or zoomed in on to the extent that you lose sense of what the object is in totality. I place little hierarchical emphasis on any one image within the layouts, instead I treat these images as a series of tones that form an atmosphere. The

Risograph printer serves as a means of disassociating the image from that which it documents. The Risograph reads these already blurry, dark, zoomed images and translates them into a dot pattern on rice paper, further abstracting the image. Using the Risograph positions the work closer to the language of printmaking than photography or other digital commercial printing techniques. This is due to a process that uses spot ink colors pressed through a rice paper screen onto paper. I work primarily in monochrome set to a screen-covered output meaning the image is translated into a series of dots. This method for reproduction further distances the final image from an exact photographic representation by removing any gray value (Wikipedia contributors, 2022), instead rendering only dots of ink at varying densities on the page.

The process of transformation and abstraction happens at multiple levels. From the landscape and encounter, to me, to the digital and back to ink and paper. The work carries the traces of these actions.

More recently, I have been creating publications that are more expansive in length and focus, often assembling outside text and voices alongside my writing and images. These links start to build an ecology of reference points and historical insights within the book that support the more poetic and enigmatic writings.

Design that makes space for others. For beings.

3. CONTEXT

Inherent in self-publishing as a framework is its ability to assemble different modes of working and producing (Gilbert, 2016). My approach to making and distributing is positioned in what Annette Gilbert refers to as graphic design which makes an "assertive claim for the artistic ambitions of their practice and their products" (2016, p. 12). Much of what I am responding to in the landscape and how the landscape presents itself is ephemeral. Being transported by a landscape is impermanent. Encounters are fleeting and the memories they elicit are constantly in flux. Self-publishing allows me a container to explore these often-ephemeral moments of encounter.

In a conversation documented in the publication *On Publishing: Graphic Designers Who Publish*, designers Jon Sueda and Chris Hamamoto (n.d.) discuss the role of publications in bringing knowledge into existence. Below is an excerpt from their conversation illustrating this idea:

> JS: I first started making publications as a way to document things I was interested in. I felt like unless you capture knowledge and make it a material thing that you can share, it might not even exist. I also like the idea of an autonomous platform for research and experimentation that is not dependent on external sources. (Sueda & Hamamoto, n.d.)

By functioning as an "autonomous platform" (Sueda & Hamamoto, n.d.), self-publishing allows me a space to explore my own ideas and what I believe needs to be said independent of external influences from traditional publishing or client-driven design scenarios. It also enables a blurring of the boundaries between art and design through its autonomy and offers the opportunity to challenge the commercial role of graphic design by operating outside of traditional client/designer frameworks. Autonomy recalls

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's writing on speculative design and their belief that "...design has become so absorbed in industry, … that it is also impossible to dream its own dreams..." (2013, p. 88). The artist's book, which Pat Steir states is "1. portable, 2. durable, 3. inexpensive, 4. intimate, 5. non-precious, 6. replicable, 7. historical, and 8. universal" (Lippard, 1985), allows me a space to document my own dreams and boundary-blurring encounters with landscapes. By making and circulating multiples, my work creates an intimate space for others to meditate on their own experience of landscapes.

Trying to design the feeling of sitting still and watching space pass by.

4. PROCESS

In this section I will discuss the process and formal methodology behind selected projects which provide a collective overview of the primary working methods explored during this inquiry. My practice can be split into two categories: (1) publications and longer-term collaborations and (2) there is work that happens in between these projects. Sometimes these in-between projects take the form of a single photograph, monoprints, or short documentary-style text.

My approach to book design is intuitive and begins with a formal evaluation of the documentation. Images are curated and sequenced with an attention to pacing, rhythm, and texture. Working within a traditional codex structure, the two-page spread is treated as a continuous space with textures and tones paired together to create an immersive atmosphere that seeks to transport the reader into the landscape of the page. The text is woven through these immersive spaces in a subtle typographic voice. Scale shifts are assigned to represent different voices or poems, while one typeface is used throughout to echo the continuous rhythm created by the images. Text is treated as small fragments of a larger whole that traverse the length of the book, falling in and out of narrative and resolution. There is a tension created when the smaller fragments of text break the continuous flow of images. This tension is an echo of encounter, the way a small rustling somewhere causes one's attention to shift.

Untitled, 2021

Figure 1. *Untitled*, Cover and Selected Spread.

The first reflection on the uncanny sensation of encounter occurred after visiting the Pacific coast near San Gregorio with my wife and young daughters. I began to think of Selkies from Celtic mythology, a seal creature that is said to take human form, (Knowles, 2006) and the children's book *The Selkie Girl* that I read to my daughters. At the end of this story the captured Selkie is given her skin back by one of her children and returns to the ocean. As she dives into the water she tells her human children, "I shall always be here, watching over you, whether you are in the islands or on the sea" (Cooper & Hutton, 1986). Later, my daughter asked my wife if fish have shoulders too.

This exploration led to a series of shorter works ranging in page count from 12 to 20 pages. Each of these projects paired a short text reflection with a series of images taken in a landscape or series of landscapes. These works include *Stay Together*; *Morning Rain*; *Night Run* and *Night Run 03.2022*.

Figure 2. *Stay Together*, Cover and Selected Spread.

Figure 3. *Night Run 03.2022*, Cover and Selected Spread.

The publications *Cottonmouth* and *July + December 2021* represent the culmination of these early projects. These two projects also highlight the typographic voice of my work. *Cottonmouth* is set in the typeface Söhne and *July + December 2021* is set in Signifier, both from Klim Type Foundry. While not the exclusive typefaces of these projects, often, I am driven to these typefaces for their relationship with historical contexts, and memory, specifically as it relates to Söhne (Sowersby, 2019). Memory is a critical aspect of how I relate to landscapes. A landscape allows me to recall memories, and the memories influence my response to the landscape. Together, they form a looping,

and generative exchange. In the case of Signifier, the way technology influences the

design of the work (Sowersby, 2020). On this topic, Kris Sowersby, the typeface designer

behind Signifier, wrote a series of questions that influenced his decision making: "What

makes a font truly digital? What is the essence of English Roman's letterforms, and how

can I translate them to the 21st century" (2020)? The idea that our tools influence and

translate the work is important as it relates to my use of the Risograph as a form of

translation.

Cottonmouth, 2022

Figure 4. *Cottonmouth*, Cover and Selected Spread.

Cottonmouth is a 20-page, self-cover and unbound Risograph publication printed

in Kelly Green. This work began when I was walking along the muddy bed of Cedar

Creek. I was on the campus of the Earth Native Wilderness School in Bastrop just east of

Austin. For a time in 2020–2021 my wife and I would send our daughters to Forest

School there. As I was walking alone and taking photographs, my wife called to me from

a different section of the creek reminding me that the Cottonmouth snakes made their

home here. A shift occurred. I became aware of another's presence. I began to think of

my children playing here alongside the children of the Cottonmouth and the vulnerability of both. As I continued walking the branches and textures I was admiring began to appear differently in my vision.

The images sequenced into the book reflect the immersive nature and the shape-shifting textural qualities of the environment—tangles of branches, some out of focus, some not; close-ups of textures that reveal little about their source. The Risograph printing method adds an additional layer of abstraction to these images. The prints were made using the lowest resolution dot screen to further remove information.

The reflection I wrote in response to this experience reads: Visions winding our children in the growth.

July + December 2021, 2022

Figure 5. *July + December 2021*, Cover and Selected Spread.

The publication *July + December 2021* began as a document of a night spent on Lake Catherine in Arkansas and observing Saturn directly visible from where we sat at the water's edge. I began to document the water and surrounding land as daylight faded. Attempts to photograph the adjacent shore took on an alien appearance as the light from a

factory mixed with light from the moon and stars. This night was the first of a multiweek-long trip driving through Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota until we reached Lake Superior during the Summer of 2021. I documented in text moments from our drive, dogs on the roadside and a syringe, the tall pines.

Later in December, Saturn was again visible as I reflected on the year. I documented the sky and trees, we built a fire and made offerings to the flames. A second text was written that calls an unnamed presence. This text contains the line "a harvest ritual," which is a reference to the mythological version of Saturn as the god of agriculture. December is also the month of the Roman festival Saturnalia (Knowles, 2006). The text ends by asking for the presence to remain with me to warm our young. This project resulted in a 40-page saddle-stitched book printed in black on cream paper.

Hawthorn Meditation, 2022

Figure 6. *Hawthorn Meditation*, Cover and Selected Spread.

In the spring of this year my wife and I made a journey to visit and sit with a hawthorn tree on the campus of the American Botanical Council. The hawthorn tree has a rich association with the Otherworld. In a text from *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* by Nigel

Pennick, which was scanned and included in the center of this book, we learn more about the historical and magical associations of this tree (1996). The tree is a threshold to the Otherworld. According to my wife, it is also planted along thresholds and acts as a barrier. As we sat there, my mind wandered back to a hallucinatory episode, a place I was led to by the presence of the tree. This book reflects on connection to the Otherworld, liminal spaces and communicating with spirits.

The photographs included in this book are curated into two sections. The first half documents a drive to the tree. Motion blur obscures the images of the roadside, medians, fences, and boundaries: places for passing over and across. The second half documents the tree and our time with it: a blanket, leaves and my wife's hand offering the tree water.

Two written texts are interspersed in the book. One documents an edited version of a conversation my wife and I had talking about the relationship between the tree, the Otherworld, and spirit. The other texts are a series of poems I wrote based on flashback memories of a hallucination and documentation of the events of the day, approaching a threshold and leaving water.
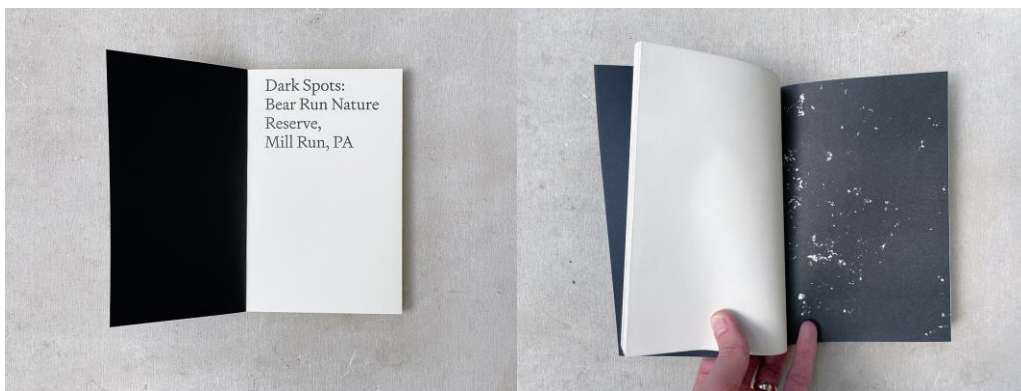
Dark Spots, 2022

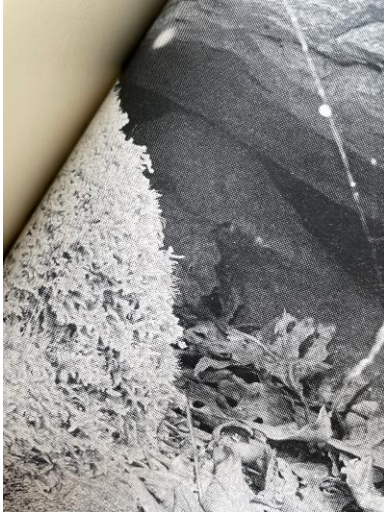**Figure 7.** *Dark Spots*, Cover and Selected Spread.

Figure 8. *Dark Spots*, Detail.

      Dark Spots was developed during DesignInquiry Bewilder, a week-long residency that included three nights of primitive camping in the woods of Bear Run Nature Reserve in Mill Run Pennsylvania. While in the woods, I began to appreciate darkness in new ways. We were already deep into a rural landscape before hiking a mile to the campsite. This allowed us to escape any light pollution. Darkness in the woods revealed itself in two ways.

      At night, I would document the trees in near total darkness. The images produced are black with only small breaks of white where the sky was visible through the dense forest. My body disappeared. During the day I would walk along the paths and document gaps and holes in the earth. Each of the moments revealed a forest that I could not fully access. These were places and times meant for others to be in the forest. These moments also challenged what documentation could capture. You cannot see into the gaps in the earth, nor can you see the forest in the night.

      The text written for this publication is a reflection on the questions of what is hidden and what is revealed, and the possibility of understanding that which is seemingly

inaccessible. A spread from the book *The Walk* by Robert Walter is included, a book I brought with me to the forest, and, happened to be reading these pages as I sat waiting in the airport to leave Pennsylvania. The text allows for another voice to speak in awe of the forest and the mysterious sounds, it also includes a passage about having a grave in the woods as I reflected too on returning to the earth.

After this project I began to think more about the role and purpose of documentation when working with the landscape. Part of this thinking was developed during a series of conversations that led to the collaborative project with Kimmie Parker, an artist, designer, and educator based outside Detroit, titled *Ten Seconds East*. *Ten Seconds East* is a year-long collaborative practice of wandering and recording in 10-second traces. In developing this project, we wanted to focus more on exploration and process than any specific outcome. Together at 6 p.m. we face east and collect ten seconds of audio, video, or words. The moments we document are combined and overlapped in a digital publication.

Figure 9. *Ten Seconds East*, Screen-capture from Website.

A Surface, A Vision, A Story, 2022

Figure 10. *A Surface, A Vision, A Story*, Cover and Detail.

This publication is a meditation on water as a connective vessel and as a site of exploration and transformation. The imagery consists of a series of stills pulled from a video of the surface of water. These still images were recomposed in a looping stop-motion GIF, which my wife watched and wrote what she saw in response. The resulting poem is threaded through the book. A second text is included as an insert. This found text is a story titled "Nick Fish" from Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*. The story concerns a boy cursed by his mother and becomes half man and half fish. By the end of the story the King of Messina asks Nick to explore the deepest part of the ocean. The story ends with the lentils floating to the surface and Nick never returning (Calvino, 1992).

In-between Practice, Ongoing

Figure 11. *Untitled*, Two-color Risograph Print.

      A series of short projects represent a way of working that exists between the larger publications. These seek to capture a single thought or image as a practice of daily documentation. These support the longer publications while also allowing attention to be given to the documentation of daily encounters. These include a series of prints, a poster with images of rain on a lake and a short text recalling seeing a ghost crossing the highway. Another short text reads: "a repeating occurrence, two lights moving from opposite positions, overlapping, and returning."

5. AUDIENCE & RATIONALE

My practice approaches landscapes to point to a way in which the tools of design can be utilized to make a space for reflection and communication with the more than human and the invisible. The intersection between landscapes and myths is complex and may be utilized to different ends, both positive and negative (O'Sullivan, 2018). Returning to O'Sullivan, we are presented with the "myth of progress" and its relationship to extraction and, on the contrary, with what he terms "a contemporary contra-mythopoesis" that "might combine with more ecological concerns: what new myths are appropriate and adequate to our Anthropocene? What different stories do we need to tell?" (2018, p. 145).

The artist Maria Whiteman echoes this sentiment in her essay "Death," stating, "As the history of contemporary ecological art shows, artists have a special role to play in conversations about our shared ecological future" (2020, p. 97). She continues, stating, "truly ecological thinking … must confront the complexity with which human and nonhuman life forms, worlds, and landscapes are interwoven" (2020, p. 97). It is here that I position a direction for design to move towards, and to shift its priorities for whom it communicates between, to give typographic form to non-verbal expression, and to guide a reframing of our relationship to these "interwoven" (Whiteman, 2020, p. 97) landscapes.

This shift is predicated on positioning my practice outside commercial interests, as a way for design to mediate something beyond the traditional product/consumer modality. Instead, I am offering to use design to mediate human and nonhuman relations.

Some practices that serve as reference points for the future development of this work include Seaton Street Press, whose publications attend to "the intersections of site,

language, and memory" (Seaton Street Press, n.d.), and the work of Richard Skelton and Autumn Richardson both individually and through their publishing imprint Corbel Stone Press. In the introduction to their book *Memorious Earth*, they write about the poem *The Medicine Earth*, stating this poem "assembles an oblique, mythopoeic narrative from a variety of source materials, including herbal texts dating back to Old English leechdoms" (Richardson & Skelton, 2018). An example from this text reads:
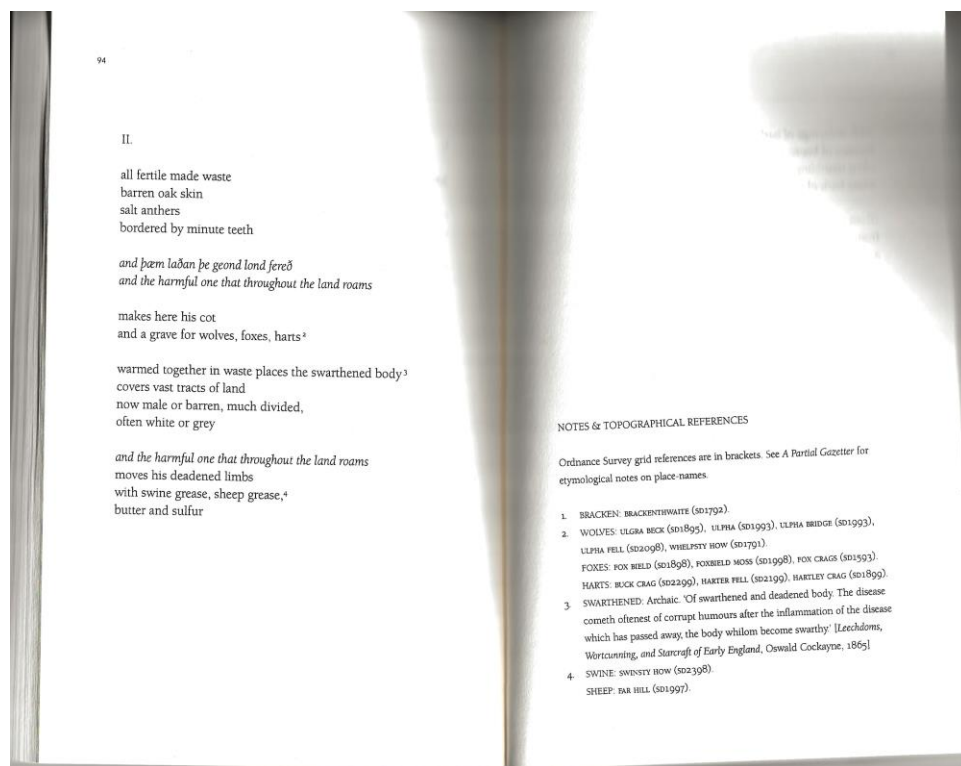
II.

all fertile made waste
barren oak skin
salt anthers
bordered by minute teeth

and þæm laðan þe geond lond fereð
and the harmful one that throughout the land roams

makes here his cot
and a grave for wolves, foxes, harts [2]

warmed together in waste places the swarthened body [3]
covers vast tracts of land
now male or barren, much divided,
often white or grey

and the harmful one that throughout the land roams
moves his deadened limbs
with swine grease, sheep grease, [4]
butter and sulfur

NOTES & TOPOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Ordnance Survey grid references are in brackets. See *A Partial Gazetter* for etymological notes on place-names.

1. BRACKEN: BRACKENTHWAITE (SD1792).
2. WOLVES: ULGRA BECK (SD1895), ULPHA (SD1993), ULPHA BRIDGE (SD1993), ULPHA FELL (SD2098), WHELPSTY HOW (SD1791). FOXES: FOX BIELD (SD1898), FOXBIELD MOSS (SD1998), FOX CRAGS (SD1593). HARTS: BUCK CRAG (SD2299), HARTER FELL (SD2199), HARTLEY CRAG (SD1899).
3. SWARTHENED: Archaic. 'Of swarthened and deadened body. The disease cometh oftenest of corrupt humours after the inflammation of the disease which has passed away, the body whilom become swarthy' [*Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, Oswald Cockayne, 1865]
4. SWINE: SWINSTY HOW (SD2398). SHEEP: EAR HILL (SD1997).

Figure 12. Page 94–95 from *A Memorious Earth*. Skelton & Richardson.

These references also point towards an audience for independent presses that operate outside of mainstream publishing. My work is intended for an art book audience, and, within this broader category, is for those attuned to a meditative and spiritual way of existing in and with landscapes and the nonhuman world. As my practice evolves, I

intend to distribute this work via my own imprint, through art book fairs, and by

submitting selected publications to distributors like Printed Matter. I also plan to continue

to pursue artist residencies that allow me to make and distribute projects at the scale of

the community engaged with the residency and the resulting inquiry.

6. CONCLUSION

The projects presented here are individual representations of a single, growing body of work. Together they form an ecology of moments, references, visions, and stories. If we are to design a publication that makes space for others, invites them into the liminal, and resists linear narratives then it is helpful to think about how the distributed work makes possible the opportunity to create an ecosystem of encounters, and a community of collective dreaming. My publications provide an intimate space for reflection on these ideas. Publication is a living form that evolves with us; as Chris Hamamoto states, "publishing can insert itself into, and influence, different time periods" (Sueda & Hamamoto, n.d.). This exploration, and the worlds it conjures up, is ongoing.

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