

# Into the Wilderness: Tracing the Steps of a Birdlike Wisdom

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## Abstract

This paper draws on the threads of Wisdom spirituality that were explored within the context of the history of capitalism and its underpinning ideologies in two papers previously published in the Kenarchy Journal: *The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom*<sup>1</sup> and *Hidden in Plain Sight: reconsidering the value of social reproduction, work and nature*.<sup>2</sup> Envisaged as occupying the centre in what I have come to imagine as a Triptych, this third paper works with and through the other two, sketching an outline of Divine Wisdom, both figurative and as praxis, to add further dimension to what was glimpsed in the earlier papers.

Sight of a multi-faceted feminine divinity is first sought out through Walter Brueggemann's interpretation of the Exodus account as a journey to the common good in an existential struggle against empire forces<sup>3</sup>. To this is added Catherine's Keller's "dreamreading"<sup>4</sup> of John's first-century CE text of Revelation and the "great sign"<sup>5</sup> of the woman clothed with the sun who flees an imperially-charged Dragon to the refuge of the wilderness. Both texts are read together for insinuations of a complex, grammatically feminine figure of Divine Wisdom, whose cosmic and everyday dimensions can be traced in struggles for the common good in opposition to centralising forces of domination.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist biblical inquiry, which formed the foundation of the inquiry into Divine Wisdom in the two previous papers is developed by A. Paige Rawson's queer postcolonial reading from a socioeconomic perspective that further unties Wisdom from masculine/feminine binaries. Correlating with the Shekinah-Hochma-Ruach presence of the two wilderness accounts, the political nature of wild Wisdom is further explored via the Black Studies of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.<sup>7</sup> The central theme of their work, "the undercommons," suggests a wild, unregulated and ungovernable realm that lies beyond institutions of control. The concept of the fugitive is key to the understanding of space where the colonised, queer, and otherwise marginal make meaning with each other; for the undercommons is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Tomlin, Julie. "The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom." (Kenarchy Journal, Volume 1:3, 2020. [https://kenarchy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kenarchy\\_Volume1.3.pdf](https://kenarchy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kenarchy_Volume1.3.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> Tomlin, Julie. "Hidden in Plain Sight: reconsidering the value of social reproduction, work and nature." (Kenarchy Journal, Volume 3:2, 2022. [https://kenarchy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kenarchy\\_Volume3.2.pdf](https://kenarchy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kenarchy_Volume3.2.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. 2010. *Journey to the Common Good*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Keller. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021) xv.

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 12:1.

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (Wivenhoe Etc.: Minor Compositions, 2013).

settled location, but something always there, a way of life in antagonistic relationship to colonialism and capitalism. In particular, Jack Halberstam's introduction to Moten and Harvey's book<sup>8</sup> is drawn upon to form a bridge between the wild spatiality of the divine, dynamic, agent and guide who merges from the two wilderness accounts and the politics of the undercommons. The nature of generative struggle - identified in the Exodus and Revelation accounts - is further explored in relation to the politics of the undercommons as outlined by Catherine Keller in *The Political Theology of the Earth*.<sup>9</sup> The strategic importance of the work of social reproduction, of re-enchantment and re-connection to the earth as sites of social, economic and political transformation is emphasised as part of the concluding section that connects the wilderness divinity to Jesus and the kenarchy project of re-cognising a loving God who empowers forms of living for the good of both people and the earth.

### **Into the Wilderness**

Before beginning to sketch the third and central panel of the imagined triptych, a brief outline of the two previous papers is required: Written during the period of lockdown, they explored, in various ways, the roots of a system of domination in the West that has privileged a white male elite over the centuries. In particular they examined how capitalism was founded on originary violence and extraction, and the ways that Western thought has developed in relation to the needs of that system. *The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom* was an attempt to imagine a different politics through an exploration of links between Wisdom literature, myths and folk and fairy tales, particularly in relation to stories that connect wo/men to wells and to the wellbeing of the earth. The second paper, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, explored how the devaluation of women and the earth is at the root of the compulsion towards growth that characterises Western economics. The dualisms that naturalised the othering and backgrounding of people and ways of being in ways that suited the purposes of capitalism were also explored in relation to the radical potential of social reproduction.

In order to begin to paint a more detailed picture of the Wisdom figure who emerged in both papers, it becomes necessary to provide a backdrop. The chosen scene is the wilderness, to where two escapes are made: First, Brueggemann's account of the exodus from Egypt; second, a less-heeded escape of a woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars"<sup>10</sup> who is first seen in John's vision in the agony of childbirth. Read together, these two accounts

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Undercommons*, 2-12.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, Catherine. *Political Theology of the Earth*. (Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See Revelation 12: 1-2.

render the wilderness as alternative space, both physical and imaginal, outside and beyond established systems of domination, where an altogether more wild divinity might be encountered.

### Escaping Pharaoh

The escape of the Israelites is set in motion by the cruelty they experience as “state slaves”<sup>11</sup> in Egypt. Under Pharaoh, empire logic waged war on their bodies, extracted their labour and imposed ever-increasing levels of production that has many parallels with capitalism’s monopolising control of resources and drive to growth.

Departing from more familiar readings of the Joseph narrative in Genesis, Brueggemann focuses on the “down-and-dirty” economic transactions and concentration of power and wealth that preceded enslavement. In his account, anxiety and fear of scarcity shape Pharaoh’s “frantic and aggressive policies and exploitative practices”<sup>12</sup> as well as the Israelites’ subjection to them.<sup>13</sup> A “systemic greediness”<sup>14</sup> characterises the imperial system, which, Brueggemann writes, is “one of raw and ruthless exploitation, always pressing cheap labour for *more* production.”<sup>15</sup> Subjected to harsh physical labour and unreasonable demands, the suffering of the Israelites reaches breaking point, coming finally to public speech as a strong dismay that contained within it the knowledge “that the social system of the empire has failed.”<sup>16</sup>

The response to their cry was divine resolve to wrest social control away from Pharaoh’s empire: Moses is enlisted as co-agent to that effort and, inspired by a vision of “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,”<sup>17</sup> the Israelites finally depart from the cruelty and scarcity of Egypt. The wilderness, according to Brueggemann is where one ends up after departing the Pharaoh system, and it was here that past narratives were to be unsettled and undone and new ones learnt. Perhaps the journey could have been cut short, but the wandering, circular nature of this time spent in pursuit of the common good has about it a “dreamy”<sup>18</sup> quality that suggests an altogether different ordering of life is in play. In contrast to their suffering under Pharaoh, the Israelites had time to discover the depths of divine and

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<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 3: 8.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, 15.

"inexplicable generosity"<sup>19</sup> that transformed the ostensibly unsustainable wilderness to a place of "viable life."<sup>20</sup>

### Un-learning Empire Ways

Grace in the form of manna or "wonder bread,"<sup>21</sup> as Brueggemann calls it, was one of numerous experiences in the wilderness that disrupted narratives of a world organised according to Pharaoh's rapacious policies. The well of water that followed them and the pillars of fire and cloud that guided them, were all means by which the anxiety of the "kingdom of paucity"<sup>22</sup> could be soothed. The wilderness provision demonstrated abundance and divine generosity so dreamy "we reserve for it the special term *miracle*."<sup>23</sup> It is important that the elemental, earthed and material nature of such experiences is not lost as a result of such framing, however. The re-imagining and re-articulation of life in relation to God, to one another, to sustenance and to the earth was made possible by means of such "everyday miracles." Interdependence with God mediated through the environment replaced the domination system of Pharaoh's empire. Interpreted as a form of co-creation or *poiesis*, as outlined in *The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom*<sup>24</sup>, an alternative "drawing forth" disrupted the extraction and exploitation that was the result of the "turn from the earth" that was foundational to economic and political domination in the West, according to Mary Grey.<sup>25</sup>

In some Jewish traditions, it is *Shekinah*, God's "saving presence," who accompanies the people into the wilderness. Read as present and participating in the Israelite's struggle towards new life in opposition to empire ways, *Shekinah* is therefore implicated in this wilderness-situated re-articulation of what it means to be human. The "alternative abundance"<sup>26</sup> of the manna was a concrete indispensable resource for life that also gestured to the Hebrew *Chokma* or Wisdom, another feminine presence "sent particularly to Israel and who offers the bread of understanding."<sup>27</sup> Together with *Ruach*, or Spirit, this trio of grammatically feminine names in the Hebrew Bible signify "that aspect of the Divine which is involved in the affairs of humanity and creation."<sup>28</sup> Can we intuit a connection between this *Shekinah-Chokma-Ruach* and the experiences in the wilderness? Reading the commandments not as rules "for deep moralism" to

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<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Brueggemann, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Tomlin, "The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom," 39.

<sup>25</sup> See Tomlin, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 33.

“clobber and scold,”<sup>29</sup> but as “the most elemental statement of how to organize social power and social goods for the common benefit of the community,”<sup>30</sup> we can perhaps feel their pulse in the struggle with and for the Israelites to get them free of empire.

### **Escaping the Dragon**

A similar constellation of feminine descriptors can be traced in the account of the woman who also found refuge in the wilderness. Feminist theologians take different views on her - and for Keller she “offers no ideal of emancipated femininity,”<sup>31</sup> but her remarkable escape and the protection afforded her - all in the face of violent empire forces - might give us pause for a moment.

In her cosmic apparel, the woman is first revealed in the agony of labour, a reminder, writes Keller, that new life comes in “unpredictable throbs and self-emptying convulsions, in different degrees of self-emptying struggle.” The scene - replete with the intense and risk-filled pain that is borne in anticipation of new life - is interrupted by “a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his head,”<sup>32</sup> whose sole intention is to devour the newborn. The newly born male infant is swiftly removed to safety, and a battle ensues that sees the dragon, now identified as “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray”<sup>33</sup> thrown down to earth. Here John is not predicting the future, Keller argues, but rather revealing the fatal patterns at play in his world. The “systemic voracity” of the attack by this “multi-headed, multi-powered force of world-scaled destruction”<sup>34</sup> would therefore be read as the “econo-politics of empire.”<sup>35</sup> In her own reading of the apocalyptic as un-veiling, or disclosure - Keller sees in the beast’s fury “the cloudy future of an ancient civilisational destructiveness so devastatingly potent that it seems bound to play itself out in subsequent history.”<sup>36</sup>

The last glimpse of this “cosmos woman”<sup>37</sup> is of her in flight, with the assistance of eagle wings,<sup>38</sup> from the nightmare attack to the protection and nourishment of a wilderness sanctuary. If we linger, rather than move on quickly to the next scene in John’s fast moving “horror show,”<sup>39</sup> we might wonder about those mysteriously appearing wings of a great eagle that ensure the woman’s escape. These, Keller writes,

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<sup>29</sup> Brueggemann, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Keller, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Keller, 61.

<sup>33</sup> See Revelation 12: 7.

<sup>34</sup> Keller, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Keller, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Keller, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Keller, 61.

<sup>38</sup> See Revelation 12: 14.

<sup>39</sup> Keller, 83.

“reprise the ancient prototype of liberation movements, of *flight* from slavery to a new collective life”<sup>40</sup> as described in Exodus 19: 4. In her “birdiness,”<sup>41</sup> the woman is identified with *Shekinah* who, some Jewish traditions still hold, is divine companion in times of exodus and exile. Interchangeable with *Ruach* in the Rabbinic writings, *Shekinah* resides in the mysterious depths of the creation narrative as “pneumatic oscillation-storm, wind, breath, spirit, who is not something sent from God above, but who ‘is’ whatever is divine.”<sup>42</sup> The author of Genesis used words that translate as “hover over,” “sweep over,” “move over,” “flutter over” or “tremble over”<sup>43</sup> to describe the activity of *Ruach Elohim* - the spirit of God. Such a “feminine, avian noun-verb cluster,”<sup>44</sup> conjures images of a mother eagle brooding over her nest and, potentially, an altogether different creation narrative. So little space is afforded the “startling portrayals of God as the beaked and feathered Holy Spirit”<sup>45</sup> in traditional Christian theology, this intriguing “divine animal hybrid”<sup>46</sup> who broods over the chaos appears to have been written out the script. Yet if the presence of *Ruach*, as “the relation of relations,”<sup>47</sup> is allowed breath, then the creation story becomes one of “interdependence of creator and creation, and as such the interrelation of all creatures.”<sup>48</sup> Hildegard of Bingen’s vision of the universe as a cosmic egg<sup>49</sup> is one example in history of creation-as-egg imagery in which the “spirit lays the eggs of matter itself.”<sup>50</sup> Without such grounding of the spirit in creation and the emergence of difference as indicated in the egg, we inhabit a world in which “all our words circulate in a disembodied vacuum,” writes Keller.<sup>51</sup> The significance of the Holy Spirit’s feathered form lies in the fact that far from effecting a spiritual disembodiment, a flight from the earth, it suggests... “a dynamism of embodiment: lines of flight *within* the world.”<sup>52</sup>

Derived from the grammatically feminine Hebrew noun *shakan*, which means to dwell, *Shekinah* in her role as companion in Jewish exile appears to encompass this grounding. Her spatiality embodies Psalm 90:1 “you have been our dwelling place in all generations,”<sup>53</sup> suggesting divinity as our very place which could be defined as Panentheism. In her cosmic dimensions and feathered flight, the Sunwoman is implicated in narratives such as Proverbs 8, where a master worker and partner of “daily delight” is

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<sup>40</sup> Keller, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Keller. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 233.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, 234.

<sup>43</sup> Wallace, Mark I. *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. (Fordham University Press, 2019), 22.

<sup>44</sup> Wallace, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Wallace, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Wallace, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>48</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>49</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>50</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>51</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>52</sup> Keller, 233.

<sup>53</sup> Keller, *Facing Apocalypse*, 73.

present. Here once more, is Chokhmah, that Divine Wisdom who in Greek is named Sophia, and in Latin Sapientia, a figure who was "set up ... at the first, before the beginning of the earth." <sup>54</sup>

Such grammatically feminine descriptors of divinity would not have been missed in the Greco-Roman era, writes Keller. Nor would the gestures towards The Greek goddess Artemis, her Roman counterpart, Diana, or the Egyptian goddess Isis, all of whom are depicted similarly arrayed with cosmic symbols. Their repression and expulsion over the centuries perhaps play a part in the story of the out-of-sight Sunwoman. Monotheism, writes Keller, and the movement towards "a One who becomes a male identified Only,"<sup>55</sup> was a process by which "images and attributes of rival deities - thrones, swords, beards, male gods," were absorbed but parallel goddess imagery "was usually and firmly suppressed."<sup>56</sup>

The Sunwoman has long been interpreted, more acceptably, as Mary, and her child as Jesus. Such readings, Keller argues, are too simplistic, failing to take into account the signage of stars, sun and moon that mark her out as "anything but a human individual."<sup>57</sup> The suggestion that she represents the people of God at least hints at the collective scope of John's vision, yet fails to convey the high "cosmic stakes"<sup>58</sup> of the labour event. This, in Keller's estimation, does not describe a literal birth or historical nativity. With her "astronomical Gestalt [that] occupies the vantage point of the earth,"<sup>59</sup> the woman could be Mother Earth; yet the appearance of the earth as an "allied agent"<sup>60</sup> later in the chapter suggests otherwise. For when the dragon-become-serpent unleashes "water like a river"<sup>61</sup> to stop the Sunwoman in her tracks, the earth opens up to swallow the fluids. Such an act of "female solidarity"<sup>62</sup> prompts Keller to wonder if the Sunwoman is the wisdom of cosmic connectivity, a personification of earth's connection to the whole creation.

Seen in this light, the Sunwoman's flight reprises a loss of knowledge; of wisdom and ways of being that might be summed up as "enchantment." If, as Keller writes, the Sunwoman may be "lingering still, our connection to the universe, somewhere in the remaining wilds"<sup>63</sup> might escape from what Max Weber described as the "iron cage"<sup>64</sup> of Western rationalism be in her gift, along with the repair of our torn connections?

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<sup>54</sup> Keller, 69.

<sup>55</sup> Keller, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Keller, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Keller, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Keller, 61.

<sup>59</sup> Keller, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Keller, 77.

<sup>61</sup> Keller, 75.

<sup>62</sup> Keller, 77.

<sup>63</sup> Keller, 77.

<sup>64</sup> Tomlin, *The Spiralling Dance*, 32, footnote 6.

In a story replete with loss, Keller dreamreads the baby's snatching away for safekeeping as the safeguarding of messianic potentiality so that another world "*remained, remains possible.*"<sup>65</sup> All that we hear of the Sunwoman's escape is that she finds her way to a "perfect therapeutic environment, a place for grief, nurture and healing"<sup>66</sup> where she remains for a significant period of time.<sup>67</sup> Yet departure, Brueggemann insists, is a necessary first step in the demanding work by which we might "think and imagine and act and live"<sup>68</sup> beyond the limits of empire. In the case of the priest Abiathar, banished to the village of Anathoth by Solomon as he shored up his regime, departure might not be done willingly. But four hundred years and generations later, Jeremiah returned to Jerusalem able to challenge the greed, wealth, commodification, power and ersatz wisdom-as-control that Solomon had come to personify. If the Sunwoman reprises the earlier flight of the Israelites, or that of Jeremiah's ancestors, her departure might be framed not as permanent defeat, but as a necessary and intentional response to violence and hostility that remains replete with possibility.

### **Out of Sight**

Interpreted as an act of resistance, departure offers the possibility of encountering a wild and liberatory divinity who struggles against the dehumanising logic of empire. The regimented systems and structures that came to define holiness for the Israelites were therefore a capitulation to hierarchy and exploitation that initiated an ongoing contestation between opposing narratives. The social order that emerged during Solomon's reign was both a comprehensive failure of imagination and a backlash against wild abundance and freedom. Writ large in the "majestically misogynistic voracity"<sup>69</sup> of the empire dragon's rage, the enmity towards the wild and unregulated can be traced in the biblical narrative and also in theology. Fear of chaos, fear of the deep, or Tehom, even of the brooding presence hovering over these dark waters fulminated against any hint of matrilineal creation. Belief in a universe created from a primal chaos, commonly held across the ancient world - and expressed in the Genesis account - became anathema to those who could not conceive of a universe that was "uncreated, something Other, something that a creator would mold, form or call to order."<sup>70</sup>

As what Keller terms a "consistent and masculinising dominology"<sup>71</sup> took hold, any suggestion of constraint against God's power became intolerable. By the third century, classical theism had erased the

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<sup>65</sup> Keller, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Keller, 68.

<sup>67</sup> See Revelation 12:8 "1,260 days" and Revelation 12:13: "a time, times and half a time".

<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Keller, 61.

<sup>70</sup> Keller, xvii.

<sup>71</sup> Keller, Face of the Deep, 54.



chaos and in the absence, an independent Father “who needs nothing but His own logos to create”<sup>72</sup> dominated the scene. Guided by a “rhetoric of sheer power,”<sup>73</sup> christianity came to denounce as “heretical disorder”<sup>74</sup> all that existed beyond it, particularly that which was considered mystical, or overly complex and fanciful.

From the fourth century onwards, as Roger Haydon Mitchell has shown,<sup>75</sup> theology was further shaped in ways that suited the interests of the powerful; and the church, by colluding with the “trajectory of empire”<sup>76</sup> eschewed its radical potential. The emergence of an emperor-like Christ able to call people into obedience suited the interests of the Roman Empire and energised hostility to other traditions. The earliest Sophia traditions, for instance, which combined Jewish prophetic Wisdom, and *basileia*, or “the political realm of G\*d” with its possibility of a transformed creation<sup>77</sup> were largely eradicated. The connection of Logos and Sophia as two pairs of hands, articulated by the Greek theologian Irenaeus,<sup>78</sup> as well as those traditions that saw Chokma-Sophia as the personification of God's saving activity were obscured. Remaining traces of divine femininity were largely transferred to Mary, the mother of Jesus, or otherwise interpreted as feminine other to the divine male regent, as in the good wife of Proverbs 31. Divine wisdom traditions were also coopted to serve elite interests: The colonial era “Lady Wisdom,”<sup>79</sup> a paradigm of civilised and cultured womanhood with connotations of whiteness and purity, illustrates the distortions that arose as a result.

### Re-cognising the Divine

Clearly, then, finding our way to this figure requires careful work: The example of Lady Wisdom draws our attention to the distortions of colonialism, hierarchy and the dualisms of the master system often at play when we seek to apprehend feminine divinity. Keller’s warning against adopting Shekinah’s name “as a synonym for the Christian Holy Spirit or feminist God/ess” highlights the dangers of careless cooption of a figure whose “indwelling was often confined to its people, not to mention its patriarchy”.<sup>80</sup>

Encountering this wild divinity requires departure from those frameworks that have so assiduously obscured and misrepresented her, or sought to co-opt her to serve their own interests. The work of

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<sup>72</sup> Keller, 53.

<sup>73</sup> Keller, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Keller, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Haydon Mitchell. *Church, Gospel & Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 23.

<sup>76</sup> Mitchell, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> Keller. *Face of the Deep*, 53.

<sup>79</sup> Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Keller, 234.

feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has contributed greatly towards the apprehension of this figure whose radical potential remains unrealised. Framed as "a practice in the horizon of Divine Wisdom," Fiorenza' feminist biblical inquiry positions the ideal Israelite woman in Proverbs 31 and Woman Wisdom who builds he/r Cosmic house in Proverbs nine as "a powerful counter narrative to the politics of empire".<sup>81</sup>

Paige Rawson's queer postcolonial reading from a socioeconomic perspective<sup>82</sup> further disrupts hierarchical dualism, troubling those gender norms that have so influenced readings of the woman in Proverbs in the past. Employing the term wo/man as a means of inverting and therefore reinstating hierarchical gender binaries, Rawson reads the Wisdom texts for "diverse and multiplying meaning, rather than and/or"<sup>83</sup> detecting a "fluid gender play"<sup>84</sup> that disrupts the positioning of Wisdom as helper to the creator.

Rawson interprets the reference to Wisdom being brought forth in Proverbs 8:22 as khoric womb: "a place and a process of becoming - already induced and inducing labour, s/he is inhabited by and within the (re)production of each creation event throughout space-time."<sup>85</sup> Despite fe/male personification, Wisdom, in this reading, is "an urge or energy" that can be described as both masculine and feminine, and therefore perpetually troubles the motif of "female" as always already other than, and juxtaposed in diametric opposition to "male."<sup>86</sup> Far exceeding the control of "the One (masculine) God"<sup>87</sup> and the order of the binary gender system, Wisdom breaches the boundaries of (m)other in opposition to the divine patriarch, or merely his multiple. Instead, as khora, this "Sophia Logos" can be pictured as a "wandering womb, always already creating infinite possibilities for boundless incarnations of a be(com)ing Wisdom accessible to *all* life."<sup>88</sup>

Drawing on Mayra Rivera's study of Wisdom texts,<sup>89</sup> Rawson highlights the "audacious occupation of civic space," suggested in Wisdom "raising" he/r voice, "crying out" and taking a stand at the highest place in the city and at intersecting places, calling to everyone who will hear he/r.<sup>90</sup> Such an energetic engagement positions Wisdom as authoritative voice with regard to those in power. The historic context of texts that show Woman Wisdom building he/r Cosmic house, Rawson suggests, was a time of exile when

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<sup>81</sup> Fiorenza, 134.

<sup>82</sup> Rawson, 413.

<sup>83</sup> Rawson, 408.

<sup>84</sup> Rawson, 410.

<sup>85</sup> Rawson, 410.

<sup>86</sup> Rawson, 410.

<sup>87</sup> Rawson, 410.

<sup>88</sup> Rawson, 419.

<sup>89</sup> Rawson, 413-414

<sup>90</sup> See Proverbs 8:

there was a shift from the role of king as “administrator of divine justice, authoritative counsellor, and guarantor of cosmic order” towards Divine Woman Wisdom.”<sup>91</sup>

By addressing men authoritatively, urging them to listen and pay heed, Wisdom exceeds the boundaries of a helper, or women’s/feminist resource. Holding those in power accountable for how they wielded it is reminiscent of Sovereignty, a divine feminine figure<sup>92</sup> who charged leaders with the flourishing of land and the community. Violent repression of a feminine divinity that holds the interests of people and land was explored in *The Spiralling Dance*<sup>93</sup>. The betrayal, exploitation and aggressive extractivism, that laid the land waste in the story of the Well Maidens<sup>94</sup> is echoed in that of the violence unleashed against the Sunwoman whose dimensions are suggestive of the holding of cosmic balance.

With Rawson, therefore, we are reaching for Wisdom that, while transcendent, is not separate from he/r creation. It is rather energy that “hurls he/rself into the cosmos in and through any body embracing and embodying h/er through innumerable creative events.”<sup>95</sup> This draws attention to the ways we each work Wisdom “out in our own skin and in our communities”.<sup>96</sup> Rawson identifies the “myriad ways” in which Wisdom works “in and through”<sup>97</sup> the political bodies of wo/men participating in struggles in the Philippines against Western imperialism and globalised capitalism. These women “strategically deploy their bodies as Wisdom”<sup>98</sup> in order to subvert governmental tactics that that devastate communities and destroy life,” writes Rawson,

The “manifold body of wisdom” that rises up reflects what Rawson reads as (re)appropriation (re)configuration and redefinition of wealth and creation/production<sup>99</sup>. Standing at the crossroads and raising “he/r voice at the intersection of life”<sup>100</sup> Wisdom advocates for unrestricted access to the resources necessary for all life. In he/r “unfettered availability”<sup>101</sup> she undermines categorisation, transgresses boundaries, celebrates life and offers nourishment to all.<sup>102</sup>

### **The Wilderness and the Undercommons**

Freed from the confines of dominology, we glimpse Wisdom as radical potential and resource for an alternative politics. The wilderness of the Israelites was geographically located, a place of encounter

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<sup>91</sup> Fiorenza, Jesus, 134.

<sup>92</sup> Tomlin, *The Spiralling Dance*, 36.

<sup>93</sup> Tomlin, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Tomlin, 35-37.

<sup>95</sup> Rawson, 417.

<sup>96</sup> Rawson, 410.

<sup>97</sup> Rawson, 418.

<sup>98</sup> Rawson, 417.

<sup>99</sup> Rawson, 407.

<sup>100</sup> Rawson, 415.

<sup>101</sup> Rawson, 407.

<sup>102</sup> Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways*, 27.

and learning; the Sunwoman's flight suggests a destination that exceeds physical space. Both are suggestive of wild space where empire ways could be unlearned and new ways of being imagined and experienced. The wilderness, therefore, is no mere backdrop, rather it is *her* place: an alternative realm at once discarded and devalued by centralising empire forces yet with potential that derives from this very beyondness.

Such space beyond the dominant structures is described by Jack Halberstam in his introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's work<sup>103</sup> on the undercommons of "black people, indigenous people, queers and poor people"<sup>104</sup>. Drawing on Black study, Moten and Harvey gesture, Halberstam writes, towards "where the wild things are"<sup>105</sup> space that lies beyond the control of the "structures we inhabit and that inhabit us"<sup>106</sup>. Departure becomes, by this reading, the heeding of a call to a zone that is continuously producing "its own unregulated wildness". Positioned beyond and in antagonism to empire, separate "from the logical, the logistical, the housed and the positioned" this is no place for traditional christian theology that became so attuned to such logic. A place where there is "no church"<sup>107</sup> the wild location of the undercommons must not be laid claim to, Keller warns, nor can its antagonism be appropriated. It does, however, allow for the possibility of participation in its struggle. The divine figure whose lines we are trying to trace shares the "fugitivity" that Moten and Harney envisage and would no doubt have common cause with those "desires and (non) positions that seem crazy and unimaginable"<sup>108</sup> that are part of the wild. In the "state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace"<sup>109</sup> we might encounter *Shekinah-Chokma-Ruach*, whose "agonism"<sup>110</sup> or struggle takes place in the wild beyond.

### The Wilderness as Expansive commons

As we saw in the account of the Israelites, the departure that is so intrinsic to the recovery of humanity, is by no means an easy one. Despite a "sustained insistence"<sup>111</sup> in the pursuit of what Brueggemann defines as the common good, the hope of wild, free and abundant life was thwarted repeatedly. The contestation that unfolded among them and their failure to eradicate it, is indicative of the strength of the enthrallment with Egypt's control. Through a series of lost opportunities, an alliance of temple, priesthood and law<sup>112</sup> took hold that reached its pinnacle during Solomon's reign. The triumph of

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<sup>103</sup> Harney and Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.

<sup>104</sup> Halberstam, 6.

<sup>105</sup> Halberstam, 6-7.

<sup>106</sup> Halberstam, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Halberstam, 12.

<sup>108</sup> Halberstam, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Halberstam, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Keller, 28.

<sup>111</sup> Brueggemann, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. (SCM Press Ltd, 1994), 134.

privilege, entitlement and exploitation and Solomon's cynical understanding of "how the world worked"<sup>113</sup> is part of an ongoing struggle that continues throughout the biblical narrative, shaped theology and is ongoing in the world today. A defeat of an order revealed in John's vision of a cosmic birth scene centuries later, it is further reminder, if one is needed, that struggles for "justice, for healing, for survival" do not happen in safe, smooth steps of progress, or without suffering"<sup>114</sup>. To stay with the struggle, for Keller, is to enter "the wake of mourning, the energy of indeterminacy, and the awakening potential of this now."<sup>115</sup> In defeat, as we have seen, there remains the possibility of the startling presence whose energetic urgency, unfettered availability and "fluid and fractured representation as wealth"<sup>116</sup> might resource and inspire us in what Keller describes as the struggle for a *more* common good(s)<sup>117</sup>.

This struggle and the "negotiation and fleshing out (quite literally) of the "common good(s)" among us all, locally and globally"<sup>118</sup> it necessitates is how Keller defines politics. The fleshing out of this "expansive commonality" is tied inextricably, as we have seen, to the "entire undergrounds forming in the ground beneath, down there in the dirt with the dehumanised and the non-human."<sup>119</sup> The struggling, birthing, exhorting presence whose ways have been traced through the wilderness and through more familiar terrain of Proverbs emerges as a divine Wisdom entirely befitting Keller's political theology of the earth and the "fierce urgency of our all too human now."<sup>120</sup>

The "dark space of possibility" that Keller sees opening "along the edge of uncertainty" flickers and "sometimes is a flutter, a flock, a flight,"<sup>121</sup> taking shape in all its mysteriousness as a murmuration of starlings, suggesting a collectivity that might be mimicked "in a dance of no one and everyone in the lead."<sup>122</sup> in the "counterexceptionalist murmuration, pulsing with interwoven difference"<sup>123</sup> that Keller envisages, we might detect Divine Wisdom, who we may call *Shekinah-Hochma-Ruach* or Sunwoman in order to retain her full cosmic force. Such a presence holds promise of a kind of revolution, Halberstam suggests, that will take place "not as a masculine surge or an armed confrontation," but "in a form we cannot yet imagine".<sup>124</sup> Yet read as exercises in departure, the experiences of the Israelites offers insight

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<sup>113</sup> Brueggemann, 22.

<sup>114</sup> Keller, 61.

<sup>115</sup> Keller, 179.

<sup>116</sup> Rawson, 408.

<sup>117</sup> Catherine Keller. *Political Theology of the Earth*. (Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Rawson, 411.

<sup>119</sup> Keller, 30.

<sup>120</sup> Keller, 180.

<sup>121</sup> Keller, 179.

<sup>122</sup> Keller, 180.

<sup>123</sup> Keller, 180

<sup>124</sup> Halberstam, 10-11.

into ways that we might work towards such a revolution. Drawing on those identified in *Hidden in Plain Sight*<sup>125</sup> three of them are expanded on below.

### **Social Reproduction**

The backgrounding of the work of reproduction may lead us to miss the extent to which the experience in the wilderness, along with other biblical texts, are often preoccupied with issues about food and provision, about the ordering of the everyday. Read through the disruptive lens of Wisdom traditions, the call to share food and drink takes on a radical force. As activists in liberatory politics and popular struggle testify, food plays a powerful role in creating "sacred and shared space" - a space "inherently based in community, in working together to create something delicious and magical."<sup>126</sup>

In "Hidden in Plain Sight," the argument was made for the centering of material needs such as housing, food preparation, the organisation of space, childrearing, sex, and procreation,<sup>127</sup> as well as the reproduction of "our collective memory and the cultural symbols that give meaning to our life and nourish our struggles."<sup>128</sup> Shifting the lens through which we view the experience of the Israelites, we may view the struggle located in the excluded and devalued work of subsistence and reproduction in opposition to empire and its systemic violence. The learning of dreamy abundance in the wilderness echoes Silvia Federici's description of the commons as "a perspective anticipating in an embryonic way a world beyond capitalism and placing at the center of social change the question of social reproduction."<sup>129</sup> The "de-privatization of land, water, and urban spaces and the creation of forms of reproduction built on self-management, collective labor and decision making"<sup>130</sup> become the means by which common wealth can be re-appropriated and capital dis-accumulated, argues Federici.

### **Re-Enchanting the World**

The idea of re-enchantment speaks to Max Weber's claim in 1917 that the intellectualization and rationalisation produced by modern forms of social organisation had resulted in a "disenchantment" that referred to the disappearing of the religious and sacred of the world.<sup>131</sup> Federici interprets this warning more politically as "the emergence of a world in which our capacity to recognize the existence of a logic other than that of capitalism is every day more in question."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Halberstam, 10-11.

<sup>126</sup> Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 6

<sup>127</sup> Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Silvia Federici. *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. (Oakland, California: Pm Press, 2019), 5.

<sup>129</sup> Federici, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Federici, 2.

<sup>131</sup> Federici, 188.

<sup>132</sup> Federici, 188.

The meaning of enchantment has been stripped back since Weber's time; similarly, the connection of words such as spell, magic, glamour to the sublime or sacred have been lost and with them what Peter Linebaugh defines as enchantment, that is "to fall under a rapturous spell of magical influences."<sup>133</sup> Positioned as the leading part of the revolutionary project and inseparable from the commons, re-enchantment happens in places other than the centre, in the wild. Here, perhaps, we glimpse the fluttering of Divine Wisdom, emerging in the everyday, not keeping faith and knowledge apart or dividing the world into religious and secular, but generating a "mysticism of everyday things."<sup>134</sup>

The work of re-enchantment, as the expression of powers of the cosmos and the body<sup>135</sup> calls to the Sunwoman with the stars at her feet, and her promise of the reconnection of humanity to the cosmos. Re-enchantment is thus imagined as an un-learning of machine-like ways of being and exploitative extraction of resources imposed under capitalism, and the recovery and renewal of human connection to one another and of relationship/allyship with the earth.

### **Re-connection to the earth**

The recovery of God's immanence underscores the need, as Val Plumwood insists, for radical allyship with the earth<sup>136</sup> and a refuting of the hierarchies that valorise the disconnected spirituality of a "sky god."<sup>137</sup> Drawing on biblical discourses on Divine Wisdom as well as the be-feathered, murmuring dwelling place as a rich source of language for G\*d also provides a framework for a feminist ecological theology of creation and a biblical spirituality of nourishment and struggle.<sup>138</sup> Little or no space has been given to this possibility in traditional theology, which is why, in both papers, social reproduction and re-enchantment were explored alongside readings of myths, folklore and fairy tales as means of energising the liberatory potential of biblical texts. The experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness, in particular Moses' encounter with the well, were all explored in relation to humanity's alienation from the earth and the need to reconnect to it. Jesus' washing of feet was also examined in light of the mastery system that has dominated Western thought for millennia and given rise to dualisms that have underscored humanity's turn from the earth. If the Sunwoman, as Keller suggests, holds humanity's connection to the earth into her cosmic dimensions, then our struggle relates to her lingering presence, in "our connection to the universe, somewhere in the remaining wilds."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Peter Linebaugh in Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, xvii.

<sup>134</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 28.

<sup>135</sup> Linebaugh in Federici, xvii.

<sup>136</sup> Tomlin. *Hidden In Plain Sight*, 17.

<sup>137</sup> Wallace, 154.

<sup>138</sup> Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways*, 28.

<sup>139</sup> Keller. *Facing Apocalypse*, 77.

## The Political Body of Jesus

In conclusion, we turn to a final emanation from the agonised Wisdom-as-bird(s) who can be found in the wild place, directing h/er illuminating rays towards the actions and words of Jesus outlined in the Gospels. In earliest Christian theology, Jesus was understood as Divine Wisdom's messenger and prophet, later as Sophia-Teacher-Incarnate," claims Fiorenza, who points to Matthew's gospel as a source of Divine-Sophia teaching and the words spoken by Jesus in Matthew 23:24 are the logion of Sophia.<sup>140</sup>

Delightfully endorsed by a descending bird/spirit who cries out that he be listened to, Jesus goes on to use the revelatory "I am" language of Sophia-Isis in John, makes proclamations in public spaces and with the symbolism of bread wine and water, invites people to eat and drink.<sup>141</sup> Readers familiar with early Jewish and Christian Sophia traditions would have understood the bread with which Jesus feeds the crowds<sup>142</sup> as allusions to Divine Wisdom. The Syro-Phoenician woman who interrupts Jesus and struggles against his elitism, enters into argument for the sake of her daughter also gestures towards Divine Sophia-Wisdom. The woman's teaching stance towards Jesus and the mention of children's bread, mirrored in the feedings in Mark and the frequent mentions of bread and loaves, is used as metaphor for what Jesus offers the people of Israel. Feeding with the bread of life and the abundant satisfaction of hunger, would have been understood as allusions to Divine Wisdom by readers familiar with Jewish and early Christian Sophia traditions.<sup>143</sup> Reminiscent of the manna, the bread represents nourishment that is both physical and spiritual.

As a messenger of Sophia, Jesus can be seen as a wise teacher who challenges the status quo and struggles for an alternative reality. Offering teaching that is not only for hearing, but to be acted upon, Jesus becomes the embodiment of a Wisdom tradition that values "life, creativity and well-being in the midst of struggle."<sup>144</sup> Like Sophia, he could not find a home among his people.<sup>145</sup>

As we saw in *Hidden in Plain Sight*, Jesus' actions, including the washing of the disciples' feet, can be interpreted as counterpolitical response.<sup>146</sup> Removing his outer garments and wrapping himself in a cloth, Jesus divested himself of the apparel of masculine power and expressed love and care in menial "women's work" of the lowest degree. Interpreted as a departure from the whole religio-political system of the time, it could be argued that Wisdom was working "in and through" the political body of Jesus<sup>147</sup> when

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<sup>140</sup> Fiorenza. *But She Said*, 13.

<sup>141</sup> Fiorenza, 14.

<sup>142</sup> See Mark 6: 34-44 and 8: 1-10.

<sup>143</sup> Fiorenza. *But She Said*, 13.

<sup>144</sup> Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child*, 157.

<sup>145</sup> Fiorenza, 14.

<sup>146</sup> Tomlin, 20-21.

<sup>147</sup> Tomlin. *The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom*, 9.



he embraced the work of social reproduction, disrupting assumptions about who is excluded from carrying it out when he did so.

The entanglement of the divine with all of human life that we see in such accounts, the enchantment of the everyday with miracles of abundance and generous provision, resonate with the wilderness encounters of the Israelites and point to revolution taking place in previously unimagined or overlooked ways. Imagining beyond the current system, as Brueggemann identifies, is an exercise in the art of departure. If we are to find ways of escaping the current system with its ceaseless Pharaonic demands for production and growth, then finding and following the wilderness guide and learning the ways of abundance and shared commonality becomes imperative.

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