THE ANIMISTIC WAY: CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM AND THE POSTHUMAN

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"To speak as the first man spoke ... To make visible how the world touches us ..."

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

There is currently a constant interconnection between categories thought to be opposites. Different modes of integrating with the more-than-human world are being offered in this contemporary environment, challenging the instrumental and mechanical perception towards the natural world. Religion has had a role in renegotiating the social imagery and in contributing to this paradigmatic turn, not only by rewriting the relations with the cosmos and the sacred, but by proposing new ways of "re-enchantment" where humans are just part of a web of translated experiences.

One of those cases can be seen in Neopaganism, also understood as contemporary Paganism: an earth-based spirituality that rejects the dogmas of traditional religions – in the West, that typically means some form of Abrahamic monotheism – while proposing a non-scientific ontology of the natural world.[1] Contemporary Paganism is often described as a macro-category that rescues pre-Christian traditions,

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[1]   Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 14.

mixing them with practices related to magic, folk beliefs, and popular narratives. Some expressions of Paganism claim to have an ancient origin or an unbroken lineage with an extinct civilization, like the Celts. However, such statements typically lack historical accuracy since they include many elements of fantasy and modern re-imaginings of ancient civilizations.[2] Paganism today is a re-constructed and creative apparatus founded by the practices and beliefs of its own members.

According to Graham Harvey, many pagans identify themselves, their worldview, and the world they inhabit as animists.[3] On a more abstract level, animism can be understood as a relational strategy where beings and environments are not ontologically separated even if they show there are distinctive and clear diversities among them. In Paganism, such animistic sensibility is expressed in how pagans relate to other (non-human) entities and how they experience and conceive the domains of ritual and spiritual appreciation. Such reflection about animism will be strengthened by the phenomenological analysis provided by David Abram about the sensuous relationship between humans and the more-than-human world.

A similar "rethinking" of the ontological links that humans have with the world, as well as alternative ways of "being human" is also present in the core of posthumanism. The posthuman project aims to recompose the human, as well as human-non-human, interactions by locating "the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others."[4] With the advances and ubiquity of digital technologies, Paganism is becoming increasingly intertwined with posthumanism, for which there is no clear, morally relevant separation and no metaphysical disconnection between humans and other entities, including machines. This article highlights how the assemblages proposed in the posthuman

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[2]   Following Liz Williams, "Western neopaganism as a whole draws on folklore, on literature and on the work of groups as diverse as the late nineteenth-century occult society of the Golden Dawn and the Woodcraft Folk." See Liz Williams, *Miracles of Our Own Making* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020), 10.
[3]   Graham Harvey, "Animist Paganism," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 393.
[4]   Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 50.

project with both the natural and the technological non-human can be conceived in Neopagan animistic sensibility.

The article will achieve this by on the one hand underlining the diverse ways in which animism resonates as a relational strategy between humans and the other-than-human world, contributing to a better understanding of contemporary Pagan spirituality – where nature is often said to be central – and of posthumanism's claims of non-anthropocentrism. On the other hand, I will show how the relational affinities between the human and the "other than human" in pagan animism can be understood through Merleau Ponty's expressive function of language as a way of "singing the world," and Julia Kristeva's semiotic Chora, a notion that addresses how the subject is not symbolically separated from the world in which it is contained. In this way, the article will enrich the explained synergy between pagan animism and posthumanism with Kristevian semiotic interpretation.

Neopaganism: rethinking animism

For Peter-Paul Verbeek, "[o]ur reality is a web of relations between human and nonhuman entities that form ever new realities on the basis of ever-new connections."[5] In the religious context, this heterogeneity resonates with what is understood as contemporary Paganism: a diversity of religious, spiritual, and magical traditions having syncretic and heterogeneous relations between humans with their surroundings and with other non-human entities. Due to its eclectic nature, Neopaganism lacks an "authentic" way of conceiving it as a formal and ordered system.

Paganism comes from the late Latin paganus, meaning "country dweller" or what now might be understood as "peasant." The term generally works to indicate beliefs that conceive themselves, in one way or another, as descendants of ancient religiosities.[6] In contemporaneity,

the term Paganism – or Neopaganism – encompasses "many different spiritual paths and a wide variety of beliefs and practices."[7] It can be conceived as a map to recognize common patterns in certain religious groups or spiritual paths, even if they are different from and not directly related to any ancient tradition in specific.[8]

Contemporary Paganism has been part of the social environment since the middle of the twentieth century, permeating both the spiritual sphere and popular culture with a variety of narratives related to the occult and the numinous but at the same time taking inspiration from popular culture itself. Since it is extremely heterogeneous, "there are no rules regarding "faith" or how the divine should be worshipped."[9] That is to say, there are no agreed normative notions of what counts as authentic Paganism, and it cannot be considered inside a traditional religious structure.

Despite their differences, all the "paganisms" usually combine specific characteristics such as: a) an eclectic and multiple vision of the deities and the sacred, which is sometimes located in the axis of pantheism or within a polytheistic "structure"; b) a not hierarchical status of genders, giving particular importance to the figure of the goddess as well as the possibility for women to be priestesses; c) the performance of magical practices, involving beliefs in spirits and other ethereal entities; and finally d) a special place for rituals[10] – they can be either related to folk traditions or grimoire-based practices – considering that throughout rituals the believer legitimates, renews and portrays the relation with his/her spiritual path.

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gion itself. Paganism, for that matter, does not work as a descriptive concept but instead as a condition given to non-Christian societies.

[7]   Jenny Butler, "Neo-Pagan Ritual Practice as Visual Culture and Creative Expression of Identity," in *Communicating Cultures*, ed. Ullrich Kockel and Máiréad Nic Craith (London: LIT Verlag, 2004), 109.

[8]   Williams, *Miracles of Our Own Making*, 27–53.

[9]   Butler, "Neo-Pagan Ritual Practice," 108.

[10]   Ritual is a heterogeneous and polyhedric term with multiple and complex potentialities of construction and transformation of meaning. From a pragmatic point of view, it is one of the most outstanding aspects of religion, since it represents the practice that best legitimates, renews, and portrays the relationship between the believer and the spiritual path.

However, one common feature accompanies Paganism, whichever path is in question: the central spiritual role of the natural world. Nature is understood as a shared environment where we are all crucially immersed and connected. On that matter, all pagan paths are – on one level or another – a nature-based religion, where "their most common and central manifestations are in the celebration of seasonal festivals."[11] Also, in nature, their pantheism or polytheism occurs either by conceiving it as the supreme embodiment of the divine or by picturing its deities as personifications of nature's different aspects and/or features.[12]

For pagans, considering nature as sacred is also a way to engage with all forms of life. That is to say, nature is neither separated nor mechanically diluted in the human world; it is instead a net of relations where humans are part of the consciousness of earth as a living planet. In some pagan movements, the earth is represented by the notion of the great goddess.[13] Such conceptions have developed an activist perspective among pagans since most of them have "something to do with the environmental movement, whether this means ordering one's solstice cards from Greenpeace, or hardcore road protests and political activism."[14] The author and high priestess Starhawk, one of the most prominent leaders of Neopaganism, is a great example due to her active way of relating spiritual practices with activism and communal networking:

Meditation on the balance of nature might be considered a spiritual act in Witchcraft, but not as much as cleaning up garbage left at a campsite or marching to protest an unsafe nuclear plant.[15]

Nonetheless, the Neopagan worldview is widely syncretic, rejecting dogmas and religious creeds. It also creates a fertile and dynamic ground for personal expression and creativity by often inviting discourses that do not possess any tangible historical basis but instead belong to

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[11] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Wakefield Press, 2005), 88.
[12] Michael York, "Pagan Theology," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 292.
[13] Williams, *Miracles of Our Own Making*, 290.
[14] Liz Williams, "Paganism, Part 1: What Is Modern Paganism?," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/15/what-is-modern-paganism.
[15] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 12.

fiction and fantasy. That is where the importance of contemporary Paganism lies: it is an eclectic assemblage. It converges history, popular culture, mythology, social emergencies, and environmental sensibilities, using almost any media to express itself. For these reasons, it is very difficult to talk about normative or genuine Paganism since it is constantly integrating within its practice other forms of conceiving itself, as can be noticed in popular and internet-based spiritual discourses.[16]

Contemporary Paganism proposes a hermeneutics that re-writes the human/nature relation from the territory of the spiritual and the subject's role as an active actor in religious construction. As Erik Davis points out, Pagans:

> have cobbled together their rituals and cosmologies from existing occult traditions, their own imaginative needs, and fragments of lore found in dusty tomes of folktales and anthropology. Pagans have self-consciously invented their religion, making up their "ancient ways" as they go along.[17]

This relational and horizontal approach to nature can be understood from an animist ontological perspective. The anthropologist Edward Tylor coined the term "animism" in 1871 to describe the first stage in the development of religious thought. In this stage, there was a consideration of souls and spirits as agents in the functioning of life.[18] For animistic societies, the "things" of the natural world were also animated and similar to their own beings. On that matter, the natural environment and the moon, stones, and stars, for instance, were considered living objects with souls. Still, for Tylor, the term had a pejorative use, referring to a primitive condition, a "savage" stage of development situated far away from cultured societies.[19] Nonetheless, the interest in

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[16] Markus Davidsen, "Review Essay: What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012): 189, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006812X634881.

[17] Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (North Atlantic Books: London 2015), 423–425.

[18] Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: Murray, 1871), 20–21.

[19] Tylor's point is clearly explained by Durkheim: For Tylor, this extension of animism was due to the particular mentality of the primitive, who, like an infant, cannot distinguish the animate and the inanimate. Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915), 53.

animistic sensibilities remained vibrant, overcoming Tylor's unjustified conceptions.

Other theorists have been proposing different conceptions and notions of animism as a relational perspective between subject-object. This "new animism" usually searches for a "two-way" relation with that otherness instead of a "one-way" mechanical approach. The new animism emphasizes an actual interaction: something like a conversation instead of a monologue. For Harvey, the new use of "animism" encompasses worldviews and lifeways, which treat the world as a diverse and vibrant community of persons (human and other-than-human). It is the practice of relational participation where the material world is not conceived from a Cartesian-modernist or any other scientific-reductionist perspective[20] in which nature transcends the instrumental conceptions and it is not a mere inert object.[21]

Anthropologist Philippe Descola goes even further and proposes animism as an ontological perspective. His "fourfold schema of ontologies" – conformed by naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism – proposes the animistic ontology as "a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies"[22] between humans and nonhumans,[23] meaning that each animistic being has a shared interior quality such as a soul or vital life force, therefore, there are different kinds of bodies in any given animist world.[24] Nonetheless, Descola's point has been criticized by other scholars, such as Viveiros de Castro, who suggests that animism should not be a projection of human qualities cast onto animals and proposes the category of "perspectivism"[25] instead.

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[20]   Harvey, "Animist Paganism," 409.
[21]   Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40, no. S1 (1999): 77–79, https://doi.org/10.1086/200061.
[22]   Philippe Descola, "Modes of Being and Forms of Predication," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 275, https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.1.012.
[23]   Descola, "Modes of Being and Forms of Predication," 275.
[24]   Katherine Anne Swancutt, "Animism," v *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Cambridge, 2019), 9, http://doi.org/10.29164/19anim.
[25]   See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–488, https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157.

There are, of course, different animist expressions around the globe, and they can be found in indigenous societies, tribal communities, as well as in urban groups. The Siberian Yukaghir hunters and urban shamans in Stockholm are great examples which show the internal diversity of animism today.[26] In contemporary Paganism, animism can be vividly noticed not only in the work of many eco-pagan activists, such as Starhawk, but also in the modes of their celebrations and ritual practices. This occurs since in the majority of paganisms there is no affiliation to a transcendental god, the divinity or the sacred "is not separated from the manifest world that we perceived by our senses."[27]

On that matter, the perceived world that is touched, touches in return.[28] Each subject is an embodied and participative person in a physical and sensuous continuum with the non-human otherness. When reconsidering Merleau-Ponty's works on perception as a relational and reciprocal encounter between the perceiver and the perceived, David Abram concludes that it can't be any inanimate phenomena since such encounters always transform subjects. Therefore, "the perceiving self is not a disembodied mind but rather a bodily subject entirely immersed in the world it perceives."[29]

Pagans, however, have also developed an animistic approximation towards non-organic entities. Several studies conducted during the rise of computer technology and the internet showed an interesting affinity between contemporary Paganism and techno-culture. For instance, in the ethnographic work of many pagan researchers such as Margot Adler[30] and T. M. Luhrmann,[31] many of the pagan communities and subjects they studied were involved with technical fields and compu-

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[26]   Swancutt, "Animism," 2.

[27]   York, "Pagan Theology," 283.

[28]   David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 68.

[29]   David Abram, "Magic, Animism, and the Shaman's Craft," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R. Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan, vol. 1 (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2015), 1023.

[30]   See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

[31]   See Tanya Marie Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

ters. As Erik Davis points out: "(t)he machine thus comes to serve as an interactive mirror, an ambiguous Other we both recognize ourselves in and measure ourselves against."[32]

Such interconnection between digital technologies and contemporary Paganism can be pictured in Technopaganism, a digital-based pagan phenomenon that was very popular during the '90s and the first decade of the 2000s. Though the term of Technopaganism has descended into obsolescence, pagans – as well as other spiritual and religious groups – have increasingly continued to ritualize their virtual environment by bringing – or discovering – the sacred in cyberspace and by shifting the instrumental view of computer technology into a "lived" territory of spiritual potentialities.

A posthuman (or more than human) spirituality

In the light of the current dynamic and interconnected societies, the emerging human condition can be described as increasingly dispersed and in constant flux. Critical posthumanism[33] answers the current crisis of "humanism" by challenging the hierarchical, dualistic and anthropocentric assumptions of the modern paradigm. It can be understood as an umbrella term of different schools of thought which focuses on, on one hand, "elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject,"[34] and, on the other, exploring how humans relate with non--humans and the surrounding environments. Here, the "human" is not a closed, pure, and self-sufficient actor but instead is open, changeable, and interconnected with the biosphere that contains it. On that matter, ecological ethics are a fundamental pillar of posthumanism since humanity is already "fully immersed […] in a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations."[35]

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[32]   Davis, *TechGnosis,* 136.
[33]   This article uses the concept of critical posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti and the posthuman notion addressed by Katherine Hayles.
[34]   Braidotti, *The Posthuman,* 37.
[35]   Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 122.

As claimed by Rosi Braidotti,[36] the way of conceiving the world needs to be focused on "multiple grounded perspectives." That is to say, "'we' is not one and the same, but 'we' are in the posthuman convergence 'together'." Braidotti's critical posthumanism interrogates and redefines the human notion as a whole, paying particular attention to how humans relate with the otherness when the subject/object and mind/body binarism is dismissed or at least thoroughly reconceived. In other words, the posthuman means a radical re-conceptualization of "the human" in light of its entanglement with nature, culture, and technology. It is, therefore, "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction."[37]

Harvey addresses a similar reflection, but from an animist point of view. For him, instead of projecting human likeness onto other beings, "animists understand that humans are just one kind of person in a wide community dwelling in particular places. The old and new approaches to animism are about quite different understandings of the world and result in distinct modes of discourse and practice."[38] Instead of humanizing the "non-human," animism sets a horizontal approach by attributing sentience and consciousness – in some cases even personhood – to other beings, spirits, and the environment. As for Harvey, Cary Wolfe assures that the human being is, before everything, not just a moral and political being but one who has an animal body. Therefore, human dignity is already inherent to the animal condition and rationality is just one more aspect of human animality.[39]

On that matter, the value of any other being does not lie in its similarities with humans. Instead, it is an intrinsic right for being "subjects of a life"[40] and for inhabiting the same world in an interrelated way. Each living body is in constant dialogue with the beings and elements

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36   Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Knowledge," *Harvard GSD*, March 13, 2019, https://youtu.be/oCewnVzOg5w, 15:40–15:52.
37   Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.
38   Harvey, "Animist Paganism," 396.
39   Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 66.
40   Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 66.

that surround it and its boundaries are not closed or impermeable but opened. By acting "more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange."[41] The body limits do not isolate the subject but, on the contrary, enable it to engage with the surrounding world. Therefore, "far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things."[42]

The aforementioned can be conceived in a broader sense with Merleau-Ponty's work about the "flesh" of the world, that is to say, on the ways in which humans meet the world.[43] This "enfleshedness"[44] refers to how entities are not separated since "the world touches everything." As David Abram assures us, Ponty's notion of the collective "flesh" refers to "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity."[45] Abram considers the "flesh" as a way of establishing an interconnectedness and continuity between humans and other beings. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "the world is not what I think, but what I live through."[46] How we perceive and interact with everything around us is not a mechanical action but an organic process of heterogenic connections and couplings.

The Neopagan practitioners have, then, an "enfleshed" relationship with the non-human context since it is all part of its spiritual dimension. The immanent conception of the sacred and the numinous in Paganism considers the sensuous and perceptive body itself as the source of connectedness of all beings. For Abram, "if this body is my very presence in the world,"[47] it is the body alone that "enables me to enter into relations with other presences."[48] Therefore, the sentient living body "is

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41   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 39.
42   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 39.
43   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 48.
44   See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 219.
45   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 48.
46   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), xvi, xvii.
47   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 37.
48   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* 37.

the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself, no soul can be detached from the body."[49]

The communion between human subjects, the natural world, and other entities – such as machines – is essential to both posthumanism and to contemporary animist Paganism since both conceive the world as a web of connections and collaborations. At this point, it is possible to make deeper parallelisms between posthumanism and the animistic sensibilities of pagans. In both cases it is crucial not to consider the manifest differences between humans and other entities as pejorative according to the former's "perspectivism" and the latter's "relationism." Accordingly, an animistic and posthuman spirituality is ambiguous, plural, radically immanent, and deeply interrelated with all forms of life. There is, in other words, an animist "theology" that is coherent with Braidotti's interrogation of what is meant by "being human" and the implications of a "post-anthropocentric" world inspired by ecology and environmentalism.

By bringing the posthuman project together with the animistic perspective, pagan rituals and seasonal festivals arise as an example of such relational epistemology, since they welcome not only animals and plants but also spirits, elemental beings, and even digital machines. Rituals can be seen as revealing values at their deepest level, allowing us to understand the essential constitution of human societies.[50] In Neopaganism, such practices are a central aspect "since they express the meaning-system or worldview of such paths and are also used as a means to connect with the sacred."[51] Pagan rituals, then, express in their performative construction how humans live or interact with other beings and the world, framing these relations in their particular ways.

Whereas by casting a circle, invoking spirits or ancestors, making a devotion to a deity in particular, or just calling the god and goddess together, pagan rituals express a dimension of full connection even if they are not following a structural and ancient tradition. This can be broadly perceived when observing, for instance, the growing of Neopagan

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[49]   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 37.
[50]   Monica Wilson, "Nyakyusa Ritual and Symbolism," *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 2, part 1 (1954): 241, https://www.jstor.org/stable/664361.
[51]   Butler, "Neo-Pagan Ritual Practice," 109.

sacramental spaces in digital games or virtual community platforms, without actually neglecting their earth-based fundaments. They "create a space where most boundaries dissolve, where all beings become part of a greater web. Ideally this is what spirituality should do."[52]

The relational pagan and the semiotic Chora

Such a relational aspect of Neopaganism, rooted in the notion of animism and manifested in their ritual performances, sets an interconnective and dialogic process between the human with the non-human world. Its own "theology" reveals an organic perception of the numinous, which is not static, settled, or apart but present in our immediate reality. In this "more than human" spirituality, the individual is not separated but in a state of "interrelatedness" with the otherness. It is posthuman since pagans inhabit a world with dialogic and clear relationships between souls, beings, and things.

In a brief pagan manifesto, the author and Wiccan priestess Selena Fox expresses how her feeling of connection with the cosmos and her surroundings – humans, nature, and technological "objects" – are embedded in an animistic sensibility:

> I am a Pagan.
> I acknowledge that the Divine is everywhere in the energy of life.
> I am Animistic. I sense the life force in the oak tree on the hill, in the herbs in the garden, in the birds singing at my window, in the boulders on the hill, in myself, and yes, even in "things" such as my car and computer.
> I understand that everything has its physical and non-physical aspects. The physical and spiritual are deeply intertwined, not separate, and one is not better than the other.[53]

This poetic expression of her spiritual life shows the level of connectedness between humans and non-humans in contemporary Paganism.

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[52]   Francesca Ferrando, "Humans Have Always Been Posthuman: A Spiritual Genealogy of Posthumanism," in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (New Delhi: Springer, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3637-5_15.
[53]   Selena Fox, "I'm a Pagan," *Circle Sanctuary*, accessed August 12, 2021, https://www.circle-sanctuary.org/index.php/about-paganism/i-am-pagan.

I propose that Julia Kristeva's theory of poetic language and the semiotic *chora* can provide some ground to address the notions of connection and separation. At the core of Kristeva's studies on the *signifying process*[54] and the role of language, the semiotic *chora*[55] is a stage of the subject when it is not constituted as such. It represents the lack of separation in this pre-symbolic state of being where there is no distinction between the self and other, a place deprived of unity, identity, or ideology. The *chora* is untidy, unarticulated, and transgressive.[56] There are no distinctions between the "I" and the external world.

The stage of the semiotic *chora* is understood as the semiotic – drives and affections – and is different from the symbolic stage, which instead is articulated, situated and governed by law. The symbolic stage occurs when the infant recognizes his own subjectivity and separates his worldview from the mother. Both of these modalities are inseparable from the signifying process, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, theory, poetry, etc.).[57] For Kristeva, the poetic language – a type of discourse which does not have any utilitarian use, therefore it does not objectify language – is what reactivates "the semiotic drive force" through its sounds and rhythms.[58] It is an operation in which the dialectic of the subject is inscribed, that is to say, the "dialectical movement between [the] semiotic and symbolic."[59]

The dynamics of heterogeneity, interconnectivity, and openness of the poetic function free language from automatism by enriching the signifying process with desire and consciousness since the poetic dimension splits the subject and decenters it.[60] By acknowledging this, any

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[54] See Julia Kristeva, *Semiotica 1* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1978).
[55] The term *Chora* was taken from Plato's *Timeaus*, who used it to refer to a receptacle. *Chora*, for the Greeks, meant "space" or "land." Kristeva associated it with the maternal body "because the infant's drives are structured around the mother's body." It is the stage where the infant is not yet a separate subject" and therefore still unified with the maternal sphere. See Kelly Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 24.
[56] Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 36.
[57] Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," 34.
[58] Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, 24.
[59] Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, 25.
[60] Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, 24.

speaking subject is, therefore, a process that is never unified because it is always interconnected and in constant relation with the outer world.

It should be noted that the animistic ontology is very well-suited for recognizing the semiotic stage reactivated by poetic language. In the spiritual context, the animistic sensibility welcomes a sense of profound interconnection between "self" and "others" by manifesting how humans are also a part of the web that collectively inhabit the other more-than-human bodies. Religion, ritual, and magic are signifying systems where the poetic language emerges as it displays the boundaries of common social practices. That is occurring since such spiritual-oriented performances generate meaning and produce belonging, separating the space where the sacred is being manifested from the ordinary and "profane" space.[61] This process does not take place from a rationalized perspective but from subjective and emotive implications. Poetic discourses create, then, a sense of intimacy with the "outsider," which instead of being perceived as an object is now a "related other" with whom a dialogue is created.[62]

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language can help elucidate how the rhythms and gestures characteristic of the poetic are an animistic act by itself. For him, language is not a fixed and immovable form but a collective medium correlated with the perceived world that contains all beings.[63] Instead, for Merleau-Ponty, the initial forms of language were expressive, consisting of gestural and poetic rhythms, similar to a song. Therefore, "language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant,"[64] and it can be understood as a way of "singing the world."[65]

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[61]   According to Mircea Eliade, the sacred and the profane constitute the "two modes of being in the world." Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959), 14. The sacred represents fascinating and awe-inspiring mystery, a "manifestation of a wholly different order" from our natural or profane everyday lives. Cf. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11. The manifestation of the sacred in a ritualized space answers to the concept of hierophany (from the Greek: hieros = sacred/holy and phainein = to reveal/bring to light) where the sacred can be manifested in any type of object.

[62]   Emmanouil Aretoulakis, "Towards a Posthumanist Ecology: Nature without Humanity in Wordsworth and Shelley," (reprinted in) *European Posthumanism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 82.

[63]   Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 213.

[64]   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 55.

[65]   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 54.

This would also mean that language corresponds to all expressive bodies and not only to human beings. Considering this, even the non-organic entities – such as machines and computational technology – that are actively participating in the world's dynamic, can produce their own and particular "song" and generate a dialogic relation with the rest of the living beings.

On that matter, to describe, communicate and relate with the animate world by means of poetic language is to reconsider "the non-intellectual, spontaneous responses to gestures, facial expressions, and so forth, which are at the roots of language."[66] As Andrejč claims, the poetic and expressive functions of language are given in the form of creative movements involved with the pre-linguistic stages.[67] Those "movements" are guided not by a final resolution or objective, but by the process of such practices in the present moment. It is in those instants of linguistic innovation and irregularity of meanings, where the poetic force that Kristeva addresses[68] emerges. A moment where the semiotic stage challenges the conceptualization of the symbolic, and where the gestures and body expressiveness become significant.

In other words, both the semiotic stage described by Kristeva and the expressive language proposed by Merleau-Ponty, would mean the diluting of the isolated human subject with the outer and non-human reality, challenging the homogeneity of the symbolic and the anthropocentric conceptions regarding the more than-human life world. It is a state of undifferentiatedness where the critical posthuman project meets the animistic pagan sensibility which welcomes a relational spirituality.

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[66]   Gorazd Andrejč, "From Existential Feelings to Belief in God," (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2012), 243–244.
[67]   Andrejč, "From Existential Feelings to Belief in God," 248.
[68]   This does not mean that all unarticulated language is poetic, but that through the poetic appreciation of language it is possible to rethink its function and its expressive power. Language, then, is not just a simple envelope of meaning, but is connected to the speaking subject and their own dialectics.

Conclusions

In his anthropological study of ritual, understood as the practical matrix of religious life,[69] Roy Rappaport aimed to portray religion not as a fixed structure but as a ground that needs to be reconstructed in order to be aligned with the world in which we are living. Today's world is deeply intertwined with digital and related technologies, science, and syncretic considerations of the sacred, as well as with sensibilities and emergencies not sufficiently considered by established religions, such as the environmental crisis. Following Rappaport's observations, it is crucial to identify the religious and spiritual manifestations developing within the different aspects of contemporary culture in order to reimagine and re-evaluate the ways in which religion can – still, in different and new ways – work as "the ground" he conceives religion to be.

Such reflection addresses the importance of spiritual approaches that celebrate and find sacredness in the differences without the need for anthropomorphizing the other. While posthumanism proposes new ways of considering humans and the ways in which they are interlinked with the world, contemporary Paganism expands this reflection, as well as the corresponding experience and ritual, to the spiritual domain by its animistic relational sensibility. On this matter, it is plausible to say that animist pagans are posthuman by default, just as posthumanism strongly resonates with the Neopagan paths when taken in the religious context.

Due to its heightened ecological awareness and creativity-oriented beliefs,[70] Neopaganism produces other ways of understanding spirituality and religion than the established religions – in the West, which is still predominantly Christianity – as well as the modernist Enlightenment paradigm, while addressing the earth crisis. Since it is not a text-based religion and since it tends to reject the authority of religious institutions,[71] modern Paganism is particularly diverse, fluid,

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[69]   See Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1–5.
[70]   Shawn Arthur, "Technophilia and Nature Religion: The Growth of a Paradox," *Religion* 32, no. 4 (2002): 303, https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.2002.0407.
[71]   Williams, "Paganism, Part 1."

and non-systematic,[72] constantly rewriting itself within the social and cultural environments in which it emerges. Its "openness" allows it to connect with other discourses and to deny any sense of structural homogeneity, something which this article attempts to show by relating it to critical posthumanism.

Following the semiotic dimension proposed by Julia Kristeva, Paganism can plausibly be seen as a poetic expression: it is not governed by law, and it is in a constant dialogue and attentive interaction with the external other, i.e., the radical other of the immanent nonhuman actors and realities. That is, perhaps, an important reason for its popularity today: contemporary Paganism's emphasis on nature and the nonhuman connects the individual with essential facets of existence which are often neglected in monotheistic and secular frameworks.[73]

The animism of contemporary Paganism, and its poetic condition, can also be understood from the phenomenological project of Merleau--Ponty, that of a philosophy which instead of explaining the world from the outside instead gives "voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand."[74] The pagan's active relation towards the non-human is nothing but the poetic instant where the subject establishes a present and fulfilled relationship with the world around them, not by mapping it into definitions or structuring their feelings but by connecting, through their own sensuous living body, a pre-symbolic relation with it. To engage with life in an animistic way is to experience the living world in a spontaneous, reciprocal and poetic way, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions.

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[72]   Harvey, "Animist Paganism," 393.
[73]   Williams, *Miracles of Our Own Making*, 14.
[74]   Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 38.

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