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Ecocultural Adjustment: A Peace Corps Sojourn

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THESIS

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Dedication

I overlook Albuquerque from the Sandia Mountains, reflecting on these adventurous past two years and my ecoculture family who made them so. Thank you for the enchanting excursions, the innovative collaborative projects, the naytcha narratives, the humanature songs, the laughter in the desert, and the immensely creative conversations. It is these bursts of ecocultural magic that led to this thesis, and so it is dedicated to you. Maryam Alhinai, José Castro, Melissa Francis, Stephen Griego, Jeff Hoffmann, Ailesha Ringer, Maggie Seibert, Mariko Thomas, and Ed Williams: thank you for joining with me in this divine moment to discover just how beautiful academia can be. May we carry our lessons with us as we scatter, once again, across the globe.

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by

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ABSTRACT

This work serves as a case study to extend, expand, and challenge the conventionally anthropocentric framing of *cultural adjustment*. I examine *cultural adjustment* through an ecocultural lens, reconceptualizing the process as *ecocultural adjustment*, which combines both cultural (human-centered) factors with environmental (both human-constructed and greater-than-human) elements in the process of sojourner adaptation. I utilize journal and blog entries along with my own memories through performative autoethnography to explore a 26-month sojourn with the US Peace Corps in Malawi, Africa, as well as the departure, travel, and return to the United States. Over the course of this reflective study, I explore and problematize the human-nature divide currently dominating the anthropocentric understandings of intercultural adjustment experiences. My interpretations point to the profound need to reimagine the sojourner adjustment process as one of both mind *and* body, of culture *and* negotiation of the greater-than-human world, as not simply *cultural adjustment* but as *ecocultural adjustment*.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Malawi visits me in vivid flashes of the senses. In early mornings, I sometimes detect the scent of burning dried maize cobs and frying mandazi. Restaurants with certain smells of just the right combination of fish and oil hit me with the pulse of marketplaces on the Malawian lakeshore. She[1] comes to me through certain weather patterns, when the desert clouds are tinted just so; she tiptoes into my bed on the moonlight and dances on specific hills in the New Mexican landscape. These snatches of sensorial memory feel like déjà vu— so realistic, so physically embodied, yet seemingly impossible. Malawi feels like a hazy dream I had once long ago.

Yet, I miss so much of her. I long for the foods, the long walks, the lakeshore, the merciless jungle, the brilliant contrast of blue sky sitting on red clay, the feel of my friends' hands in mine. I miss the pace of life, the magic of the earth, the talking sky, the daily adventure, the regular risks, the feel of the dirt beneath my bare feet. Yet I now live in a space where the land is covered in concrete, where I am protected from discomfort, where my feet stay clean.

My current state of concrete protection is very much tied to my geographical location and social position, as I am now situated in an American urban location in a white, middle class, working context. In this world, dominant Western discourse creates a distinct division between humans and what we conceptualize as nature—a pure realm completely separated from societal human existence (Evernden, 1992). Thus nature is conceptualized as "necessarily distinct from humans, human constructs, or human impact" (Marafiote & Plec, 2006, p. 67).

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[1] Pronoun use is addressed in the Terminology section of Chapter 4: Methodology.

Communication is an integral element in these relations, both creating and attempting to articulate this tension. Milstein (2008) describes communication as a mediating force in humanature (Milstein & Dickinson, 2012) relations, explaining that "the mediating role of communication allows for an exploration of environmental co-presence, of nature as 'speaking' and humans and nature in forms of conversation" (Milstein, 2008, p. 174). In dominant Western culture, communication is generally viewed as an exclusively human behavior, as "we tend to speak and think about nature as an objective environment (sans culture), culture as a built environment (sans nature), and communication as simply a means of saying something about each" (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 39). This discursive separation of culture and nature is problematic for sojourner adjustment to different geographical locations, as dominant Western perceptions of mobility and intercultural negotiation rarely emphasize experience with environmental factors, risking the exclusion of the body and its senses from this equation. This discursively indicates that sojourner adjustment is a strictly mind-centered process when, in actuality, the physical body also requires time to adjust to environmental elements, as well as establish or reestablish relations with the greater-than-human world. Extant intercultural communication theory is reflective of and contributes to this perception of cultural adjustment as strictly human-centered, as demonstrated by the overall lack of theory linking the cultural adjustment to greater-than-human factors.

In this study, I explore the dominant Western dynamic of human-nature separation, within academic orientation and personal experience, in the context of sojourner adjustment, using autoethnography to conduct a case study on an individual sojourn. By retracing my own processes of adjustment, I interpret my experiences not as *cultural adjustment* but as *ecocultural adjustment*, in which both human-centered and environment-centered factors are

inextricably vital to both conscious and subconscious adjustment. The concept of *ecocultural adjustment* creates space for and justifies adjustment processes that are not strictly cultural. In exploring these processes, this study also attempts to draw attention to and disrupt the human-nature divide lodged within extant intercultural adjustment and culture shock theory, emphasizing that the cultural is never separated from the greater-than-human.

I begin with a background section for contextualization, which elaborates on my US Peace Corps experience, both within the organization and in the field. This is followed by an overview of literature, exploring the current academic relationship between culture and the environment. Next, the 4th chapter is a methodology section explaining why I have chosen to utilize performative (Spry, 2011) autoethnography and a strong first-person voice in the synthesis of my data. All of this is used to lay a foundation for the autoethnographic case study, which reflects on my own journal and blog entries documenting my travel and adjustment to US Peace Corps service and daily life in a rural village in Malawi, Africa, as well as my re-entry adjustment upon return to the United States. This is a somewhat extreme ecocultural sojourn chosen to identify very explicitly the *eco* adjustment of the *ecocultural* experience. I conduct my analysis in a highly performative autoethnographic manner as I reflexively travel through and work to unravel these data, which were recorded in a personal and casual manner before I entered academia.

Justification

In this study, I investigate a range of variables involved with sojourner adjustment to place. I seek to explore Alaimo's (2010) imaginings of "ourselves in constant interchange with the environment" (p. 22). This human relationship with/in/as nature (Milstein, Alhinai, Castro, Griego, Hoffmann, Parks, Siebert, & Thomas, in press) or place is of distinct focus, as "places such as these—those we visit and dwell within briefly, those we call home, and

those from which we are sometimes displaced—serve us in particular ways as geography for our thinking, gathering our thoughts, holding our attentiveness" (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013, p. 4). By examining my personal relationship with/in/as a distinct place, I hope to shed light on deeper layers affecting *cultural adjustment* and *culture shock*, concepts that have been largely anthropocentric, or human-centered, in the academic realm. I argue environmental factors must be included and profoundly integrated in consideration of these sojourning concepts, and that they must be retooled, indeed, as *ecocultural adjustment* and *ecoculture shock*.

This study is a response to Milstein's (2005) call for qualitative studies to help "identify key events that led to perceived changes in self-efficacy, allowing sojourner participants and researchers to further the sensemaking process of the sojourn and its relationship to personal growth" (p. 235), as well as the call from many authors to challenge the human-nature, culture-nature, and human-animal divides (Haraway & Teubner, 1991, Milstein, 2011). This work also contributes to comparative ecoculture case studies, as called for by Carbaugh (1996), who asserts, "Specific case studies that trace the patterned use and interpretation of nature in communication and community are essential" and states:

> Such studies would enable a comparative assessment regarding available means for conceiving of, and evaluating, natural space, local meaning systems, and the attendant attitudes that these cultivate, and constrain…Also, such studies should lead us to see our own taken-for-granted ways anew and to reflect upon them, freeing us from the entangled webs we have helped to weave. (p. 54-55)

This autoethnography is one such case study, focused on a specific ecocultural adjustment journey, illuminating one distinct experience from start to its ever-in-progress unfurling.

Thus, it should serve as an intensive sample for *ecocultural adjustment* and how this concept can be applied in the future.

Research Questions

   This work addresses a simple collection of research questions. First, in what ways do environmental factors and the greater-than-human world impact sojourner adjustment and shock? Further, how can taking these factors into account in the intercultural, environmental, and ecocultural communication research communities help trouble and even transform the human-nature divide that currently dominates Western human-nature relations? In examining these questions through a specific case study, this work should serve as a nudge to intercultural communication scholars, trainers, and practitioners to explore the benefits and, indeed, the necessity, of expanding focus to incorporate more environmental factors in theories on the process of cultural adjustment—a phenomenon which, in my experience thus far, is never strictly *cultural* but, instead, profoundly *ecocultural*.

Chapter 2: Case, Beginnings, and Contexts

There are three rules for life in Peace Corps Malawi. One: Always bring toilet paper, because you just never know. Two: Always bring a book, because you just never know…and because you might forget rule number one. And three: Everything is just okay.

-Unofficial Peace Corps Malawi Mantra

I found it very difficult do Malawi any justice in my writing home. How can one begin to share an experience this full? I would compose, instead, letters and blogs that were incomplete snapshots—brief descriptions of a day in the life of a Peace Corps Malawi volunteer, a vague description of my home or work, of my adoptive families or the meals we shared. I felt most comfortable writing in my journal, and only because I was able to build on a foundation I had already established through experience. Even these are incomplete, and the gaps can be filled only with my memory.

The design of this very personal study requires me to express who I am, but I find it strange to simply list facts: I was born in southern California, and I was raised a traveler in a white, middle class context. I later lived on the Gulf of Mexico, I ran away from a future in an MFA creative writing program to Spain at age 23, and I applied to the US Peace Corps at 24, which led to my move to Malawi at 25. These snippets of information say very little about me or the adventure I thrust myself into. My application for US Peace Corps service was telling, exhibiting a beautiful optimism. In my initial essay, I wrote:

I have struggled with my position here in the "real world" since completing the first step of my college education and being faced with the question of "what's next?" I have a drive within me that forces me to look beyond a Friday paycheck or the purchase of a nicer car. I am a 24-year-old American, middle-class, educated woman who knows she is meant to do something more with her life than watch the world go

by on the news. I am aware of how lucky I am, and I feel a sense of responsibility and

a true passion to be a help on this planet. I would like to help change the normal

stereotypes held around the globe about Americans. I would like to share stories that

can open the eyes of the residents of the USA and encourage them to learn more

about the world around them. I would like to improve this world in preparation for the

next generation of every nation. I would like to learn about any and every culture

surrounding me on this huge planet. I would like to have a clear purpose, and work

hard to make a difference.

Truthfully, reading over my entrance essays now makes me smile, albeit a bit sadly, for this

optimistic and romantically naïve young woman, as my views on international aid have

fundamentally shifted and I have grown, perhaps, more cynical. It is unclear whether

international aid for colonized African nations helps or hurts development, as it can either

"release governments from binding revenue constraints, enabling them to strengthen

domestic institutions and pay higher salaries to civil servants," or it can hinder the

development of good governance (Bräutigam, & Knack, 2004, p. 255). Volunteer

organizations leave much to be desired in terms of service and, particularly, sustainability, as

well, especially as they are convoluted by short-term voluntourism stints contributing to the

White Savior Industrial Complex (Cole, 2012) and often doing more harm than good.

Furthermore, the US Peace Corps has been under growing scrutiny in the last several

years for negligence in protection of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs), support of PCV sexual

assault survivors, and the medical care of PCVs. In 2011 in PC Benin, Catherine Puzey was

the victim of a murder following an organizational breach of confidence (Schecter & Ross,

2011). The public eye on this issue drew attention to the many PCV survivors that came

forward to complain about privacy, support, and response to sexual assault occurrences, resulting in safety and security reform in the organization through a Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program (Hessler-Radelet, 2013). In 2014, Nicholas Castle passed away following what is being investigated as medical negligence in PC China (Stolberg, 2014). I did experience one occurrence of assault in Malawi and found the response to be adequate except that I was not permitted to maintain confidentiality for my fellow PCV witnesses who, understandably, did not want to be associated with a crime involving alcohol. I was also witness to other assaults that were ultimately handled very, very poorly.

I had brought US dollars with me (allotted for my personal travel) which I scrambled to exchange for kwacha so I could buy tomatoes; later, I began to make large withdrawals from my emergency savings, and supplemented my income with a minimum of $100 every month. Those PCVs that did not have the luxury of savings were reliant on their neighbors, their gardens, and leftovers begged off of restaurants. The US government gave us an emergency raise of 10%, which did very little, as we petitioned for a minimum of 50-60%. In order to qualify for more, we had to conduct formal surveys of spending (hardly indicative when you only have a few thousand kwacha to spend). In a staff changeover, our surveys were discarded, and we had to wait until the next quarter to begin the process again. We wouldn't receive supplemental funding for many months. This was a frustrating and desperate time in the Peace Corps Malawi community.

I bring this all up because one of the major issues with the US Peace Corps is that the contract duration for a Country Director is the same as that of a PCV—just two years. This means that every two years, country policies are overhauled, just to be later abandoned, and changed again. The Associate Peace Corps Directors (APCDs) in each country for each

sector are meant to be more stable, longer term positions that can create continuity—in my 26 months in Peace Corps Malawi, I had four of these serving as my supervisors at different times. This does not include a large period of time when the education sector had no APCD at all. This left little ability for PCVs to forge relationships with the organizational representatives, meaning that there was little to no support while we were in the field.

I was told by administrative members that Malawi is a low-demand nation for US Peace Corps employees, meaning that it serves as an entry point and springboard for a career within international aid, but that no one actually wants to stay in this low income location which comes with few amenities, lower pay, and less prestige due to its small and impoverished nature. While PCVs were working on sustainable projects, the American staff seemed to be biding time.

Additionally, due to the bureaucratic inner workings, the failure for one person in the long chain of command to file one piece of paper had disastrous results. Due to what I can only describe as negligence, I had an entire project fail because one of the grant associates failed to file my application, even though he had had it in his possession for weeks. More importantly, my petition to extend my service was abandoned—this was turned into a joke by my APCD of the moment: "oh, I suppose you'll just have to apply again and return to us later! We will be glad to have you."

Still, my time in the US Peace Corps is deeply ingrained in my identity. My optimism—and, as illustrated by this work, my identity as a storyteller—are still very much a part of my who I am, and my natural positivity and enthusiasm were exactly the traits that made me a perfect candidate for the US Peace Corps—that, and my simple willingness. I wrote:

I will not have a problem fulfilling the Peace Corps' core expectations. The most

difficult part of applying is committing to spend 27 months in an unknown place. I

am a little timid, a little sensitive, and more than a little scared. I know, though,

without any doubt in my mind, that I can do anything, go anywhere, and live anyhow

for a purpose I believe in. I believe in what the Peace Corps volunteers do. Also, I

believe that as long as there are people who live in difficult circumstances, I can

survive them too. Humans are survivors by nature, and I am strong enough to live in

any environment. Living and working in different situations makes us see things from

a new perspective, to appreciate and understand people better, and to learn about our

own strengths and weaknesses. This is what life should be about. I invite the

challenges that the Peace Corps will have me face.

Clearly, I was aware I would be tested by Peace Corps service. I also feel the US Peace

Corps did a fair job preparing me for the challenges of cultural adjustment, isolation, and

difficult working conditions from the very beginning. Still, every Peace Corps experience is

extraordinarily unique. There is no way for any volunteer to be prepared, and I am glad that

early in my service, I was advised to simply discard all expectations. As I let go of my

specific hopes and daydreams for my service, I was able to be pleasantly surprised at every

turn, treating each development as another aspect of this grand adventure. One of these

surprises was my shift from conceptualizing this work as strictly human-centered, as I

quickly learned that many of my challenges would be bodily in nature.

In the Organization

The Peace Corps has three main goals that PCVs work toward: to service the host

country with sustainable projects, to share our American culture with our communities, and

to learn about our surroundings and share that knowledge with Americans back home. Most

things I did as a PCV worked toward these goals. I was employed primarily as a teacher development facilitator, and I worked as a secondary school instructor of English language and literature. I also managed projects in the health and environment sectors, focusing primarily on girls' health education and natural medicine (see Appendix A for description of my volunteer service).

The US Peace Corps is a US government-run operation, and (in the spirit of reflexivity) I found the most difficult part of working as a PCV was the organization itself. Rife with bureaucratic barricades, rapid staff turnovers, and a long and complicated chain of command, my cohort of PCVs was left largely unsupported. Part of this is due to the complicated political situation in the Republic of Malawi at the time of my service, despite the largely peaceful overall state of the nation.

During my training, there was an intense set of riots during a serious fuel shortage. Citizens called for former President Bingu wa Mutharika to step down in light of corruption accusations, and the riots ended with 18 deaths at the hands of the police (Mapondera & Smith, 2011). In the same period of days, the United Kingdom cut off international aid to Malawi following the expulsion of the United Kingdom's envoy. Inflation was unbridled, and at the time, the official exchange rate was 160 Malawian kwacha to 1 US dollar—yet if I had US dollars in cash, I was able to get over 400 MK to the dollar on the black market. As PCVs were paid in Malawian kwacha, this caused desperation amongst my cohort. The US Peace Corps intentionally pays their volunteers a comparable sum to that of their local counterparts, but the American government seemed to be unaware that due to the combination of inflation and the fuel shortage, food and supplies were exorbitant.

It is these types of bureaucratic occurrences that can rob a willing human of her belief that she can save the world. It is in spite of the Peace Corps that I loved my Peace Corps experience, not because of it. What I fell in love with were the kind people of my village, the warm cultural features, the pulsing lushness of the Lake Malawi shores, and my understanding of myself as situated within this ecocultural frame.

As I mentioned, I believe Peace Corps Malawi did a fair job with language and culture training—to some extent. Many of us were affected by organizational budget constraints, particularly in terms of language education, which is why I was never given instruction in my local language, Chitonga. During my training, I was instead put into class with Chitumbuka students while residing in a Chichewa speaking household and community. Language education was by far my most frustrating aspect of training, but it worked well for those Peace Corps Trainees (PCTs) learning Chichewa. The technical training was sufficient, as I was prepared to learn by trial and error in the village classroom. The cultural training was highly applicable and helpful. What was lacking in these trainings was preparation for what we would be exposed to in a bodily and sensual sense, as we dispersed into our individual sites with extreme variations in climate, food, vegetation, and greater-than-human life.

In the Field

Malawi is part of the Rift Valley, which means its topography is drastic and varied. Some areas are dry and arid, largely deforested and windy. Others are chilly, rainy, and mountainous, while the lakeshore is humid, green, and hot. Ninety minutes of travel could lead me to an entirely different climate zone.

During my initial two-month language, culture, and technical training, I resided in a mud hut in a small village called Mpalale, in the Dedza District in the central region of

Malawi (see Appendix B for a map of the Republic of Malawi). My hut was part of a family compound with an outdoor kitchen (where my amayi, or mother, prepared meals over the fire, as I ineffectively tried to help), a maize storage, a bafa (small bathing area sheltered by a grass fence), and a main house. The bathroom (a vital factor in sojourner adjustment) was a chimbudzi, or pit latrine, with a packed mud floor and a thatched roof, just outside of the compound. This chim was supposedly shared, though I never spotted any local entering or exiting the small mud structure, as, culturally, the admittance of bodily function is largely shamed, and my neighbors and family were highly skilled in slipping in and out without ever being spotted. Mpalale sits at an elevation of more than 5000 feet and, as I was there during cold season (June and July), the lack of insulated buildings meant that the cold averages of 50° Fahrenheit were greatly amplified. Bathing in the chilly early mornings, outdoors, from a bucket of (albeit, fire-heated and warm) water was always a jolt with which to start the day.

From here, I was sent to my assigned site, a village called Chintheche, in the Nkhata Bay district in the northern region of the nation, just a few kilometers from the vast Lake Malawi. This is a well-known tourist destination for white expatriates, mostly from the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe. I had requested a placement near the shores of Lake Malawi, knowing full well the lakeshore hosted by far the hottest weather in the country. I was assigned a house owned by my base school, Chintheche CDSS, and previously inhabited by a PCV. It was equipped with electricity, which was a grand rarity for my cohort (and simply due to my vicinity to a tourist lodge). This meant I had four light bulbs and three electrical outlets, along with a semi-functioning hot plate that electrocuted me daily. The electricity was turned off every Sunday for maintenance, and not very dependable. After the nearest transformer was struck by lightning (and the replacement took two weeks to arrive), I

learned to keep charcoal and an mbaula (a clay fire cooking stove) on hand so I could prepare food outside as needed.

My house had once had glass panes in the windows, but most had been broken out (most likely by wind, children, or someone slamming them too hard in the heat). While the windows were equipped with decorative burglar bars, I never found the time or materials to build window screens, so greater-than-human elements flowed freely through the house. Other creatures traveled in and out, including my pet housecat as well as rodents, snakes, baboon spiders, camel spiders, scorpions, and geckos. This was aided by my habit of leaving the back door open, in order to promote a breeze in the hot weather. Outside my back door, I had a small walled courtyard with a lockable fence, an outdoor kitchen, a bafa, and a storage room, all made from hand-molded bricks. I also had a single outdoor water tap—another great luxury, like the electricity, as most people in Malawi haul water from boreholes located centrally in their village.

I had my own a tiny chimbudzi located just outside the courtyard (though I often found evidence of others using it as they passed by). It was located near a tree whose roots had popped and cracked the concrete floor, creating hiding places for various visitors. The crumbling brick walls with their mud mortar were precarious, and between the very real fear of collapse and the discovery of a few nighttime serpent visitors, I ceased chim trips during the dark hours. My yard was thick and green, and particularly wild in the rainy season. I would frequently open the courtyard door to reveal giant monitor lizards, vervet monkeys, or a neighbor's sows, chickens, or goats. I kept a compost pile that never had a chance to compost thanks to these roving, hungry visitors.

Peace Corps Malawi instructed us to focus particularly on cultural integration, citing security and safety as the main motivation. PCVs who are well loved, respected, and understood are more protected by their community and less likely to be the target of crimes. The other main motivation for integration was to establish a level of comfort to ease the process of needs assessments; this would help with creating relationships with community members who would make good collaborators and advocates for sustainable, long-term projects. Our first few months at site were designated for teaching and outreach as we learned the traditions, languages, and cultural practices of our local villages. During this time, I embarked on my third language training, following up my basic Chichewa training (for foundational communication during training) and my Chitumbuka studies with Chitonga tutoring. I could mostly communicate in English, however, as the education sector is required to utilize English (Malawi's official language) rather than Chichewa (Malawi's national language) or any other minority language. While my PCV-designated emphasis was strictly on culture and language, my body was busy making other adaptations throughout this process, adjusting to the climate, elevation, food, predatory insects, changes in sleep patterns, and a severe anti-malarial prophylaxis called mefloquine. Integration into my site in Malawi was not predicated simply on language and culture alone, after all, but also on finding how I fit into the greater-than-human world.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Indeed, this shared genetic language is one line of evidence that all the organisms on Earth are descended from a single ancestor, a single instance of the origin of life some four billion years ago.

-Carl Sagan, *The Dragons of Eden*

In his 1871 work, *The Descent of Man,* Charles Darwin acknowledged his conclusions that "man is descended from some lowly-organized form" and that there could be no doubt the human descent from "barbarians" would be viewed as "highly distasteful to many" (p. 8). Western humans considered themselves above the wild world, favored to rule the earth. Darwin's work affronted popular ideologies of the time and boldly placed the human being as emerging from the same muck as the rest of the greater-than-human world. He writes:

> Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen, instead of having been aboriginally placed there, may give him hope for a still higher destiny in the distant future. But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason permits us to discover it; and I have given the evidence to the best of my ability. We must, however, acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (p. 9)

Even as Western humans carry this genetic stamp linking us to the greater-than-human world, continued separation between humans and nature has perpetuated and, indeed,

increased, in the name of progress and scientific understanding. The greater-than-human world has become a faraway *environment*, which has been "drained of its blood, its lively creatures, its interactions and relations—in short, all that is recognizable in 'nature'—in order that it become a mere empty space, an 'uncontested ground' for human 'development'" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). This "western construction of human identity as 'outside' nature" has driven "many of the problematic features of the west's treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis" (Plumwood, 2002, p. 2). Indeed, even in his argument that humans emerged and evolved organically, Darwin (1871) named this origin 'lowly,' perpetuating the very hierarchy he seeks to disrupt through biological theory.

The human-nature divide extends beyond the environmental crisis and crises in social justice (Plumwood, 2002), into crises of human identity, self-identity, culture, and human and place relations. The disconnection from our undeniable origins in the greater-than-human world have led Western humans to focus on intelligence and advancement while disregarding instinct, sensorial experience, and bodily connection to the earth, as "conventional scientific discourse privileges the sensible field in abstraction from the sensory experience" and that contemporary discourse avoids the possibility "that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*…are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*" (Abram, 1997, pp. 66-67, original emphasis). One way, in particular, I have experienced this disconnect firsthand, is through concepts of sojourner *cultural adjustment* and *culture shock*. The dominant Western human-nature divide, in this case, discursively places human interaction, and thus, human culture, at the center of the adjustment process. For me, this

meant little support throughout my most traumatic adjustment processes, as issues of humanature relations were not considered valid.

In this work, I argue that disconnection from the greater-than-human world and the dominant Western discursive perpetuation of the human-nature divide hinders sojourner adjustment to new cultures and the environmental factors thereof. This section provides a basis for my argument, providing background information on culture, on cultural adjustment and culture shock, the human-nature binary, ecocentric and anthropocentric cultural viewpoints, and ecocultural communication.

Understandings of Culture

Culture, classically, is strongly associated with nationality or with particular sets of language and behavioral codes. Contemporary interpretations, however, reject the association of culture strictly to geography, asserting that nationality is not the only component in cultural belonging (Shome, 2010). Instead, culture is spatial, transnational, and fluid, a dynamic and evolving "field of forces where competing interests vie for dominance and control" (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). Definitions of belonging, borders, boundaries, and of insider and outsider are no longer simply defined.

Carbaugh (1996) expands on conceptions of culture by defining it as "a system molded within and to context, a somewhat coherent set of practices that are consequential for nature, with its primary toehold in highly situated, socially constituted, mutually acted, and individually applied communicative practices" (p. 46). That is, social practices and behaviors are contextualized and continually reconstructed, always with some impact on or contribution from the greater-than-human world. Our definitions, then, too, of the terms *environment* and *nature*, must be considered socially constructed "as part of cultural communicative practices" (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 46).

The evolving definitions of culture and ecoculture have great implications for the concept of *culture shock*, once seen as a compulsory, automatic, strictly human-centered phenomenon. As the academic community has begun to undo conceptions of culture as bound by geographical or political borders, so we must revisit early definitions of *cultural adjustment*, *culture shock*, and *cultural re-entry shock* as isolated incidents based on the crossing of political borders. Indeed, if we consider culture as a fluid, intricate concept functioning at both macro and micro levels, concepts of *cultural adjustment* and *culture shock*, too, must evolve as well.

Cultural Adjustment and Culture Shock

Much of the research on *cultural adjustment* has focused on *culture shock*, a term originally coined by Oberg (1960) and defined as an "occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad" (p. 142). According to Oberg, culture shock includes four crisis phases of emotional reactions associated with cultural adjustment. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) summarize these crises as the honeymoon, characterized by reactionary euphoria and enthusiasm; the crisis, with emphasis on feelings of inadequacy and anxiety; the recovery, "including crisis resolution and culture learning" (p. 81); and finally, adjustment.

In this same time period, other predictive pattern theories emerged, including the U-curve (Sewell & Davidson, 1956) and the W-curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) (see Appendix C). These models are often still practically applied as a foundation for predicting the effects of culture shock. Many cultural immersion trainings, including the one I underwent for the US Peace Corps in 2011, utilize the W-curve as a predictive pattern, leaving little space for individualization of characteristics, contexts, or circumstances for the

sojourner's adjustment journey, and no allowance for impact from the greater-than-human world.

In recent years, researchers have begun to reframe the term *culture shock*, favoring terms like *cross-cultural adaptation* (Kim, 2000). Kim's (2000) Stress-Adaptation-Growth Model, unlike the U or W-curves, works in a spiral between stress and adaptation, slowly increasing in individual growth over time (Kim, 2000, p. 57) (see Appendix D). Another emerging term is *adjustment journey* (Brown, 2009). Though the author does not greatly expound on this concept, the term *journey* connotes a grand, often long and multi-destination sojourn, both in the literal and mental or emotional senses. It also implies a sense of the unknown and an excitement in discovery; through this perspective, the idea of cultural adjustment is viewed as an adventure rather than as a quick transition from one simply and concretely defined place to another. Furthermore, the term *journey* doesn't necessarily indicate a terminal destination, but can be considered ongoing. This non-expectation of distinct terminus may assist in the transition process. For these reasons, I utilize this term throughout this study.

In this study, I use the terms *adjustment* and *shock* as two different, though related, concepts. Whereas *adjustment* is an overarching process that can be either successful or unsuccessful, *shock* carries a connotation of trauma (Ward, et al., 2001). Sojourning, however, and the domestic or international changing of cultures, is not always associated with a traumatic psychological shift. Often, these processes of sojourner adjustment are positive experiences (Adler, 1975), resulting in increased self-efficacy (Milstein, 2005), intercultural competence (Martin, 1987), and self-awareness (David, 1971), among other benefits. S*hock*, then, can be viewed as a potential side effect of the umbrella process of

adjustment. This study readdresses these processes through an ecocultural lens, with an emphasis on troubling the Western human-nature divide inherent in most extant adjustment theory.

The Human-Nature Binary

Western society largely conceptualizes humans as fundamentally separate and, indeed, above, the greater-than-human world. This relationship is articulated as a binary, or division between human and nature or between culture and nature. Carbaugh (1996) notes, "because of certain well-worn features of our Euro-language, we are often caught in ideational duels between, for example, nature and culture" (p. 39). Communication, in this sense, is often considered "a simple mapping of an objective something-out-there (in nature) or something that is humanly common (in culture)" (p. 39).

Communication, however, is also an integral part of the creation and maintenance of natural and cultural messages as "environmental communication is the ever-present and multi-faceted shadow of—natural and cultural—place in human symbolic action" (p. 41). Marafiote and Plec (2006) call discourse regarding the natural world heteroglossic, inclusive of social texts, ideologies, and styles and that are often inherently complex and contradicting. Within this intricate web of significance connecting humans (and culture), their environments (nature), and communication, Western discourse perpetuates a human-nature or culture-nature binary.

While dualisms are consistently problematized "due to their reductive, potentially damaging, and inherently value-laden nature" (Marafiote & Plec, 2006), they often seem inescapable in Western conceptions of the greater-than-human world. Conley and Mullen (2008) discuss the human-nature binary in terms of human choices, asking how people can

better understand their real or imagined connections to the earth and to one another. They elaborate:

> How does one locate oneself in the everyday web of ecological choices and
>
> consequences? This is precisely what the nature-culture binary offers: a clear set of
>
> ethical coordinates that guide the myriad ecological reckonings of daily life—paper
>
> or plastic, farm raised or wild caught, grain fed or grass fed, organic or local, ethanol
>
> or biodiesel or hybrid, and so on and so on. (p. 183)

This binary, however, may be rearticulated through sets of dialectics so as to better understand the human-nature or nature-culture relationship. Under the umbrella of a human-nature dualism, carefully examined dialectics include sublimity-banality, or the tension between the sublimity of nature and the banality of culture (Conley & Mullen, 2008); androcentrism-gynocentrism, or the tension between culturally constituted masculine and feminine centeredness in culture-nature relations (Milstein & Dickinson, 2012); and three specific dialectics that seek to deepen and elaborate on the various ways humans relate with/in/as the greater-than-human world: mastery-harmony, othering-connection, and exploitation-idealism (Milstein, 2009). Finally, a wide range of scholars explore the dominant Western reproduction of the human-nature binary using the ideological tension of anthropocentrism-ecocentrism, with either centeredness on human values or a perspective of interconnectivity.

Marafiote & Plec (2006) admit that viewing the human-nature divide through the lens of dualisms "provides an understanding of the pervasiveness of perceptions of the natural world as exclusive of humans and human constructs, and vice versa" (Marafiote & Plec, 2006, p. 54). They go on to problematize the simplicity of this human-nature dualism,

however, and call for the human-nature divide to be more closely examined through a lens of hybridity, which could draw attention to, decenter, and disrupt the pervasive "contradictions and complexities present within individuals' utterances" about the greater-than-human world (Marafiote & Plec, 2006, p. 61). They write,

> From this expanding framework, rather than identifying evidence of *either* nature *or* culture, *either* materialistic separation *or* idealistic connection, *either* anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism, *or* ecocentrism, we seek evidence of all of these, as well as other heteroglot voices that may be present in the natural world. (Marafiote & Plec, 2006, p. 61, original emphasis)

Plumwood (2002) similarly problematizes the use of dualisms in the discussing the human-nature divide, noting, "The contemporary human and environmental crisis underlines the cultural centrality of the reason/nature story, and the urgency of resolving the western network of dualisms" (p. 6). Marafiote and Plec (2006) find the use of hybridity as a force in the examination of the human-nature divide fosters understanding of how we create and interpret human-nature relations. Dominant Western conceptions of *cultural adjustment* and *culture shock* are largely anthropocentric, or human-centered, but viewing these and other human relations with/in nature through a lens of hybridity may be helpful in better understanding adjustment and shock processes, as it would broaden the inclusion of non-dualistic factors that may contribute to the processes. Through the concept of *ecocultural adjustment*, I seek a lens of hybridity in examining sojourner adjustment, acknowledging that there may be many factors contributing to any one individual adjustment journey.

Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

One way of exploring the human-nature divide is through examining the tension between ecocultural orientations of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Corbett (2006)

defines anthropocentrism as human-centeredness, explaining that this viewpoint is based on the belief that "Humans are superior to and dominate the rest of creation, and the natural world is ranked hierarchically with humans on top" (p. 27). Corbett explains that in its extreme form, anthropocentric nature is simply a "storehouse of commodities for humans to use without restraint" (p. 29). Thus, whether it is drilling for oil or mass-producing animals for food, the means justify the end if it serves to sustain (dominant Western) human well-being.

On the opposite end of this spectrum, an ecocentric viewpoint removes the human from the center. An ecocentric perspective "can be represented by a circle, a nonhierarchical mix of interdependent relationships or a web of all life" (Corbett, 2006, p. 27). This viewpoint acknowledges equal value to all living and nonliving elements in the earth's system, granting no privilege to any particular species, including that of human beings. In other words, while anthropocentricism operates as a hierarchy—humans controlling the planet as the dominant species—ecocentrism functions as a nonspeciesist network of interrelated parts, in which each element has value and the removal of even one element causes disruption in the cycle of the others. In this sense, the human being is simply a contributing member of the ecosystem.

A number of emerging systems such as agriculture, written language, and Christian theology may have contributed to the replacement of ecocentrism by anthropocentrism (Abram, 1997; Corbett, 2006). Regardless of the root causes, it is important to note that anthropocentrism is a sharp diversion from former human ways of existing. As Corbett (2006) asserts, "anthropocentrism has been a 'detour' of thousands of years, preceded by primitive earth-based cultures" (p. 27). Indeed, we can see many examples throughout

history of nature-centered civilizations succumbing to human-centered ones. As Milstein (2009) writes of the ideological history of the Americas, "…alternative symbolic-material discourses of adaptivity and reciprocity with nature practiced by many pre-colonial cultures were largely devastated by European colonists who brought with them a mastery-oriented way of seeing and acting upon the human place in the natural world" (p. 27). Abram (1997) argues that it is written language that separates western society from the earth, replacing place and sensory-based oral culture ways of remembering with independent, linear, and, indeed, spiritless conceptions of place and space and the human roles within these.

In dominant Western society, with the recently emerged authority of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism is considered a radical viewpoint, often referred to in ecocultural and environmental communication as a "transformative ideology"—one which problematizes dominant perspectives and serves as a call for change (Corbett, 2006, p. 41). Plumwood (1993) argues that the Western conception of *nature* is primarily a "field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature" (p. 4). Thus, she notes, racism, colonialism, and sexism have "drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic difference as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture" (p. 4). This removes agency from all that is cast as or close to nature, as to be defined as *nature* in this context is to be conceptualized as "non-subject" (p. 5).

The *environment*, in this case, is an "invisible background" against which the "achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place" (p. 5). Plumwood continues that to be defined as nature, as the

environment, is to be defined as a "terra nullius, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes" and that to be part of these realms is to be in a "sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply 'natural', flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things" (p. 5). Thus, Western conceptions of *nature*, *environment*, "and/or wild(er)ness serve to promote the interests of a select few to the exclusion of all "Others" (Evans, 2002). The undoing of the human-nature divide, therefore, is of vital focus for environmental and social justice, which are inextricably linked. As our world becomes more and more globalized, it is necessary to focus on ecocultural adaptation with these relations in mind.

Ecocultural Communication

Ecocultural communication is one interdisciplinary attempt to recognize this interconnectedness of a world constructed of things "made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshly acts of interpretation" (Haraway, 2006, p. 2). In recognition of the interdependence between social and environmental justice, as well as the interdependencies between culture and the greater-than-human world, many researchers promote placing the environmental at the forefront of communication and culture studies. Pezzullo (2013) calls for communication and cultural studies researchers to produce work that will engage the "ecological crises and how the nonhuman are inextricably linked with communication and culture," continuing to ask academics to consider "how we might produce more nuanced analyses of messy environmental, economic, moral, ethical, political, and symbolic dynamics that implicate global ecological crises and environmental advocacy campaigns" (pp. 303-304). Sturgeon (2009), similarly, extends a call to environmental communication scholars:

If we want to create a truly sustainable future, we must think about social inequalities

as much as we think about environmental problems, and we must understand their

interrelations. We will be better off, I believe, working from analytical frameworks

that address environmental problems and social inequalities together. (p. 5)

Therefore, rather than using a strictly environmental or strictly intercultural lens for this

examination of sojourner adjustment and shock, I focus on their interconnections by utilizing

an ecocultural perspective. This assists me in better examining the human-nature divide and

analyzing modes of its undoing.

Overview of Analysis

Following the methodology section, below, the analysis section spans Chapters 5-8.

Chapter 5, *Transcorporeality and the Human-Nature Divide*, focuses on the concept trans-

corporeality (Alaimo, 2010) to further explore the human-nature divide in relation to the

human body, which is often cast, in contemporary Western society, as a bounded, solid

container (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). The exploration of my own bodily and embodied

reactions to the greater-than-human world emphasizes the permeability of bodies. This is

essential to my argument for ecocultural adjustment, as it is a literal form of place attachment

(Low & Altman, 1992). Due to my salient experience with it, this theme of embodiment of

place is the overarching premise of this work, and of the concept of *ecocultural adjustment*.

This chapter also explores the human-nature divide in terms of literal barriers that I

attempted to create throughout the initial stages of my ecocultural adjustment journey. Often,

these manifested as the attempted creation and maintenance of clean-dirty boundaries. This

argument utilizes Douglas' (1966) examination of rituals of purity and impurity to explore

ways in which dirt, as "essentially disorder" (p. 2), represents the greater-than-human world

in the human-nature divide. This chapter also delves into Allewaert's (2013) discussion of

colonialism in the American tropics, drawing a parallel between the ecological enmeshment of colonial bodies with their new environments to my own experience with ecocultural adjustment as a transcorporeal (Alaimo, 2010; Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012) phenomenon in a sub-equatorial region of Africa.

Chapter 6, *Solitude-as-listening: Communication with the Greater-Than-Human World*, discusses communication with and connection to the greater-than-human world, exploring my experiences as a woman in solitude alongside Carbaugh's (1999) discussion of the intrinsic relationship between place and communication, with particular focus on listening. I argue that this practice of *solitude-as-listening*, of familiarizing myself with the greater-than-human world, is a form of communication as well as fodder for creativity. Adapting to the human silence I experienced was a salient step in my ecocultural adjustment journey.

In Chapter 7, *Food as Transcorporeal Embodiment of Place*, I explore sense of place (Feld & Basso, 1996) as well as sensing of place (Basso, 1996) through Fischler's (1988) theory that what we consume contributes to our self-identity. Food is a definitive mode of embodying place, and I utilize the concept of transcorporeality to discuss the ways in which eating locally contributed to my relations-in-place (Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, & Dickinson, 2011) and my ecocultural adjustment journey.

Finally, my analysis concludes with Chapter 8 (*Departure, Homecoming, and Ecocultural Re-entry Shock*) in which I utilize experiences from my homecoming to the United States to discuss *ecocultural re-entry shock* as a traumatic factor of my ecocultural adjustment journey. This discussion includes self-identity loss as well as detachment from

place and the greater-than-human world to argue that *shock* is not strictly cultural, but indeed, ecocultural.

The analysis is followed by Chapter 9, *Application of Ecocultural Adjustment in Immersion Trainings*, which discusses some modes of modeling adjustment patterns. It also includes a specific ideas for integrating ecocultural concepts into trainings in order to promote more inclusive programs. These chapters are followed by Chapter 10, *Saying Goodbye: Discussion and Implications*.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this study, I utilize a performative (Spry, 2011) autoethnographic approach, where autoethnography will serve as a strategy to reflexively explore my own narratives of ecocultural adjustment experience. This chapter begins with an overview of this method and contains sections describing my data gathering and data analysis methods. These contain justification for my use of the first-person voice and interpretive, somewhat informal writing style.

Performative autoethnography "views the personal as inherently political, focuses on bodies-in-context as co-performative agents in interpreting knowledge, and holds aesthetic crafting of research as an ethical imperative of representation" (Spry, 2011, p. 498). That is, reflexively exploring lived experience and embodied knowledge serves as a tool for better understanding and challenging dominant cultural narratives, as well as illustrating this break in tradition through creative connections to the reader. Performative methodology, therefore, acts as a bridge between theory and "interpretation, a process wrought with the crisis and complexity of representation," between "performance as a distinctive *act* of culture and performance as an integrated *agency* of culture," and between "academic and artistic space" (pp. 498-499). As Spry (2011) writes, "Performative autoethnography is a critically reflexive methodology resulting in a narrative of the researcher's engagement with others in particular sociocultural contexts" (p. 498). In this particular performative autoethnography, I use an ecocultural lens, extending Spry's framework to include non-human others in a variety of contexts beyond the sociocultural, in order to examine the role of the environment in the process of cultural adjustment.

Spry (2011) writes, "Embodied knowledge is the research home, the methodological toolbox, the 'breath' of the performative autoethnographer" (p. 502). Therefore, my

experience, as well as my retrospective and reflexive deconstruction and reconstruction of it serve as an effective base in the exploration of concepts of cultural adjustment. This "breath" serves as a strategy for breathing life into extant theoretical concepts, allowing my personal experience to contextualize and reflect on theory (and vice versa), guiding readers to consider dominant conceptions of cultural adaptation in a personal, perhaps emotional and sensitizing way.

Performative autoethnography is "a methodology grounded in forging knowledge with others to dismantle and transform the inequities of power structures" (Spry, 2011, p. 498). She notes that it is a personal, political, and social praxis, one that, "as a critically reflexive methodology, can provide the framework to critically reflect on the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide, and commune with others in the body politic in ways alternate to hegemonic cultural constructions" (p. 499). As a researcher, I cannot discount my own interest and investment in this subject; simply and honestly, I would not be pursuing knowledge in this realm if I did not have personal attachment to the concepts or were not an active participant in many of the dominant cultural narratives I seek to problematize.

Spry (2011) notes:

The performative autoethnographer assumes the complexity of her or his own sociocultural emergence or situatedness may exceed her or his capacity for narration—hence, if I am to claim agency, I also have the responsibility to account for my sociocultural whereabouts and its implications for myself and those with whom I work; I must be 'dedicated to playing,' dedicated to *doing* reflexivity even—and especially—while knowing it is never enough, never complete, never finished. (p. 505, original emphasis)

Thus, I utilize my own experiences with the ecocultural adjustment phenomenon as an exploratory tool, and do so with my own positions in mind; it is vital to this study to note that my position as a white, middle-class, college-educated American sojourner is one of privilege, and that my perspective is hardly representative of any one population. Every Peace Corps and sojourning experience, further, is a deeply personal and unique story, so I am in no way attempting to speak for other Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) or sojourners. It is also important, however, to note that my process of knowledge building and cyclical, experiential learning can be beneficial in the pursuit of social and environmental understanding, as it facilitates understanding and fosters open conversation by presenting a close study on adaptation. This could be applied in many ways to future studies on sojourning, migration, immigration, refugee crises, military deployments and homecoming, and other topics.

Spry (2011) also writes that this often creative approach switches the "imperialist impulse to 'make others understand'" to the act of "doing understanding with others" (p. 505). In studying culture, it is vital to take an invitational approach, so the use of this method also acts as a stimulus for others to join the collective conversation about these issues. Similarly, in studying culture, it is important for me to carefully and consistently consider my own experiences in and understandings of my body, cultural identity, relationships to place and space, and my own levels of privilege in various contexts.

In order to better articulate these relationships, I utilize a strong first-person voice, the foundation of which is Ellis' (2004) ethnographic-I. Ellis challenges objectivity in ethnography, calling on researchers to reconsider and, furthermore, *value* their own perspective as an active methodological force:

Is the 'I' only about the eye of the researcher, the researcher standing apart and

looking? What about the 'I' of the researcher, the part that not only looks but is

looked back at, that not only acts but is acted back upon by those in her focus. Is

ethnography only about the other? Isn't ethnography also relational, about the other

and the 'I' of the researcher in interaction? (p. xix).

Ellis (2004) also describes autoethnography as the merging of data gathering method and

method of writing, a place where scholars can incorporate their 'I' as a valid tool in, and,

moreover, a valuable first-person perspective for their research.

In the case of this work, I extend Ellis' definition of the "other" to include factors

beyond the sociocultural, using an ecocultural lens to also examine interactions with

environmental (both built and greater-than-human) factors. Spry (2011) builds on Ellis'

concept through the performative-I, which, she writes, "was the result of a deep and all-

consuming loss" (p. 503), which could not be expressed or processed without the

embodiment of knowledge. This embodied knowledge, she writes, "is the somatic (the

body's interaction with culture) represented through the semantic (language)" of what

theoretical compositions will or will not be experienced by the body, and why (p. 502). Thus,

instinct and feeling become a mediating force of embodied personal and political knowledge,

creating space for critical reflection. My experience in Peace Corps Malawi is deeply

embodied, intensely emotional, and so intricately tied up with my current personhood that I

could never present a neutral stance; instead, I use the performative-I to harness this deeply

lived emotion, allowing my own feelings and instincts to guide my work.

As Butler (2005) writes, "when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account

that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity,

become a social theorist" (p. 8). The first-person narration in this project will better serve a self-reflexive experiential learning process for me, which will create a more well-rounded and inclusive case study. With this reflexive strategy, I will be able to shed light on the role of the/my body in place and space through an ecocultural lens. Madison (2009) highlights the importance of the body in performative methodology, stating:

> We must embrace the body not only as the feeling/sensing home of our being—the harbor of our breath—but the vulnerability of how our body must move through space and time of another—transporting our very being and breath—for the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of realization and discovery. (p. 191)

This is of great importance in both methodological and theoretical senses. From the methodological, performative viewpoint, embodied knowledge plays a distinct role in examination of the self, of theory, and of dominant social norms. From a theoretical standpoint, particularly with my ecocultural lens, the physical body and its relationship with/in/as space and place becomes a vital site of examination. As I argue for a greater emphasis on the *eco* of *ecocultural adjustment*, I closely study, through my personal texts, the behavior of my own physical body within the frames of trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2010) and sensory relations with/in/as the natural world (Abram, 1997).

Data Gathering Methods

My particular approach for venturing into these terrains is the retrospective examination of my narrative texts through autoethnography. I conduct an autoethnographic case study on an individual adjustment journey, revisiting my many journal and blog entries to retrospectively explore my continual adjustment to and eventual departure from Malawi during my 2011-2013 service with the US Peace Corps. I also discuss the process of homecoming and domestic cultural adjustment that I experienced and am still experiencing in

2016. In revisit this in order to identify the role of the greater-than-human world within my adjustment journey to provide a heuristic case study in ecocultural adjustment. Peace Corps Malawi serves as an intense sample of ecocultural adjustment, as Malawi remains one of the most impoverished nations in the world and one of the few remaining places where PCVs work and reside in very rural locations with few amenities and resources, such as electricity, clean water sources, transportation, medical access, and technology. According to the US Peace Corps, this makes cultural integration the highest priority for volunteer safety. I agree that this is vital, but also argue that environmental integration is extremely important; this consideration for both cultural and environmental elements both fall under the umbrella of ecocultural adjustment.

I resided in the northern lakeshore region, in a hot and lush subequatorial climate, where I worked as a teacher development facilitator (TDF) and an instructor of secondary school English literature. The data that emerged from this experience comprise 5 hand-written journals of approximately 460 double-sided, single-spaced pages, and a public blog with 66 entries, written in a casual and often private manner before I entered academia. I will use these data to problematize academic conceptions of *cultural adjustment* and *culture shock*, drawing attention to ecological, embodied, and sensory factors as an integral part of these processes and exploring the emergent ecocultural themes that can inform extant intercultural adjustment theory. Important, too, is my retrospective understanding of these entries in light of the experiences I have lived since returning to the United States. My own memories serve to establish the context of my narratives. I walk an interesting and delicate line—as these experiences are nestled into a specific time frame; I feel, only a few years later, as if I am studying words written by an entirely different person and yet these recorded

ecocultural experiences as well as my own memories of them contribute to my understanding of the world and my own identity today.

My journal and blog entries are a form of narrative, as they "organize the stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives" (Foss, 2004, p. 307). My journaling was simply this—an effort to understand the new world I was thrust into through my Peace Corps experience. Thus, I utilize performative autoethnography to retrospectively analyze my own narrative texts. As Carbaugh and Brockmeier (2001) state, "such a complex and fleeting construction as human identity—the self in time—can only exist as a narrative construction. Without the narrative fabric, it seems difficult to even think of human temporality and historicity at all" (p. 15). Because of the importance of narrative to human identity, it is also

Autoethnographers, further, not only turn the analytic lens to focus specifically on their own perspective as they interpret and analyze (Ellis, 2004; Chase, 2011), but can treat this experience itself as narrative which aims to show rather than tell (Denzin, 2003), "and thus disrupt the politics of traditional research relationships, traditional forms of representation…" (Chase, 2011, p. 423). Thus, one of my intentions with this piece is to poke at expectations of the research world. Creativity is one of the most valuable pedagogical tools we have (Milstein, et al., in press) and I challenge the academic expectations that research must be presented in impersonal and formal formats. Instead, I aim to utilize user-friendly language, creative nonfiction writing, and personal voice to promote reflexivity, accessibility, and to invite and engage the interest and input of the reader. Narrative inquiry, too, is still an emerging field (Chase, 2011), and through this autoethnographic case study, I seek to contribute to its evolution.

Data Analysis Method

In order to better focus the question of the role of environmental factors on adjustment, as well as how the role of the human-nature divide affects this process, I coded my past narratives for themes related to ecoculture, the human-nature divide, adjustment, and environmental communication factors, as well as issues of gender and solitude. From here, I followed Goodall's (2000) recommendation to render "the personal meanings" as I introspectively isolated key moments after "attributing special meaning to them" (p. 108). In other words, my personal understanding of these data is as important to my analysis as the texts themselves. "The act of explicating these key moments," note Lindlof and Taylor (2010), "requires a good deal of interpretive writing" (p. 249). I used this interpretive writing through the performative autoethnographic voice to synthesize and highlight emergent themes and construct ecocultural adjustment theory.

The following chapters expand on these themes I interpreted from the data, including notions of transcorporeality, clean-dirty boundaries, battling against nature to maintain my personal human-nature divide, embodiment of place, and communication with nature. These all expand on the Western human-nature divide and my theory of ecocultural adjustment and ecoculture shock by following my own changing relation to place, people, and my identity. Following analytical exploration of these themes is a discussion and implications section in which I connect these themes to illustrate my theory of ecocultural adjustment and offer approaches for practically connecting theory to extant intercultural communication and cultural adjustment theory, as well as praxis and training.

Terminology

In this work, I rely on compound words such as *ecoculture*, as "never purely themselves, things are compound" (Haraway, 2006, p. 2). The use of the compound terms

naturecultures and *pastpresents* (Haraway, 2010), along with others such as *humanimal(s)* (Milstein, 2013) and *humanature* (Milstein, 2011) help to better frame these concepts not as opposing terms, but as deeply intrinsic, interdependent relationships. As Milstein, et al. (2011) write,

> We use compound terms, including ecoculture and humanature, as a way to
> reflexively engage ecology and culture, nature and human, in integral conversation in
> research as they are in life. These symbolic textual moves are heuristic turns away
> from western notions of 'the environment' and turns toward lexical intertwining…"
> (p. 488)

The use of compound terms, then, further complicates the human-nature or culture-nature divides in the process of research writing, nudging at the anthropocentric framing of humans and/or their cultures as separate from the greater-than-human world. I differentiate in this work between the *human-nature* divide (textually illustrated through a distinct separation) and *humanature*, which is an enmeshed concept emphasizing the inextricable connection between humans and the greater-than-human world.

Additionally, I honor my body in this work. As I began writing in this performative manner, it felt somehow wrong, in an embodied sense, to continually refer to my body as an *It*—as a separate, plastic object from which my brain, senses, and spirit were disconnected. I use Buber's (1958) *I-Thou* theme to illustrate the boundlessness and agency of my body. Buber writes:

> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a
> thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through
> being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no

bounds. When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But

he takes his stand in relation. (p. 1)

My *Thou* manifests as *She*. Innately connected with my female-identified brain and feminine

spirit, my body is undoubtedly that of a woman—and she possesses a power, a set of senses

and instincts, infinite connections with the greater-than-human world, a permeability and

exchange with her surroundings that my brain cannot comprehend or analyze. I recognize

that my brain is just one part of my body—not the unyielding source of power and control

that the Western container metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008) leads us to conceptualize it

as. Despite my own insistence of this unity between brain and body, I often speak of my

body as her own character, as frequently during my adjustment journey I felt a disconnect

from her, as I became more and more aware that she had powers of communication that I

(my brain-centric consciousness) did not fully understand but could learn from through

sensory practices.

Moreover, I write distinctly of the merging of body and place. Thus, in discussing this

She, I refer to both my body and the elements of Malawi, not as a bordered body and

bordered country, but as organic, merged beings in relation to my consciousness, sensory

experiences, and sub-conscious connections. This is not intended to gender Malawi in any

way, but to emphasize the union between my feminine body and the local patch of earth on

and in which I resided throughout my Peace Corps service.

Finally, I often use the terms *environment* and *environmental factors.* As noted above,

environment has been rendered largely ineffective (Alaimo, 2010). However, there is not a

widely-used term that inclusively articulates the combination of both human-constructed

environmental factors with elements of the greater-than-human world. Therefore, I use these

terms to refer to the combination of factors, rather than the dominant Western notions of the faraway environment which has become a distant setting for human resource production (Alaimo, 2010). I use *greater-than-human* in discussing what are conceptualized as *natural* elements, as the term *nature*, like *environment,* can be problematic due to its multiple meanings and interpretations. These elements are more widely referred to as *more-than-human* in recent literature, while Abram (1997) also refers to this as the *sensuous world*. *Greater-than-human*, as a term, makes a move to highlight the environment in communication research, as called for by Pezzulo (2013). This term is meant to add value to environmental influences, highlighting the environment as not just *more*-than-human, but as the foundation, the very life source, that allows human existence to thrive.

Chapter 5: Transcorporeality and the Human-Nature Divide

One grave manifestation of the human-nature divide is the dominant Western conception of the human body as an enclosed capsule, in which the skin serves as a distinct border from the elements of the earth. This notion of contained bodies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) serves as a foundation of human-nature relations, including the Western removal of the human from the greater-than-human world. As Alaimo (2010) writes, "despite the tremendous outpouring of feminist theory and cultural studies of 'the body,' much of this work tends to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter" (p. 3). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discuss the metaphor of contained bodies as an *objectivist myth*, one that perpetuates "a view that separates man from his environment" and supports the illusion of successful functioning as mastery or control over nature through science (p. 229).

Lakoff and Johnson also discuss a *subjectivist myth*, which serves as an attempt "to overcome the alienation that results from viewing man as separate from his environment and from other men" (p. 229). This myth draws upon Romanticist values of celebrating the sensory and an appreciation for and experiencing of nature. Both the objectivist and subjectivist myths are problematized and expanded through the *experientialist myth*, which places "man as part of his environment, not separate from it," and defines human-nature relations as involving "mutual change" (pp. 229-230). These authors argue that the experientialist account offers richer understanding of the state of our own bodies as well as other vital areas of our every day lives. Breaking down the objectivist and subjectivist myths and reconceptualizing Western notions of the body experientially assists in the undoing of the human-nature divide and the overcoming of the illusion of human skin as a barrier from the greater-than-human world.

In her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Alaimo (2010) further works to break down the human-nature divide by problematizing the separation of the body from the earth through an exploration of the "interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures" (p. 2). Through her illustrations, she removes the barriers from between human corporeality and the elements of the greater-than-human world. "By emphasizing the movement across bodies," she writes, "trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnectedness between various bodily natures" (p. 2). She expands:

> By underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world…allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which 'human' and 'environment' can by no means be considered as separate. (p. 2, original emphasis)

This concept of trans-corporeality, or transcorporeality (Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012), also helps with the conceptualization of the human body as systems that work with and within their greater-than-human environment. Greater-than-human elements contribute to the constant regrowth and reconstruction of bone, blood, and tissue, just as bodies contribute to the composition of the soil. As stated by McWhorter (1999) in a discussion on natural bodies,

> Life never surpasses dirt, because life rides on dirt's coattails. Life has no vehicle of its own. Whatever discreteness, integrity, and identity living things may have, it all

comes from the activity of that undifferentiated, much maligned stuff we call dirt. (p.

167)

The body is, therefore, transformable and in perpetual process of literally embodying her physical place. The body, in other words, *becomes* the place in which she resides.

This merging of body and nature and a significant embodiment of place was a salient part of my experiences in Malawi. In many ways, I felt my body adapting to and adopting the elements surrounding me, and this became an important part of my adjustment journey, and was particularly evident as I, homebound, departed from Malawi. My journals and blogs demonstrate a complicated ecocultural adjustment journey as I emotionally, psychologically, biologically, mentally, and socioculturally sought to integrate. I initially conceptualized this process as a battle, particularly in engagement with greater-than-human elements. Indeed, I spent much of my initial adjustment process working to maintain my human-nature divide as I felt it breaking down. I often illustrated this effort in terms of clean and dirty as I struggled to maintain borders between my body and the external, natural world.

Mud Walls: Fighting to Maintain the Divide

I identified a clean-dirty dualism as a literal manifestation of the human-nature divide in the adjustment process. In this section, I discuss ways in which my conception of clean and dirty became an obvious effort to separate my Western body from wilder spaces, which I viewed as threatening or encroaching. Often, I viewed this construction and vain maintenance of imagined boundaries as a literal battle against the elements. Just days after I had arrived in Malawi (June 11, 2011), I journaled:

I'm on my little stoop again listening to the wake up noises of the village. Babies

crying, amayis sweeping, dogs barking, birds tweeting, goats' hooves clattering, hens

clucking and pecking, murmured mwadzuka bwanjis…bare feet walking on the hard-

packed ground. Roosters crowing, of course. And more, the scents: the woodfire smoke, morning manure, mud and dew. Amayi is scrubbing pots with dirt. It's just crazy how spoiled Americans are—we would chalk up difficulty cleaning to lack of proper chemical and tool, and leave it to soak. There are a million of these examples. The human-nature divide is represented quite literally through my struggle maintain cleanliness, as reflective of larger Western orientations seeking to maintain separation from the earth, as manifest in what is most commonly referred to as *dirt*. I marveled at my host mother's use of her fingernails and sand from the ground to scrub her Teflon-free pots— something that seemed counterintuitive for an American raised on Clorox bleach and steel wool who had been taught that cleanliness inherently meant the absence of dirt.

Douglas (1966) writes, "Our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions" (p. 7). My experience in Malawi was often framed by the struggle to maintain cleanliness of both home and body. I was thrust, quite literally, into dirt from the beginning of my service, when I resided in a mud hut. In my journal, I describe this dwelling as "*very* small, very simple, very full of smells of manure and earth." One of my daily chores was the use of a simple, handmade grass whisk-broom to sweep out my tiny hut, creating clouds of dust and ushering out mouse droppings, small pebbles, and dead insects. I was also responsible for sweeping much of the courtyard, which was bare dirt, packed down and continually swept so that it resembled the concrete that borders homes in the United States. While sweeping dirt seemed, to me, a task of futility, it was a cultural expectation that showed care and respect for the home-space, and also served the practical function of creating a safe human-space, free of hiding places for venomous snakes.

I appreciated the sweeping of my mud floors and did so obsessively, always marveling at the detritus that would accumulate in a mound on my stoop. I, a lifetime sufferer of arachnophobia remained anxious about the state of my hut, and relied strongly on my mosquito net, the mesh barrier I referred to as my force field, to protect me from the earthen walls, the thatched roof, the packed mud floor, and whatever non-human creatures might have existed in those spaces. Through this, I was able to (mentally, at least) maintain cleanliness, comfort, and safety in at least one tiny 7x3 foot space. This net border helped me feel, even from within the walls of a mud hut, protected from the elements of the earth.

Clean-Dirty Borders and the Human-Nature Divide

Following my training period, I moved into a much more sophisticated home—one with a pocked cement floor. The walls were constructed of hand-molded, clay bricks made from, essentially, dirt. The house was being constantly consumed by termites and other non-human creatures and weather elements, making daily cleaning an absolute necessity. Soon after arrival, on September 16, 2011, I blogged:

The tin roof's ceiling with its bare rafters was swathed with red dust-stained spider webs, the hundreds of spindly legged weavers hanging still and patiently. The walls, once optimistically painted a tropical blue, were streaked red with termite trails and black with long trains of moving ant armies. Rodent and reptile droppings decorated the broken furniture. The concrete floor boasted a thick red layer of dirt blown in from beneath the doors and through the shattered windowpanes. Wasp nests decorated every doorway, crickets leapt out of the way of each footfall, ants spilled out of every crack and crevice, and bougainvillea vines had stolen their way effortlessly in through the burglar bars, tightly grasping everything within reach. In the mere matter of months the house had stood empty, the jungle had moved in.

I note that I immediately set to cleaning. I carefully recorded the progress made from day to day, often framing the process as a battle. In reference to my arrival to my assigned site on August 19, 2011, I journaled, "By this time I was absolutely beat, just able to go through the motions of collecting my keys, greeting Mr. Longwe, and beginning what will be an ongoing war with the wasps, ants, termites, and spiders." The entries that follow include details of gauging the resilience of spiders, "tearing apart spider webs and scrubbing termite nests off the wall," and arming myself "merely with a can of doom [insect poison], a whisk broom, and a war whoop," to battle with a "she-demon mother spider from hell." I refer to the creatures in this space as heinous, out of control, and even, in the case of the spider mentioned above, a "devil mommy." In relation to their presence, I described the space as a wreck, in shambles, insane, and dirty.

As time marched on, it was more and more difficult to maintain my human-nature divide with the constant infiltration of dirt into what I referred to as *my* territory. In the first several months of my stay, I conceived a strict division between two separate spaces—my space, a clean space, strictly reserved for my body and my behaviors, which was meant to be protection from the external realm—and the outside, the dirt, or the natural space. Hendry (2010) writes, "We tend to view the natural world as the 'big out there'—a place or thing that is separate and distant from humans and their cultures." (p. 5). This was my territorial conceptualization of place and space upon arriving at my site in rural Malawi—a strictly divided spatial realm of clean and dirty places. As Douglas (1966) writes, however,

> When we honestly reflect on our busy scrubbings and cleanings in this light we know
> that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries,

making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the

material house. (p. 68)

Indeed, in my journal, after trying and failing to kill a large rat with a shoe, I scrawled, "I

was mad because rats ate my papaya and left droppings on my desk…and because, damn it,

this is my house, not the rats', not the termites' or ants' or spiders'…I'm sick of the filth of

this jungle pit." Clearly, it was not the filth, or the dirt, itself, that angered me, but the lack of

clear borders between what I conceived as my orderly house, my property, my sense of

home, and the disordering and disorganizing of the elements of the greater-than-human

world.

In a situation of adjustment, most things were beyond my control. Exerting the force

of cleanliness and my own human-nature divide over what I conceived as my space was one

of the only strategies through which I could achieve a sense of organization and, thus, power.

This exercise of power was an adjustment strategy as I attempted to adapt to my new home

and place, exercising ownership over a space of intersection. This control over my

environment was also highly applicable to my own body, as I struggled to keep her clean and

healthy in a period of great physical adjustment.

Exerting Power in Ecocultural Adjustment

My home was an interesting and accurate metaphor for what was occurring within

and on my body itself. In my blog, I wrote:

My hot weather and thick jungle environment makes for a high level of pests…My

personal plague is my ant army that I am currently losing the war to. They are on and

in everything, driving me insane with their persistence. I have scorpions, bats, birds,

spiders, millipedes, centipedes, giant slugs, rodents, lizards, grotesque spider

monsters, swarms of mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, finger-long cockroaches, gnats, flies,

wasps, long trains of termites, snakes, and beetles all nesting in, travelling through, or literally eating my home at all hours.

And so it was with my body—other bodies traversed this terrain, this living environment, exploiting my porousness. I fought to protect my body from invasion, to maintain my own personal human-nature divide, through bodily cleanliness. Despite this, the separation was continually broken down. In March of 2012, I blogged about the hookworm that had recently entered my body at the beach:

> This lovely little creature is spread (oh yes) through the fecal matter of DOGS. It enters through your foot itching like nothing you have ever felt, and its little friends make their way through your bloodstream to the intestines. This was, above all else, entertaining to me, though I adamantly declared I keep myself very clean and don't run around barefoot. It was treated with two little pills.

Despite my attempts at cleanliness and purity, my body, a permeable system of flow in and out of the greater-than-human world, became home to fungal infections, heat rash, intestinal worms, water-borne parasites, hookworms, and millions of microorganisms either helping to sustain me, or weakening me in various ways. The maturation of the malaria sporozoites in my liver was suppressed only by medicines. The systems of my body battled giardia and bacterial dysentery as my immunity was weakened by the elements. So, too, the barriers I created in my home were adjusted to fit my situation. Soon, clean and dirty became fairly relative—sweaty ceased to equate with dirty, and my compulsion to sweep the floors several times per day eventually lost priority.

Eventually, I began to better recognize the beauty of this intimate connection with the greater-than-human world—drinking directly from covered, dug wells gave me an intense

sense of unity with the earth, as I could taste the minerals of the soil and draw nourishment from healthy water that had sifted through the dirt to flow clear. I was grateful for the food sources available to me, crediting them for my sustained life and reciprocating by returning the seeds to the soil of my garden. Yet, the parasitic pests and the pervading heat still felt, to me, to be waging war on my body.

Transcorporeal Battle in Ecocultural Adjustment

This is a similar phenomenon to that discussed as a major trial of the colonization of the Americas. In *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, Allewaert (2013) writes of the struggle of white colonizers to simultaneously maintain a human-nature divide *and* adjust to place. Allewaert discusses plantation zones as tropical or subtropical climates, as entangled spaces in which "animals, persons, plants, artifacts and their histories, and even land were penetrating, fused with, transforming one another" (p. 31). While the heated climate accelerated the growth of cash crops, it "slowed down, encroached on, and transformed all human agents in this ecology" (p. 31). Plantation spaces, then, "possessed those who traversed them" (p. 33). Bodies in these spaces were "experienced as disorganized and disorganizing" (p. 2) as a direct result of their relations with the greater-than-human world. They were "pulled into" the external world by natural elements, blurring and breaking the metaphor of the body as a container through permeation, or transcorporeality.

In my journal, I also expand greatly on the heat itself and its effect on my body. I considered myself more readily adaptable to this particular facet of the Malawian lakeshore than most PCVs due to the many years I spent (often without air conditioning in my home) on the Gulf coast of Alabama, where heat and humidity rivaled the conditions I experienced in subequatorial Africa. I was familiar with the persistence of mosquitoes and the presence of

giant cockroaches (not so dissimilar from the American South's palmetto bug) and I was no stranger to constant sweat. Just months into my service, I journaled, "I should be immune to this. I live on the Gulf. I live and breathe steamy swamp air…I don't mind the sweat and the sun—it means I'm alive, that sweat and sheen." I further wrote, however:

> I guess the difference is at the end of the day, back home, if I want to, I can take a break…But here, well, I haven't had a break from the heat in 6 months. I haven't stopped sweating in 6 months. It wears me down, it wears me down and I feel I have nothing left.

The heat was a force all its own, a suffocating and permeating power that was an active, living element, a seemingly agentive specter in my life, ever-present and heavy breathing, compounding every experience into a more extreme situation. I wrote:

> I feel like a mushroom in the hot sun, evaporating, wrinkling up into a puckered brown nothing. The difference is the sun is down and now is when I am supposed to have relief. Instead I have nausea (I can't drink enough to stay hydrated), itching (the heat keeps the heat rash prickling and spreading), and utter frustration (I feel like I might explode. I would run away but there is no place to go).

This frustrated crying-out fairly early in my service further demonstrates a stage in my ecocultural adjustment journey, where I fought to maintain division between my body and the pervading forces of the greater-than-human world. This suffocating heat was one part of the massive shift my body was experiencing, and it would have taken years to develop the type of tolerance that I was aiming for. I did begin the adjustment process, though. The next hot season I experienced was nothing as bad as this one, and by the time I returned to the United States, I desperately longed for the warmth.

There were many cultural expectations that I was working to adapt to throughout this acclimatization process, including that of teacher professionalism. Instructors in Malawi are expected to dress extremely nicely by Western standards—despite the harsh environment—donning suits and ties, or suits and closed-toe high heels. I tried my best to abide by these standards but usually could not physically tolerate it. Sometimes I would sit at my desk in the staffroom at school in a t-shirt and light skirt (the most professional dress I could pull together on some of my more desperate days), mopping my face and chugging liter after liter of water, while my colleagues wore wool blazers and sipped hot tea, their faces dry (and with no sign that sweat might be dripping down their backs, like it was on me). They would openly notice my perspiration and chuckle (compassionate but also amused), remarking, "Ahh, my friend, you are just not used," as in, I was simply not adapted to the environment—I was battling the elements, while my friends had adjusted generations ago. As I worked to adjust to the cultural standards, I was engaged in a severe process of adjustment to the environmental ones. These two areas of adjustment focus could not be separated.

Sweat as Transcorporeal Communication

This entire process was one of communication, which included many layers. From a very physical and foundational perspective, my body's communication with the environment manifested in visible ways that I could often recognize—through heat rash, through perceptible infection, through reactions to insect bites, through sun or wind burn—as well as ways that I could only feel—nausea, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, and fatigue. Bell (2011) writes of this communicative phenomenon as a differentiation between the environment and what he refers to as *invironment*, where "the *invironment* refers to the zone of the body's perpetual dialogue *with* the environment" (p. 108, original emphasis). The body's constant, sensual, and often subconscious communication with the surrounding

elements is a mode of transcorporeal communication that reinforces Bell's argument, "the environment is not only something 'out there.' It is also something 'in here,'" or inside the body (p. 109). The communicative processes I began to notice were also examples of internatural (Plec, 2013) communication, which expands the concept of communication "beyond that very human obsession with the structure and substance of verbal utterances" (p. 3) and creates space for the communicative exchange between bodies in the greater-than-human world.

Abram (1997) also makes arguments for human communication with and as the greater-than-human world, noting that our fascination is elsewhere, focused on "all these fields or channels of *strictly human communication* that so readily grab our senses and mold our thoughts once our age-old participation with the original, more-than-human medium has been sundered" (p. 258, original emphasis). Abram notes that the human mind "is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth" (p. 262). Human senses, then, serve as a channel of communication with and as the greater-than-human world, pathways of interaction that are often suppressed or, at the very least, drowned out, in contemporary Western society. Whether we are aware of it or not, however—whether I was aware of it or not during my stay in Malawi—our bodies are in constant communication with the earth. Considering communication as strictly a human-human process limits the success of adjustment, as humanature communication is foundational in bodily adjustment to new places on their ecocultural adjustment journeys.

Transcorporeal Peace-Making

Blog Post, March 11, 2013: It is rainy season. It is the season of the mosquito swarm, the season of the happy cow, of flourishing bright rice paddies, of colorful

umbrellas and laughing wet children and pink-tasseled maize. It is the season of

glowing green hills, tall grasses, and creeping vines, thick with the scent of crushed

leaves. It is the season of hookworm, of overflowing pit latrines, of cholera and

dysentery. It's the season of floods, of hellish thunder, of ferocious wind, of

dangerous lightning strikes and painful horizontal tempests, of slick and sun-glossed

mornings after nights of disconcerting storms.

My activities in Malawi revolved strictly around the weather. Responding to the elements

was one of the first ways I understood myself to be deeply connected to Malawi, as this was

essentially the first time I had been forced to prioritize the agenda of the greater-than-human

world above my own. In my first rainy season, I learned that this was a reciprocal

relationship; the rain, even in treacherous overabundance, was a gift, and culturally, it was

treated as such. Moreover, in a setting with little technology or media to rely on, I found

myself rapidly learning how to predict the weather, closely listening—with all senses—to the

signs of the earth and responding appropriately. This became one of the most important

forms of communication with the greater-than-human world, and, through flows and ebbs, I

began to consciously break down my own boundaries and honor the space within which I

was situated. This meant acknowledging and accepting my own vulnerability and

permeability.

The problem with my initial battling of the elements, my seeking to maintain clean

boundaries from dirty spaces, and my protectiveness of body, was that my walls, my doors,

my spatial boundaries, were simply a Western ecocultural illusion, as they, themselves,

served as home to endless creatures. They were permeable force fields, cracked and eaten,

their porousness assisted by my lack of windowpanes and holey roof which routed

windblown dirt right back into my place of residence after I swept it outside. Even the mosquito net force field I tucked under my mattress every night was a penetrable material, keeping out mosquitos but allowing other elements to flow in and out.

My body's borders, too, were permeable, as my skin and stomach absorbed the external elements into my very tissue. This transcorporeal humanature relationship began to shift the way I conceptualized my space and place in relation to the greater-than-human world, understanding it, later in my service, as a continual cohabitation, of my space and of my very body. My body was, slowly but surely, on a very physical level, becoming Malawi. This transformation was a communicative process, one based on my listening, with all my senses, to the signals of the earth.

Chapter 6: *Solitude-as-sensing*: Communication with/in/as the Greater-Than-Human World

> *It is our brush with the wild nature that drives us not to limit our conversations to humans, not to limit our most splendid movements to dance floors, nor our ears only to music made by human instruments, nor our eyes to "taught" beauty, nor our bodies to approved sensations, nor our minds to those things we all agree upon already.*
>
> -Clarissa Pinkola Estés*, Women Who Run With the Wolves*

I eventually adjusted to a point where I was extremely attached to my time in Malawi and adverse to the idea of return to the United States—what the US Peace Corps called my American "home." I could not quite pinpoint, however, what made this attachment so strong. It wasn't my particular role with the US Peace Corps or my village neighbors or my expatriate friends; indeed, when petitioning for my extension, I had requested relocation and a different position. In reviewing my writing from that time period as well as contemplating the experience retrospectively for this study, I believe that the connection to the Malawian landscape and culture extended beyond the infusion of natural elements into my body and my relationships with the people I lived around, worked alongside, and adopted as family. In other words, my environmental *sense of self-in-place* (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001) worked within the wider web of my *relations-in-place* (Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, & Dickinson, 2011). Much of this experience was wrapped up in my own solitude and the introspective, creative state it allowed me to fall into. The solitude, independence, and exploration of my own strengths was significant, as it coupled with a practice of *solitude-as-sensing* and allowed me to communicate with body and with my greater-than-human surroundings in new ways.

A Woman Alone

> *Journal Entry, Friday, October 11, 2011*: I understand better now how Peace Corps
>
> Volunteers in the field can be more susceptible [to depression and suicide]. Emotions
>
> here are wild and extreme. The highs are brilliant and exciting, but the lows mean
>
> utter desperation, sudden and hard-hitting loneliness; intense, severe furiosity…deep,
>
> deep frustration…it's all there just waiting to pounce, and once it does, it is all-
>
> consuming.

Milstein (2005) wrote after sojourners face and overcome intercultural adaptation challenges

successfully, they also report increases in self-efficacy. My time in Malawi was rife with

challenges, and yet, facing these challenges gave me a sense of extreme satisfaction, even

through the highs and lows of adjustment. In a blog entry on June 10, 2013, I made an

attempt at describing, for the public, the overwhelming sensation of solitude I was

experiencing:

> No one is there to help you when you are writhing on your floor in illness; there is no
>
> one there to help you with anything…Letters and phone calls from home were rare to
>
> start and grow less frequent…Many volunteers suffer from the feeling that they are
>
> out of sight, and therefore out of mind…We miss funerals, weddings, births,
>
> anniversaries, holidays, birthdays. It's painful that I will never see my Grammy D or
>
> my friend Alex or my great-aunt again, or that by the time I meet my nephew he will
>
> be a year old...And our families and friends will never understand the challenges we
>
> are facing here on our own.

I am explicit that the solitude was painful, and yet, I remained. For me, the positive aspects

of isolation outweighed the challenges overall. Pearson (1964) discussed the adaptation of

Peace Corps Volunteers, using a framework of crises to illustrate adaptation. Brein and

David (1971) describe this process:

> During the first crisis the volunteer is compelled to…explain his purpose to his hosts
>
> and dispel their misconceptions. The second crisis is one of acceptance of the
>
> situation; the romance and adventure are gone; the volunteer becomes bored, lacks
>
> intellectual stimulation, and his work becomes tedious. He begins to read more and
>
> discovers a "society of solitude." The third crisis is one of self-awareness and few
>
> frustrations. There is a feeling of identity and an awareness of the "different life" (p.
>
> 218).

While I do not know if my experience with Peace Corps Malawi necessarily followed this

pattern (or that these stages should be considered crises), I believe that this "society of

solitude" is an important challenge often experienced by Peace Corps Volunteers. In my

case, my closest fellow volunteer was located over 40 kilometers away, a distance that, when

vehicle-less in Malawi, amounts to quite an involved, costly, and time-intensive journey. I

did not often see other Peace Corps Volunteers or foreign visitors, which allowed me to

spend an abundance of time with the village residents.

However, this in itself was not an exemption from solitude, as I wrote in my blog on

June 10, 2013:

> We have to be cautious of who we befriend…I have found that not only is it
>
> culturally inappropriate to be friendly with the educated men at my school or in my
>
> village, but that if I do chat, it is quickly assumed that I want to begin an
>
> affair…Sexual harassment and marriage (or plain out sex) proposals are extremely
>
> common. The women, on the other hand, are often much less educated and less fluent

in English than their husbands. Women are also the workers of the family and stay

very busy. The result of all this is a lot of superficial friends in the village but

virtually no one you can truly call a friend by our standard, more involved, American

definitions.

Thus, my day-to-day experiences with my neighbors did not help me to feel less alone. This

aloneness, I learned, was an important opportunity to examine my strengths, build my

courage, and improve myself intellectually. Furthermore, cultural norms forced a solitude

which created space for connection with the greater-than-human world through acts of

solitude-as-sensing. As I shifted from a human-centered focus, I discovered a growing

awareness of my senses. I turned to what I conceived as nature for companionship, which

fostered creativity and sensory awakening.

Solitude and Magic

My journals reflect an intense amount of space for solo contemplation, a freedom

from the attention-thieving noise of human-human interaction. I write richly: stomach-

turning illustrations of illnesses, thoughts on death, detailed descriptions of dreams and daily

experiences, deep contemplation of my emotional states, many lists of my goals, and,

especially, vivid descriptions of the greater-than-human world. Brown and Morgan (1983)

write, "Many great writers, artists, and religious leaders have turned to nature for solitude

and inspiration throughout the ages" (p. 86). They further note, "spiritual observation is not

some mystical, magical thing that is peculiar to medicine men and shamans, but something

latent in all of us" (p. 86). Abram (1997) agrees, and explicitly brings culture into the

conversation, noting the "magic" forces of shamans or sorcerers "are the same forces—the

same plants, animals, forests, and winds—that to literate, 'civilized' Europeans are just so

much scenery, the pleasant backdrop of our more pressing human concerns" (p. 9). My

experience of solitude in Malawi turned my "civilized" focus away from human distractions and into a more introspective space, one in which I was able to better able to listen to and commune with the greater-than-human world. Like the shaman, I lived alone, isolated, and on the fringes of a human culture—but existed as an ecological learner of magic, an explorer in this realm, newly aware of and invigorated by the power of my senses and the act of listening.

This solitude thrust me into creative arts, the exploration of literature, and a deep awareness of myself with/in/as my physical place. Solitude became extraordinarily important to my self-identity and my understanding of my natural surroundings. Somehow, with the quietness of solitude, I came to know the sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and feeling of my tiny territory better than I had known any home before and, importantly, I recognized myself within it as I watched my body adapt to its surroundings. Since returning to the United States, I have not been able to reestablish a space of peaceful solitude (or the artistic fervor, the intellectual contemplation, or the intimacy with nature that came with it). I now consider this a rare and elusive luxury.

Alone with/in/as the Greater-Than-Human

Journal entry, November 11, 2011: The moon is awe-inspiring—a well-polished, brightly shining white gold medallion that leaves its impression on your gaze long after you close your eyes. It's a hot night, hot, hot and bright, and someone nearby has been banging on a drum for hours. I'm out in my courtyard writing by the moonlight as the mosquitos have their way with me and Zen [the housecat] hunts for bugs. The three days of rain have awakened the first batch of calling frogs, and they have joined in with the chorus of crickets and bats. I would like to sleep out here, with the breeze and the slowly swaying silhouette of my lone pine tree. If I thought

there was any way to avoid the troops of ants I would be asleep already, resting away

this headache and allowing my hair to dry of sweat.

This is still an early moment in my ecocultural adjustment journey—a mere three months

after arriving at my assigned site and five months after arriving in Malawi, which I think is

reflective of how mixed I felt, still conceptualizing the ants as troops of an enemy and yet

beginning to feel myself in communication with the greater-than-human on a sensory level. I

have recorded so many moments like these, quietly soaking in the elements surrounding me

at any given moment. Ecocultural tensions were at play in this stage of my adjustment

journey: sometimes I blissfully conducted my examinations of my surroundings, and other

times, I wrote of the effort of a feeling of loss of control in the uncontrollable conditions of

my nature-infused home-space. In fact, this entry from September 9, 2012, over a year after I

arrived at my assigned site, I have clearly mixed emotions about how I was emotionally and

bodily situated in my ecological and cultural home:

> It's interesting to me how I can be content here, loving, digesting, mapping Malawi as
>
> it fuses with my body…I'm in this home that now also has its grip on me like those
>
> before it, its bird claws and snake fangs holding me in place, fighting to keep me,
>
> fighting to own me, to uplift and destroy me, to take me over the way African vines,
>
> creatures, and weather take over everything. Malawi would make me its own,
>
> hungrily devouring me so I can add to the red clay, add to the cycle, leave my carbon
>
> to the continent.

This was less about feeling like this place would and wanted to destroy me, the way I had felt

earlier in my service, but more a recognition of my part in the ecological cycle—that as my

body "fused" with the landscape through transcorporeality, I had a sense that it *wanted* me

there. I had become a part of that space, and my spirit and my body were embedded within it, and I recognized that this attachment would make it difficult to leave.

In his discussion of discourse beyond language with the Blackfeet tribe, Carbaugh (1999) emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between place and communication as the act of *listening* to the greater-than-human world, which can provide wisdom that would be otherwise unattainable. Likewise, the act of *not* listening results in a loss of wisdom. Without this non-verbal connection, we suffer a loss of identity, wisdom, and spirituality. *Listening*, according to this definition, isn't a single-sense act, however. In the traditional culture of the Blackfeet, *listening* is an embodied experience, prioritizing subconscious characteristics. Carbaugh (1999) specifies:

> Knowing in this way involves the primary nonverbal acts of watching, hearing, feeling, or listening to all of one's surroundings. Through these acts, multiple senses are activated as portals into reality: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste…when engaged in the world through this stance, one can become better attuned to it, resonant with it, and know things about oneself and the world that otherwise remain hidden (p. 112).

The sensory intimacy referred to here is certainly not an automatic act, but a learned and practiced behavior that is largely ignored, or perhaps simply forgotten, in dominant Western civilization. The absence of this practice further forges and perpetuates the human-nature divide.

Carbaugh (1999) writes that the Western mode of *listening* today "consists of two moves: 'listen,' then 'make up your own mind of what you heard'" (p. 103). In traditional Blackfeet culture, however, the aim is to avoid conscious sense-making within "the privacy of one's 'own mind'" (p. 103), and instead, practice straightforward communication with the

greater-than-human world, accepting the messages of this universal language directly, as they are presented. Valladolid and Apffel-Marglin (2001), in discussing Andean peasant cosmology, share similar ideas about communication with the greater-than-human world in citing PRATEC's Eduardo Grillo:

> Here [in the Andean world], conversation cannot be reduced to dialogue, to the world, as in the modern western world but rather here conversation engages us vitally: one converses with the whole body. To converse is to show oneself reciprocally, it is to share, it is to commune, it is to dance to the rhythm which at every moment corresponds to the annual cycle of life (p. 647).

In both of these works, it is emphasized that the sensory should be prioritized in listening to or conversing with the greater-than-human world, as the process of mindfully attempting to interpret messages can stand in the way of the real messages. In moments where I could smell the rain coming even when I was seeing blue skies, or when I could feel a static charge and instinctively brace for a lightning strike, or in tasting the sky within the rainwater I had collected to drink, I was practicing this skill. I was not seeking interpretations or forcing predictions, but allowing my senses to absorb shifts in my surroundings as a form of language, one I was just beginning to perceive. Carbaugh's (1999) concept of listening as a full-bodied experience shifted as my quiet solitude became a constant, evolving practice of *solitude-as-sensing*.

Similarly, Abram (1997) writes of sorcery in indigenous cultures, attributing magic to sensory communication with the natural world. He writes:

> Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by

altering the common organization of his senses will he be able to enter into a rapport

with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape (p. 9).

Abram explains that this is the role of the shaman: to reside on the outskirts of his or her

culture and practice sensory communication, dancing across perceptual boundaries dictated

by social customs and language to understand—and actually *experience*—the multiple

intelligences of the world. I did not have the terminology with which to write of it then, but

my *solitude-as-sensing* allowed me to commune with my surroundings in a different, highly

attuned, experiential manner. My Peace Corps experience thrust me into solitude and silence.

Without the modern barriers from the greater-than-human world I was largely accustomed to,

such as air conditioning, television, smart phones, or even plumbing, I had a unique

opportunity to immerse myself into the space surrounding me and experience a hint of the

magic that exists within the layers of the greater-than-human world.

Slowly, this became a simple reality. I slept and woke on the cycle of the sun and

adapted my life around the mosquitos' schedule. I grew accustomed to the severity of my

sweat and figured out ways to survive the heat. I learned which areas of my house would

flood in the rain, and grew to expect the frequent lightning strikes on my metal roof. I

embraced the surprise creature visits as new adventures with my greater-than-human

roommates. I became accustomed to finding exoskeletons in my clothes. I learned to love

long silences, and weeks alone with my thoughts. I open my dirt and ink smeared journals

now and out fall the feathers of guinea fowl, dried crosses once constructed from green grass,

delicate pressed bougainvillea blossoms, notes from and pictures of my students, the

immortal grains of red-orange sand, the dried husks of unfortunate insects—the remnants of a

magical ecoculture that my life was once structured in and around.

In Malawi, I was in a constant state of sensory exploration. This is in direct opposition to life in the United States, where "frontal occularcentric practices" are privileged over direct embodied sensory experiences (Milstein & Dickinson, 2012). Another sensorial and transcorporeal ecocultural adjustment process was that of my relationship to food, which initially jolted me with its differed cultural uses, but ultimately became representative of my unity with the local land and people as a part of my ecocultural adjustment journey.

Chapter 7: Food as Transcorporeal Embodiment of Place

Looking deeply into your tea, you see that you are drinking fragrant plants that are the gift of Mother Earth. You see the labor of the tea pickers; you see the luscious tea fields and plantations in Sri Lanka, China, and Vietnam. You know that you are drinking a cloud; you are drinking the rain. The tea contains the whole universe.

–Thich Nhat Hanh*, How to Eat*

During my time in Malawi, I was deeply immersed in the greater-than-human world. My uninsulated, cracked, and bug-eaten handmade brick house was a metaphorical illustration of my body—creatures entered uninvited, often making their home within. The soil and sun permeated and dyed my skin, parasites fed on my body, and the heat infiltrated, influenced, and often controlled or sickened me. As time marched on, I was able to clearly see the progress I had made in adjustment, considering my body to be part of Malawi, and Malawi to have become my body. At the end of my service, I blogged:

> Over the past two years Malawi has become my home. Malawian people have become my friends, my family. Malawian crops and stock, pesticides and fertilizers and all, have nourished me; Malawian air and water have maintained me; Malawian dirt and thorn and sun have branded me, keeping me for theirs.

My Peace Corps Malawi experience marked by body, and it drastically changed her inner workings, as well. Simultaneously, my very presence affected the space around me.

My body had become a member of her ecosystem. Malawian atmosphere had sustained me, embedding particles of earth in the tissue walls of my lungs. Mineral ground water had converted into blood and tears. The pumpkin leaves, beans, and pulpy mangoes born of local dirt fed me, the eggs from the chickens that pecked their way through my compost nourished my muscles. My fingers had been hardened by cooking fires and digging food from the ground. My blood had become a communal meal for millions of mosquitos,

and worms periodically fed within my intestines. The lake soothed and caressed me, lowered my body temperature, licked me clean, and fed me. Despite the challenges, this was home, and this home, this place, was deeply embodied.

Food as Ecocultural Communication

Food, as a form of communication, transcorporeality, and embodiment of place, is an inescapable facet of ecocultural adjustment. Sojourners must rapidly adapt to different ways of producing, preparing, and consuming food in a sociocultural process. In this sense, the sojourner is adjusting to a new grammar of communication, as food is a cultural system which "sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies" (Barthes, 2013, p. 24). There is no doubt that in Malawi, I dealt with food on a highly involved sociocultural level. Like a baby, I had to relearn what to eat and how to eat it, then, later, how to acquire and prepare my food. I was not accustomed to eating molten-hot nsima (finely ground maize cooked with boiling water into a paste) with my fingers, cooking over an open flame, or gathering and frying up termites for dinner. I was carefully and happily instructed on the proper methods, and I had to work hard to make these adjustments on a sociocultural level.

The entire literal language that I used for food changed, even as I failed to become fluent in the local languages. Food words became highly embodied, words I felt deeply and liked the sounds and the feelings of: mphangwe, madzi, nkhukhu, ntochi, hanyesi, ndiwo, mbatata, somba, tiyi[2]. These were their associated foods in my mind, as I felt them on a local level, not because I was translating from English for conversation (ntochi is very different than the American conception of banana). To this day, these words pop into my brain, as my memory for food words is stronger than any other parts of the local languages.

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[2] greens, water, chicken, banana, onion, relish, sweet potato, fish, tea.

The grammar extends well beyond literal conversation. In Malawi, food is intrinsically tied to culture and vice versa. Barthes (2013) asks what connotes a unit of signification of food, and how we might be able to articulate the "spirit" of food (p. 26). That is, how might we more effectively explore the seemingly infinite variables that contribute to culture through a simple meal? Barthes notes that "one could say an entire 'world' (social environment) is present and signified by food," (p. 26), and in Malawi, this was frequently the case. As I wrote in my blog early in my service,

> The fact is that Malawians take nsima very seriously. It is a life source, despite its utter lack of nutrition. Upon meeting me, most people ask "What is your staple food in America?" a question that is honestly difficult to answer because we have nothing which so much dietary emphasis is placed on. It is shocking that I don't eat nsima in the states and that I do not cook it for myself here. If one has not eaten nsima that day, then one has not eaten.

One does not discuss food in Malawi unless it is in terms of nsima. I never heard the words, "I'm hungry" or "I need to prepare some food," but I would commonly be told, "I have not yet had my nsima today." Nsima completed the day, and without it, one was thought to go hungry.

When it comes to a meal in Malawi, then, entire meals are built around this one item—the subject of the story, so to speak. In my blog, I wrote:

> A classic Malawian dinner has a starch, a protein, and a vegetable. But let me clarify that the starch is the main course. Everything beyond nsima is referred to as "relish," a simple compliment to a much more important staple food. Nsima is very finely ground maize flour mixed with boiling water to form a thick paste. It is served in

patties, and you use your fingers to pluck up a scalding (molten lava) piece and roll it

into a ball, dipping it in the ndiwo (relish) on your plate.

The longer I stayed in Malawi, the more I understood the vitality of this ritual, and that it was

communicating certain messages, taking on a form of communication all its own. Barthes

(2013) writes, "To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing

up, and signalizing other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign" (p.

28). In sharing food with me, my Malawian families told particular cultural stories, to share

and literally feed me their cultures. I, too, communicated particular messages by taking part

in the eating behaviors I was being taught—by eating with my fingers, learning the names of

the food, and taking the sheer time to engage in a meal (which was much more slowly paced

than meals in California), I communicated a willingness to learn and an appreciation for the

food and the hands that grew and prepared it. These signals were often transmitted through

the food itself.

Barthes' (2013) grammar can be applied to the dishes I refer to here. Meals have a

particular story, and in Western society those stories are often lost in a long chain of

production and processing. But in Malawi, the stories were rich. My first exposure to this

was immediate, with my Mpalale family. My amayi had spent weeks preparing and planting

the fields, and the family painstakingly tended the crop. In the harvest season, the courtyard

was piled high with a huge mound of maize ears, which were placed into a sack and pounded

to loosen the seeds before we would sit together and shuck kernels off the cobs into large

baskets. Amayi would visit the mill to double-grind it into ufa, then pump, haul, and boil

water over a fire, cook the flour into a paste and shape it into patties for the dinner table.

Following the harvest would come burning season, when the maize fields were razed.

Once I relocated to the lakeshore region, I learned that these cultural meals operated as survival stories as well, and were deeply ecocultural. While maize was a vital ingredient in the food grammar here as well, cassava was the reigning king crop. On this special tuber, I blogged:

Some strains are safe to consume raw, while others are naturally laden with cyanide. The plants look identical to me, but locals know the difference by sight and, failing that, a tiny taste. The poisonous varieties are not wasted, however. This drought resistant crop is too valuable a food for Malawians to ignore. Instead, the tubers are processed using soaking, fermentation, and sunlight to leech the cyanide from the food. The roots are harvested from the base of the plant and soaked in water until they essentially spoil—the scent is terrible, though it becomes such a natural fixture in the village that eventually you fail to notice. When the tubers have fermented, they are arranged on drying racks [made of tree branches] in the sun. Once they are dried completely (and removed of all nutrients, essentially), the pieces are deposited into a large mortar and pounded into a very fine powder. If this process is hurried or if any of these factors are not balanced, you will have bitter cassava, a sure sign of low levels of poison…Over a wood fire, water is boiled. The cassava flour is added bit by bit with constant stirring as the pot becomes unsteady and, in my case, tips over or spins or completely loses control (most women use their feet to hold the pot still while they use two hands to muscle through the quickly thickening porridge).

With their centers around these labor-intensive staples, each meal in Malawi was a story of a humanature relationship in a rich setting of the greater-than-human world. Each meal composed its various elements to tell a specific tale of soil, labor, rain, and cultural

gastronomy, to articulate "nature as a place for stories and stories as a way to secure social relations within nature" (Milstein, et al., 2011, p. 502).

As I engaged in meals with my families and friends I learned who the family farmers were (invariably the women), where their farm plots were located (as assigned by the chief and in accordance with village space), how the rains had been throughout the season, how the drought might have affected the pests or the harvest, how their chickens or ducks were faring, who had caught the fish and how, whether the mphangwe (green leafy vegetable) was turnip or rape greens or black jack or bean or cassava or pumpkin leaves and how this selection was affected by the season, what the weather on this particular day might indicate for the next several months, how these wild elements were tamed through cooking fires, who was permitted to eat what part of an animal, and what the proper ways to eat particular foods were (often an embodied act, as fingers are the most convenient eating utensil).

These stories were ecocultural communicative tools allowing space for fellowship, cultural exchange, pleasure in eating, and the national pastime of Malawi—kucheza, to "chat." This works within specific cultural norms and gender roles of course, as men are privileged with a chair and table, while women and children traditionally sat outside on the ground. Because of my role as a visitor (and an azungu—a white foreigner), I was generally granted guest privileges and seated with the men of the household, something I often found difficult to negotiate.

My last communal village meal was with the Chinombo family—fitting, as they had also provided me with my first meal in Chintheche. I blogged:

The kids were allowed to sit with Mr. Chinombo and I as we discussed the various regional foods within Malawi. I mentioned a conversation I had had with a Chewa

tribe native who called kandawoli [cassava nsima] and the Tonga people who eat it

"disgusting." Mr. Chinombo laughed and shook his head. "Those people eat mice,"

he said, tickled. "This," he stated, holding a ball of kandawoli in his fingers and

looking at it with reverence, "this is real food. This is important food."

The ecocultural relationship between Mr. Chinombo and his kandawoli was not unique in

Malawi, as a particular possessiveness and pride over this precious food source is a common

cultural trait.

Food as Embodiment of Place

I argue that my body communicated with place and vice versa, and thus, the greater-

than-human world, in a huge variety of ways; one of these modes was a response to food and

food culture. Indeed, sense of place is "very much involved with sense of taste" (Anderson,

2014, p. 130). In my region, as in most of Malawi, food is a largely localized experience.

There are few imported goods (margarine, Coca Cola and Fanta, and the occasional and high-

priced—and necessarily refrigerated—Snickers bar are a few popular examples).

Most food, however, is grown in Malawian soil and minimally processed. The rice

comes from the north, the tea comes from the south, the sugar is grown and packaged in the

central lakeshore region, and maize is grown in each and every backyard (though the

localization of this particular food, as a colonial and international aid product, could be

argued). Even Malawi Gin is distilled in-country. I made weekly purchases of tomatoes,

onions, eggs, beans, bananas, and sweet potatoes from the local market, a haphazard outdoor

assembly of vendors who were also my neighbors. I supplemented my diet seasonally,

plucking wild amaranth from the dirt outside my house or from the cracks in my concrete

courtyard, harvesting lemons or papaya from the trees outside my house, and accepting the

sticky gifts of plastic bags of mangos from the children who gathered on my front porch. I

made wine from hibiscus blossoms when my plants bloomed and grew insect-chewed zucchini in my red clay garden. Even the occasional meat I consumed was selected from our resident outdoor butcher—the locally bred and fed haunches of cow or goat would swing in the market until the meat was sold or the sky grew dark. Similarly, fishermen would walk through the village in the early mornings with a wheelbarrow full of fresh-caught Lake Malawi chambo or kampango for sale.

Consuming in this highly localized manner was a form of communication between my body and the greater-than-human world, as "the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world" (Pollan, 2006, p. 10). As I ate what was grown or raised in this particular place, so those foods became the very tissue of my body. Thus, my body became her very place, as "daily, our eating transforms nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds" (Pollan, 2006, p. 10). In a discussion on this bond, which is revered by the Okinagans, Armstrong (1995) notes, "the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things which the land is. The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed parts to be our flesh. *We are our land/place*" (p. 323, original emphasis). Thus, she continues, "our most essential responsibility is to earn to bond our whole individual selves and our communal selves to the land" (p. 323). As I related to the place where I dwelled, I came to better understand myself as situated in this place, as part of this place.

This was a reciprocal existence. My body served as a member of the food chain, as my blood fed thousands of mosquitoes and parasites found their way into my digestive and circulatory systems. My bodily waste contributed to a thriving pit latrine ecosystem of critters that worked to return it to the dirt. Certainly, these relations-in-place (symbiotic,

parasitic, or otherwise) served as a form of communication with the variables of place, as my presence affected the ecosystem. This process of embodiment worked in two directions, further undoing the human-nature divide, as body and place blurred together. I became Malawi, and she became me.

There are constant reminders of this blurring between place and body. Not long ago, I took a trip to Tres Piedras, New Mexico, to visit one of several Earthships. These off-grid structures are built to efficiently recycle water, and many of them are constructed to include perimeter greenhouse areas. Thus, the indoor gardens, here in the vast, arid desert, were host to giant mushrooms, butterfly bushes, grape vines, fig trees, and planters of lettuce, strawberry plants, chile plants, and herbs. I turned the corner and could feel my entire body react as I encountered a dwarf banana tree. Immediately, I was transported back to my two banana trees in Malawi, which I had lovingly, painstakingly transplanted from the jungle to my yard and raised from banana pups to towering, healthy giants. A hot surge shot through my belly at the sight and smell of this tropical sister gem thriving in the desert—I was simultaneously home and homesick, panged by love and loss. My sudden impulse was to climb into the planter and breathe in the emissions from the glossy leaves, to relive that scent-based memory of my space in Malawi. The physical reaction occurred before the mental connection caught up, as though my body had found a missing part of herself.

In fact, this could be what was taking place. In a discussion on the body and phenomenology, Abram (1997) notes that rather than viewing the body as an enclosed capsule, the body, itself, is experiencing—a "living, attentive body" with indeterminate boundaries that "define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange" (p. 46). He writes:

> The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the
> soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to
> the air, to the composing earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and
> squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself,
> so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body
> begins and where it ends.

As I ate, then, as I drank and walked and even breathed, I communicated my presence to my world, inhaling with every breath the place in which I resided, experiencing the greater-than-human world with my bodily senses, communicating and receiving specific messages through and with/in and around my living body. This communication and the literal ingesting, inhaling, embodiment of place was an "improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits" (Abram, 1997, p. 53).

Food and Relations-In-Place

The understanding of sociocultural and ecocultural food grammar in Malawi was also carefully negotiated in a bodily sense, as food communication and place-making (Basso, 1996) occur on a raw physical level between body and place. My sense of place (Feld & Basso, 1996) was established through sociocultural as well as bodily modes. This is a highly palpable transcorporeal experience, "since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 12). The dominant Western understanding of consumption is another way that the human-nature divide is perpetuated through the container metaphor of human bodies. Alaimo (2010) writes, "we are transformed by the food we consume (as the film *Supersize Me* attests), but for the most part the model of incorporation emphasizes the outline of the human: food disappears into the human body, which remains solidly bounded" (p. 13). This outline is the dominant Western conception of skin as a boundary separating the

human body from the greater-than-human world. We are aware, in a rigid nutritional sense, that food contributes to the makeup of bodies, but we largely ignore the extent of the impact that foods make—that is, that food, and in this case, place, becomes us. This is physical, but it also contributes to identity and sense of self.

I was aware of the extent to which my body was *becoming* Malawi in a very physical sense, but I don't know if I truly understood how reliant on this connection to place my self-identity had become—until it was time to leave. I physically embodied my geographical place, and simultaneously, my food (and thus, place) became an integral part of my self-understanding. As Fischler (1988) writes, "To incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat. Incorporation is a foundation for identity" (p. 278). For me, this was salient to my sense of place, my sense of self-in-place, and thus relations-in-place. The connection we have to our food is intrinsically tied with the ways we behave socioculturally, the ways in which our bodies develop, and the very ways in which we view ourselves. In other words, we are what we eat, and what we eat is who we are. Not only was eating in a highly localized manner transforming my body in a physical way, but the very conception I had of myself and my relations with/in/as my surroundings were rapidly shifting because of this transcorporeal experience.

In a community-based cultural study on environmental vernacular, Milstein, et al. (2011) illustrated the interconnectedness between social relations, nature, storytelling, rootedness to the land, and the significance of foods from local place. Within this vernacular, a sense of *relations-in-place* (Milstein, et al., 2011) was a salient theme. Here, self-identification is intrinsically "rooted both in the land and in relations with others, on food of

the land as integral to emplaced social relations, on nature as a place for stories and stories as a way to manage secure social relations within nature" (p. 502). For me, as I became more and more aware of my own embodiment of place through daily existence, this extended beyond *relations-in-place* to something more like *relations-with/in/as-place*, highlighting not only my human-human relationships with/in the greater-than-human world, but also my relationships with/in the greater-than-human world itself. Not only was I communicating and communing in a reciprocal fashion with nature, I was extending this relationship to actually become the place in which I resided.

Armstrong (1995) loosely translates the Okanagan description of those separated from their place, their land, as suffering "displacement panic" and that being pulled apart from the land also pulls them apart from their generational family (p. 319). The Okanagan believe that the physical self is only one of four selves, and that the body is in constant interaction with and is entirely dependent on what happens outside of the skin. In this way, the human body is, itself, also the Earth, although "Only in part are we aware in our intellect, through our senses, of that interaction" (p. 320). Armstrong writes, "They say our flesh, blood, and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which the Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse" (p. 320).

I cannot compare my experiences in sojourning to that of the Okanagan connection to the greater-than-human world, but the small hint I experienced leads me to believe that separation from place truly does result in crisis. These wholly embodied *relations-with/in/as-place* have salient consequences for sojourners, who, depending on the length of their stay and the level of their immersion with/in/as place, may or may not have the time or opportunity to forge these connections to the sociocultural and greater-than-human

environments; one way or the other, what does the act of wandering from place to place do to sojourner self-identity?

Separation from Food, Place, and Self

Armstrong (1995) writes, "We are this one part of Earth. Without this self we are not human: we yearn; we are incomplete" (pp. 323-324). During my homecoming ecocultural adjustment journey, I suffered a loss of relations-in-place and a disconnection from the greater-than-human world as I was separated from sensory understanding and the sources of my food, and thus, place. Food became a major source of anxiety. Fischler (1988) in his discussion of food, self, and identity, asks, "if we do not know what we eat, how can we know what we are?" (p. 280). He elaborates on the production and presentation of modern food, noting that it is becoming, in the eyes of the consumer, "an 'unidentified edible object', devoid of origin or history, with no respectable past—in short, without identity" (p. 285). During the months following my return, I continually questioned what was in my food—and where the bones had gone.

Two things initially struck me sickened and unable to eat in public upon my return. The first was the sinister inability to trace what chemical additives, sterilizers, stabilizers, emulsifiers, hormones, antibiotics, dyes, pesticides, and preservatives might be hidden in the food products I was served. What complicated and violent chain had my meal traveled, just to be fried up and served on my plate? And, further, as I looked around restaurants, I watched hundreds of pounds of wasted processed foods make their way to the trash can. The extremes of gluttony and waste upon my return were utterly shocking after an extended period of witnessing true hunger, and practicing the art of eating as a way of furthering my connection to the earth.

Furthermore, nothing tasted quite the way I had remembered or fantasized about. Chicken was dry and void of taste compared to the village's small but flavorful birds, ice cream was sickly sweet and nauseating, bananas were gigantic but bland, the smell of bacon made me feel suffocated. Even American Coca-Cola was much too sweet compared to the Malawian—the difference, perhaps, between corn syrup and cane sugar bases. My senses were indicators that my body had changed during the previous 26 months of my ecocultural adjustment journey, and this was another stage of adaptation I would have to tackle. My senses communicated specific evidences: this is healthy, this is not, this is natural, this is not. The very smell of my own body changed as my diet evolved. I was mourning the loss of my *relations-with/in/as-place* as well as my "*sensing* of place" (Basso, 1996, p. 143, original emphasis).

The understanding of food, food culture, and food sources (and, therefore, place) are thus an integral element of the sojourner ecocultural adjustment journey. Fischler (1988) asks,

> "if one does not know what one is eating, one is liable to lose the awareness or certainty of what one is oneself. How do modern foods transform us from inside? Are we in danger of losing control of ourselves through what we eat? In a food system (and a cultural system) that is in the process of being destructured and/or restructured, how do we situate ourselves in relation to the universe and the cosmos?" (pp. 285-286).

For me, as a sojourner, situating myself into Malawian food culture (and thus my position in relation to the universe) was fairly simple. I was braced for major change, trained in cultural practices and food behaviors, and trying my best to be open-minded. My time in Malawi was

one of the first occasions in my life where I knew, for extended periods, where my food was coming from, and I could feel its soil working its way through my body. This rooted me firmly to the place in which I resided and ate, and helped me forge an embodied understanding of myself, fostering and strengthening my self-identity, leading me to understand my *relations-with/in/as-place*. Returning to a nation with a lack of food culture, and thus, a lack of culture in itself, and unknown food sources thrust me into a space of identity loss.

A full eleven months before I departed Malawi, I journaled,

When I go back to America, I'll look essentially the same…But my mind, my spirit, my behavior—it won't be the same. With Africa in the very cells of my body, weighing me and weighing me down, I can't begin to predict what challenges I'll face in reassimilation.

In this massive transition back to the United States, I suffered the loss of place, and thus, self-identity. I also suffered the loss of daily challenges, which, though intensely trying, had provided me with a sense of satisfaction and efficacy. The barriers that I had sought to build in order to maintain my human-nature divide had been since broken and I had surrendered myself into a space of humanature relations. And then this, too, was lost, as I returned to a safe, sterile and insulated home surrounded by concrete and asphalt—clean-dirty boundaries were sharp and well-established once more and the human-nature divide was carefully regulated by measures beyond my control.

I was also severed from my quiet solitude, no longer free of technology, media, and crowds of people; I had to forgo my time of silence and creativity, roving thoughts and attempts at philosophy, long periods alone with the greater-than-human world. I traded this

solitude-as-listening for traffic, human noise pollution, and smart phones. All of these factors—reestablishment of clean-dirty boundaries and the human-nature divide, loss of solitude and silence, loss of communication with and as the greater-than-human world, and *relations-with/in/as-place* through transcorporeality and food communication, not to mention sociocultural and human communication challenges—culminated in a crisis of *ecocultural re-entry shock.*

Chapter 8: Departure, Homecoming, and Ecocultural Re-entry Shock

Keep the earth below my feet; For all my sweat, my blood runs weak; Let me learn from where I have been; Keep my eyes to serve, my hands to learn.

-Mumford and Sons

Due to the physical and emotional reciprocal immersion I had developed with and in and as this distinct place, the idea of leaving made me highly anxious. In May 2013 (after 22 months in country), Peace Corps Malawi hosted my cohort's Close of Service (COS) Conference, during which time we cemented our departure travel plans, received brief advice about future job searches, and had a session of about one hour on what it would be like to transition back to American life. This contrasted greatly from our two months of Pre-Service Training (PST), which provided abundant instruction and advice for cultural adjustment and shock and taught us extensively about Malawian culture.

Experiencing shock upon homecoming is "counter-intuitive" (Sussman, 2001, p. 110) because it is widely assumed that home is still based on familiarity, and should, then, require little transition (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992). Thus, at least in my experience with Peace Corps Malawi, much of this transition training is skipped. We were notified that we were provided with three free counseling sessions to ease our transition upon re-entry, in the case that we struggled with our homecoming adjustment. This was the extent of our stateside support.

When it came time to return to the United States, my body rebelled, begging with every atom of her carbon for me to let her stay in her world of adventures. Life in Malawi was difficult on her, but she was much more afraid of the alternative, of losing it. From May to my scheduled August departure, my body became ill, generating her own fever and aches. She cried and howled, her muscles knotted, clenched in mourning and uncertainty. She ate

through her own stomach. She refused to sleep. She became angry, and scared, and lost, prone to lashing out, temperamental and sullen. I was told stress was the only viable cause this *body rebellion* through chronic illness and I was put into counseling (only for the maximum three sessions permitted by the US Peace Corps before I would be medically separated, of course). I tried to find various ways to stay after my extension fell through the cracks and termination of service was imminent. I interviewed for jobs, I looked for places to stay, but I couldn't find a viable option. I later blogged:

> In this blog and all other communications, I continued to focus on the positive. I did not want my family or my friends to think that I did not miss them. I did not think they would understand how I could be afraid of them. They expected me to be celebrating my homecoming while I was struggling to hide my heartbreak. There were hints of misunderstanding, insensitivity, and disinterest, not because the people I love don't care about me, but because very few people could even guess at what I was feeling. I couldn't match their excitement, and it made me feel like something was wrong with me.

I struggled to name what it was that drove my fear, and it seemed to be a grand dread of the "real world," as I wrote in my blog, "This time I have not set off on a great adventure, into the vast unknown world. I traveled this time to unemployment, to complicated technology, to social pressures, and extreme consumerism—all things I find depressing and daunting." I retrospectively blogged,

> All these worries, combined with the stress of finishing all my projects, packing up my house, saying my goodbyes, and completing Peace Corps' paperwork, made me physically ill. I became chronically sick in May and was given a stress-induced

diagnosis. I started experiencing terrifying panic attacks and severe insomnia. My body ached; the day I left my house for good I couldn't turn my head because my neck was so painfully knotted with tension. I was prone to teary break-downs. I was sick all the time. I was sleepless and snappy. I threw myself into work mode, successfully dominating my interviews and my closing paperwork…The only aspect of my official preparations that I struggled to master was packing. So I gave everything away.

I marched through my last days in the capital city largely numb, but ever on the edge of tears. Sometimes I broke down into states of sobbing, but could not articulate why—it felt like my body's own behaviors, while my brain had retreated to a separate place, as though my mind were severing from my body in anticipation of reentering Western ecoculture. There was no logic to it.

Soon the day of departure arrived. I blogged:

A gang of four of us departing the same hour got a taxi to the airport with our favorite driver, Tennessee. I watched out the window as the dry scenery spun by me. I thought of the day I arrived, 26 months earlier, exhausted from long flights and giddy with excitement and ambition. The future was limitless and exciting. This time, my tired body buzzed with fear.

I found myself on a plane in August of 2013, looking down over the country as it shrank below, holding tightly to my friends' hands, shaking and verging on hysterical as I laughed uncontrollably and frighteningly, feeling as though I, my body, were literally ripping as I removed myself from the land.

Ecoculture Shock in Homecoming

Leaving the hot lakeshore jungle of my Malawian village to work a commuter job in Culver City, California, was a jolt to my entire sense of being. Simply navigating the city took all my energy, not to mention the act of driving for the first time in over two years. I sat in traffic for hours every day, just to enter a work place where I sat still, miserably shivering in the air conditioning, staring at a computer screen, before joining the traffic once again. The grocery store was a source of sheer anxiety for me—the abundance, the overwhelming options, the overloaded carts and the excessive spending, the lines and crowds, the fluorescent lights—all of this was panic inducing. Public places were over-stimulating, always contaminated by music or television, too much pressure from servers, too much conversation surrounding me on all sides.

I was thrust into counseling (again, for three sessions only) and immediately assigned a diagnosis, clearly suffering from "adjustment disorder"—a mild diagnosis, the counselor told me, "because if I write down the word *depression*, it could follow you forever." The recommendations she gave me were completely anthropocentric and people-based: volunteer in the community, make friends, or join an organization. Yet, I was suffering something more than a loss of companionship and job fulfillment. I was grieving for the full picture: the people of my community, yes, desperately, and of course my job, but also the smell of burning maize husks, the taste of the local lakeshore bananas, the sensation of the lake during hot season, the thick nighttime air, the wet heat, the daily adventure, the long walks, the surprise visits from exotic critters, the relaxed pace of life, the labor and the dirt, the roaring thunder, the mineral of the ground water, the feel of muscle and pain and hard physical work, the scent of my own body.

I was told, again and again, that it was just *culture shock*, and that it would pass. My counselor reminded me that I would be *normal* again soon. But what was *normal*? Feeling comfortable constantly wearing shoes so I could comfortably walk on the concrete pathways instead of feeling the earth beneath my feet? Enjoying frigid air conditioning and the constant blaring of commercials? Adjusting to water that tasted of chlorine instead of the earth from which it came? Happily shopping at Wal-Mart? Settling for a daily 4 hours of commuting for a job I didn't like, just so I could have some money and, therefore, better social status, or, at least, social survival? Was it *normal* to have no idea where my food was coming from, or what was in it? Was it *normal* to exercise indoors in a concrete room where no one spoke to one another? Was it *normal* to spend 23 hours of the day either sitting still or sleeping? Was it *normal* to be constantly surrounded by people and yet disconnected from each and every one of them? Was it *normal* to blow dry my hair instead of letting it dry by a fire outside? Was it *normal* for my encounters with the greater-than-human world to be an over-fertilized, insect-free, and carefully groomed grass area at a park? I had lost my connection with the earth, with my own humanature, and I was thrust back into a world where the human-nature divide was palpable, sharp. In my blog, I, a now recovering arachnophobe, wrote:

> Even though I keep imagining them, I've seen no cockroaches, no mice, no centipedes, no scorpions, no snakes, no lizards, no birds, no bats, no millipedes, no slugs, no termites, and no wasps in my house or my bed. There was a tiny spider living on the edge of my bathtub and I checked every morning to make sure she hadn't abandoned me. But then she did.

My world was suddenly safe by dominant Western standards—clean, separated from the outside world, dirt-free. It was protected, insulated, climate-controlled, and designed for my

comfort. Despite suddenly being once more surrounded by other people, other Americans, my own family, I had never felt so alone.

This, for me, was *ecoculture shock* or *ecocultural reentry shock*—the literal shock of my body as she was transplanted from an environment consisting largely of natural elements to one almost entirely constructed by humans. The people were different, the environment was different, and not one person in my life could even begin to understand the pain I was feeling.

Nostalgia for the Humanature

Journal entry, March 11, 2013: In this moment, I feel a familiar elation, an overwhelming happiness, my own violent flood of joy. I had hoped Peace Corps service would quell my wanderlust. I was hoping it would saturate me with adventure until I wanted no more, until I could be satisfied to stay still. If anything though, my time in Malawi has cemented me in my wandering ways, proving that I not only tolerate it, but that I thrive in my nomadic lifestyle. I enjoy my adventures. I like watching the fields roll by outside the window of a shared taxi with Malawian dance music pounding. I like teetering on the edge of the world in a battered pickup with the great wide lake 2000 feet below…I like seeing the kids dance in celebration of the first rains as the mud grows and moves beneath their feet. I like being able to walk endless kilometers with my belongings on my back, unafraid of sweat and dirt and bugs and people. I like hitchhiking…I like trying new foods I've never sampled, seeing places I've never seen before, and doing things I've never done. I love the thrill of the new. I will not survive without it.

In a beautiful irony, I miss all that I once battled. To this day, I miss my creepy-crawly creature roommates, I miss the warm blanket of heat, I miss the physically hard work,

the blisters and blood, the dirt, the exercise and elation of my senses. I particularly miss my once highly active sense of smell, which now lies largely dormant. Of his return to North America following his sojourn in Southeast Asia, Abram (1997) writes, "I was indeed acclimating to my own culture, becoming more attuned to its styles of discourse and interaction, yet my bodily senses seemed to be losing their acuteness, becoming less awake to subtle changes and patterns" (p. 26). Upon my own return to North America, I was disturbed by the lack of human scent on the bodies of others. Americans smelled clean and synthetic, more chemical than animal. Eventually, my sensory awareness, like Abram's, faded nearly altogether, no longer necessary to my occularcentric lifestyle. Abram writes, "my skin quit registering the various changes in the breeze, and smells seemed to have faded from the world almost entirely, my nose waking up only once or twice a day" (p. 26). I miss the feeling of my body operating in sync with the greater-than-human world. The constant negotiation of the humanature relationship (once framed as a battle and later as an adventure) is addicting, and it ever beckons to this former adventurer from the calm of American life. In their discussion on discourses of dwelling, Carbaugh and Cerulli (2012) write:

> "…place is profoundly basic and specific as we learn and study who and where we are. The concept takes us, like celebrated others before us, to concrete and contingent circumstances which serve as the grounds of our existence, our experiences and lives. By losing sight (or touch, or feel, or smell) of our places, we risk being unsettled in our thoughts, floating above and beyond our immediate circumstances, where we indeed live.

That is, we identify much of ourselves as intrinsically connected to the place we live, our dwelling or home space. I was Malawi, and then I lost the elements of place that had made me feel secure in that identity.

My existence in my village strengthened my attachment to the land and my understanding of my own identity within it, helping me to forge a new home. In Malawi, every movement, even walking, was based on uncertainty and sensory stimulation. Navigating my route meant communicating with strangers, negotiating obstacles, experiencing the heat or cold or wind or rain, feeling stress or hunger or frustration or elation, riding in cramped cars with goats or chickens or children or too many adults, taking risks. Sometimes, it meant getting peed on, adopting a child for a day's travel, getting stranded late at night, spending hours napping on the roadside, negotiating the black market, climbing a mountain, pushing trucks out of knee-deep mud, riding on sacks of maize swarming with weevils or nestling into a truck bed full of cabbages. My life in the United States is very protected in comparison with the one I lived in Malawi. There, the land played an active role, constantly exercising my patience, boldness, independence, spirit, and willpower. It stretched my physical limits, exemplifying the strength, beauty, and sheer capability of what I learned is an exquisite and powerful body that I could be proud of for her resilience.

Here, in the United States, I suffer from wanderlust and boredom. I spend the majority of my time inside buildings, literally insulated from the rest of the world. My time is spent busily, but not necessarily meaningfully, and I am surrounded by technology built to make my life easier. As a student scholar, I spend much of my time in front of a computer, and my hands stay clean, free of dirt. I break a sweat only when intentionally exercising, mostly in an enclosed space. And, most destructively, I am sedentary, anchored to one place

but without the time to learn it, to explore it, to commune with it. I am a permanent foreigner within my local greater-than-human spaces. I have gone from a woman adventuring to a woman simply situated in Western society.

The Ecocultural Adjustment Journey Continues

Recently, my mother wrote me: "Seems I have always been pulled between worlds. However, my moving between worlds is always less stunning than the shock you wore when you returned to the states. Oh my! That was something else!" Since I returned to the United States and took on this different life of concrete and professional dress and reliable vehicles, my body changed. And as she did, so changed my relationship with the earth. Two and half years later, I am still working to adjust to life in the United States. Frankly, I did not begin to make great progress until I relocated from southern California to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Dust marked my arrival in this wide-open state. I turned to this in-between land in a desperate search for something beyond the grind of smog and anxiety. I needed to forge a new home, to find a new sense of belonging, and to rediscover the sensation of being alive. I needed sanctuary and space and I welcomed the challenge of both academia and the high desert, neither of which was within my realm of experience. This was much more favorable than the alternative of staying put, pursuing *normalcy* in Los Angeles.

When I moved to Albuquerque I discovered that the summer monsoons were wild, intense, and exciting, the desert mountains were rich with life, and the people I encountered were hot air balloon adventurers, hikers, campers, onion farmers, revolutionaries, dog lovers, beer drinkers, snowboarders, hippies, mountain climbers, explorers, transplants, barefoot wanderers, philosophers, nomads, and protectors of the land. These people could sense the approaching storms, they knew the feeling and the character of the dirt, they were proud of their overlapping and intersecting cultures. They rode their bikes and read books and

transformed their front yards into vegetable gardens. They remembered what it meant to honor the earth, to appreciate the sunshine, to be thankful for the rain.

I struggle still. I have difficulty with working day in and out in air conditioned and fluorescent-lit offices and classrooms. I am easily over-stimulated and exhausted by basic conversation. I can't tolerate commercials on the radio or television, and have difficulty splitting my attention between media and conversation—background noise is sure to ruin my human connections. I have trouble understanding the justification for uncomfortable professional clothing and, particularly, nonfunctional shoes (I never relearned high heels). I adamantly seek out local foods and am constantly frustrated by the general American relationship to food, or, more often, food products. My body developed allergies for the first time; these are year-round and inhibiting to my normal activity. I still have a sensitive stomach, potentially from my multiple encounters with bacterial dysentery, giardia, and stress-induced illness. One of my instructors recently told me, in a refreshing fit of honesty, that she was so happy to see me looking better, as when I arrived in Albuquerque, I had appeared wild eyed and constantly alarmed.

Most importantly, I have severe difficulty with the management of stress. I find American (and, of course, academic) existence to be extraordinarily taxing. The clenched knot painfully entangling the muscles in my neck that plagued me throughout my Malawian goodbyes returned with a vengeance stateside, and I've been unable to fully turn my head left for over a year. A slight rise in stress invariably causes instant digestive issues. Stress also dictates a complicated relationship among my body, my brain, and sleep. The pace of life from polychronic Malawi back to the monochronic United States, and the ecocultural jolt of

environmental change affected my body in ways I still do not (and probably will never) understand.

In a study of corporate and government employee homecomings, Adler (1981) contradicts the "implicit assumption" that cultural re-entry should be easier than the initial sojourn, noting, "returnees in the present study found re-entry slightly more difficult than the initial entry transition" (p. 341). One would assume, as well, that this would greatly vary depending on a range of variables, though in Adler's study, "employees suffered equally from re-entry shock, regardless of their overseas location or type of assignment" (p. 342). For me, my re-entry was not just slightly more difficult—it was initially debilitating.

Though little research has been conducted on the environmental factors of cultural adjustment, culture shock, and cultural re-entry shock, my homecoming experience was largely one of humanature relations. The contrast between my deeply immersive greater-than-human communication and relations-in-place in my village, and the abrupt reinsertion of the human-nature divide caused embodied loss and trauma. This also combined with anthropocentric factors of cultural adjustment. This culmination of human and greater-than-human elements made this process not simply *cultural re-entry shock*, but *ecocultural re-entry shock*.

Ecocultural Adjustment as an Individual Journey

Because a number of factors contribute to *ecocultural adjustment*, it is a constantly shifting process. For me, my attention was drawn to the influence of environmental factors due specifically to the unique situation I was in and the rare opportunity I had to immerse myself into the greater-than-human world. If I had been placed in an urban setting during my service with the US Peace Corps, I might be in a very different situation today. However, it is

key that even if I were in an urban environment, I would still have undergone and would be undergoing *ecocultural adjustment*—I just would not necessarily be so aware of this process.

My journey has been impacted by many circumstances—illness, travel, weather conditions, technology or lack thereof, etc. I've done my best to chart this out on a simple timeline and couple it with a summative model of my own journey (see Chapter 9, below). The biggest take-away from charting my own ups and downs of *relations-in-place* is that *ecocultural adjustment* is not a simple pattern, or a predictive formula. Humans, their environments, and their interpretations of the greater-than-human world are vastly diverse. By illustrating my own experience, I emphasize that *ecocultural adjustment* is an unpredictable journey of perspectives and constant negotiation as both our minds and our bodies communicate with place and work to situate themselves within the broader cultural and environmental demands. My chronological mapping of my own journey serves as an invitation for others to reflexively consider their own experiences in a similar manner, through an ecocultural lens.

Chapter 9: Application of Ecocultural Adjustment in Immersion Trainings

In this time of space-time compression (Massey, 2013) and extraordinary mobility, reflexive examination of adjustment processes is vital for improved negotiation of intercultural and ecocultural relations. Travel means constant negotiation and renegotiation of space and culture, and approaching this continual process in a self-reflexive manner is necessary for both healthy adjustment as well as sensitivity to cultural practices and conceptions of space.

This study is one response to Milstein's (2005) call for qualitative studies that could "further the sensemaking process of the sojourn and its relationship to personal growth" (p. 235). By widening the scope of factors that are given value in the play into sojourner adjustment and creating space for subconscious, sensory, and embodied variables, the sensemaking process can be better understood and articulated in trainings. Including environmental factors in the conscious sensemaking process of adjustment would be helpful for self-awareness in sojourner adjustment and could, therefore, increase feelings of self-efficacy.

An emphasis on environmental factors would also greatly strengthen cultural immersion and re/integration trainings. In my experience, the US Peace Corps does a fair job of training volunteers when they first arrive in their host nations, spending up to three months on language and culture training. However, almost none of this centers on environmental elements, something that should be considered as particularly crucial in Malawi, where the East African Rift has created a tumultuous and highly varied topography. An awareness of potential environmental influences as well as coping mechanisms for these could greatly ease sojourner adjustment journeys.

While I was prepared to deal with some of the greater-than-human elements thanks to medical sessions (mosquitoes and parasites, in particular), I would have greatly benefited from preparation on the mental stress stemming from environmental factors. This would obviously look different for every location, but in my case, I would have found it very helpful to converse with PCVs already residing in the geographical region I was assigned to about how they managed the hot weather, mosquito population, dehydration, hunger season, and other greater-than-human factors. Instead, it took me trial and error, word of mouth, and a very long period of time to figure out some simple solutions for my humanature relations, such as sprinkling baby powder in the doorways to deter ants, planting lemongrass under my windows to naturally repel mosquitoes, and taking a monthly dose of deworming medication regardless of my symptoms.

Peace Corps Malawi brought in many local trainers that could provide good insight, but many of these were unfamiliar with farther-flung regions in the nation. Furthermore, they were subject to a rigid, global training plan that allowed no space or time for discussions on issues such as the weather. Additionally, I also received training from recently arrived American staff, compounding the already existing disconnect from the greater-than-human world in our training. I was given the opportunity on several occasions to serve as a technical trainer for the teaching skills of new arrivals, so I was also able to personally answer some questions about environmental and cultural issues. As this was not in my assignment description, however, I was told not to engage in these conversations. This was unfortunate, as it created the sense that Peace Corps Malawi wanted their trainees to learn through trial by fire. Trainings, however, should highlight experienced workers in the field rather than relying on urban-based and recently arrived trainers, and training agendas should include space for

discussions on adjustment to the greater-than-human world as well factors of the built environments.

On my journey, additionally, Peace Corps Malawi placed very little training emphasis on the return to the United States. Contrasting with the two months of language and culture training I completed upon arrival, I had an approximately one-hour informational session and was provided a thin handbook about departure and homecoming processes. This is insufficient, as extant theory demonstrates that re-entry can be particularly stressful. Perhaps future studies could help shed light on ways to improve this oversight.

In my case, it was somewhat helpful to have a discussion panel (possibly a unique feature of Peace Corps Malawi's 2013 COS conference) with RPCVs who had undergone this transition (although it would have been nice if they were largely more recently returned volunteers, as the panel mostly consisted of RPCVs who had served in the 1980s-90s). It would have been much more beneficial, however, to focus on coping strategies for homecoming readjustment. In the case of a return to the United States, these might include discussions on current events (both nationally and in local hometowns), reminders of particular phenomena (traffic, size of vehicles, height of buildings, restaurant etiquette, media presence), and discussions on re-adapting to wealth, materialism, social expectations, American body image, environmental relations, and human-human communication.

In my case, I had had no access to news networks and would have greatly benefitted from an update on the previous two years' events. I was also absent for over two years in a time of grand technological revolution and would have benefitted from a tutorial on recent technologies (I thought I was updated on technology since I owned an iPod, something that had become a dinosaur in two short years). I also had to relearn social interactions according

to dominant Western expectations—I had mostly forgotten the pace and rapid interacting behaviors of the dominant Western world. Moreover, it would have been greatly beneficial to emphasize environmental norms; I remember being startled by seemingly sorcerous occurrences like the prediction of the weather, availability of avocados in every season, water for green lawns all year long, trash and recycling pick-up services, and trucks that traveled around town spraying for the reduction of mosquito populations.

Design and utilization of more environmentally-driven immersion and re/integration trainings would be of great benefit to inter- or transnational organizations and would contribute to improved mental/emotional/physical health of those employed to travel, work, and/or reside abroad. It could also help us to better understand the effects of transition on study abroad and international students and thus create and initiate more comprehensive training and support programs.
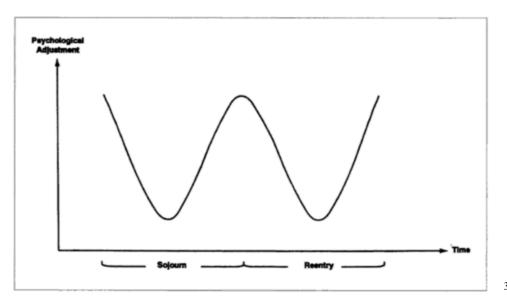
Beyond Predictive Patterns in Immersion Trainings

One direct application for re/immersion trainings is considering a shift in the use of models and predictive patterns. Predictions of cultural adjustment through the use of models can be helpful to some extent, but there is a danger in using these models to represent a correct, functional, normal way of adjusting. *Ecocultural adjustment*, as a process that creates more allowance for individual adjustment journeys, presents an opportunity to shift this idea of normalcy. As I mentioned, my personal experience, particularly in re-entry, was a distinct expectation of normalcy—being diagnosed with *adjustment disorder* was particularly emotionally damaging, as it indicated that there was a correct way to adjust and that I, implicitly incorrect, was maladjusted. This naming, this standardized framing of my process

as incorrect caused high levels of anxiety about my own well-being and made me question what, exactly, was wrong with me.

The dominant expectation is that sojourners will follow the Sewell & Davidson's (1956) U-curve and/or Gullahorn and Gullahorn's (1963) W-curve models of adaptation (used for my own culture training in Malawi in 2011). These patterns indicate distinct highs and lows in adjustment with a definitive final adjustment.

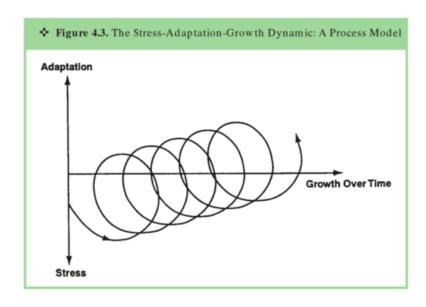**Figure 1. Gullahorn & Gullahorn's (1963) W-Curve**

More recently, some scholars have made a move to highlight the processual nature of adjustment, as illustrated by Kim's (2000) model of the Stress-Adaptation Growth dynamic. This demonstrates the variability of adjustment, exhibiting the cycles of stress as an integral part of adjustment. This model does not necessarily indicate an end to the adaptation process, which is helpful in conceptualizing adjustment as an ongoing journey.

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[3] U- and W-Curve model highlighted in Kim, Y. Y. (2002)

Figure 2. Kimm's (2000) Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic

❖ **Figure 4.3.** The Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic: A Process Model

[4]

Both of the above models are based on human-centered stress and adaptation. In examining ecocultural adjustment, I wondered what role the greater-than-human world or the environment in general plays in this process. I thus began experimenting with my own visualizations of this phenomenon.

Modeling Ecocultural Adjustment

In considering the power and widespread use of models, I have reflected on my own experience to puzzle out how it fits in to these illustrations. As an experiment, I first tried to summarize my experiences of ecocultural adjustment and, specifically my stressors, over time. I found that these were often human-centered or environment-centered stressors (with environment as built or of the greater-than-human), and that these stressors were inextricably related. The combination of these tensions pulled and pushed my ecocultural adjustment, my

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[4] Stress-Adaption Growth Dynamic highlighted in Kim, (2000)

ideological leanings, my communication with the greater-than-human world, and my embodied relationship with place and ecosystem.

Figure 3. Timeline of Ecocultural Stressors

- **June-August, 2011: Training**—highly culture-centered adjustment efforts cause mid to high-stress level; physical adaptations to elevation, cold weather, and foods contribute to overall discomfort.

- **August-November, 2011: Arrival and adjustment to assigned site**—strong human-nature divide effort exerted to create and maintain boundaries. Emphasis is on cultural adaptation and immersion and the feasibility of this makes it less stressful than environmental factors.

- **November, 2011-February, 2012: Moments of solitude-as-listening**—beginning to learn a sense of coexistence with the greater-than-human world while human-centered adjustment seems more difficult.

- **February-March, 2012: Anger at the greater-than-human world**—paranoia and anxiety due to mefloquine antimalarial medication; anger with nature for onslaught of pests and pervasive heat; infected with bacterial dysentery, hookworm, fungus, and struggling with heat rash. I am witness to a robbery and an unrelated assault, which increases human-centered stressors.

- **April-May, 2012: Calming in nature**—rejuvenated following switch in malarial treatment as mefloquine leaves my system; preparation for and process of natural medicine training connects me to the earth and a mostly forgotten human culture.

- **May-June, 2012: Quality company and calm in the water**—a visit from an unknown RPCV from PC Namibia rekindles my interest in the culture in which I reside; I begin working on a biodiversity project and feel very unified with Lake Malawi.

- **June-August, 2012: Disconnect from local ecoculture**—travel for summer camps, trainings, and volunteer events removes me from my village, severing me from my local community and environment. I stay in a Peace Corps bubble, surrounded by Americans in urban environments, with culture-centered stressors.

- **September-October, 2012: Awareness of changing body**—I introspectively reflect on my body's assimilation into the greater-than-human world.

- **October-December, 2012: Illness and fatigue**—long-term illness and fatigue cause stress from and disinterest in the local culture and general irritation with the greater-than-human elements, which result in feelings of adjustment failure.

- **January-March, 2013: Adjustment upswing**—slowly overcoming illness and fatigue culminates in a vacation during which I find I feel extremely comfortable in my ecoculture, navigating both Malawi and Mozambique on foot, via hitchhiking, underwater, on boats, and in public transportation.

- **March-May, 2013: Job satisfaction**—feeling accomplished in my work helps me feel more culturally-situated and much more peaceful in the greater-than-human world; I feel very comfortable and begin considering an extension.

- **May-August, 2013: Anxiety for departure**—leaving begins to seem very real and anxiety (and anxiety-related illness) spikes as I cope with goodbyes to community and the severing of self from place.

- **August, 2013: Departure and ecoculture shock**—I depart Malawi and spend time in Thailand. Bangkok in particular (mainly the sheer amount of people and the built environment) jolts me severely and I fall back into anxiety-caused illness; I wish to retreat from humans and return to the solace of my village.

- **September-December, 2013: Ecocultural re-entry shock**—I return to California and am overwhelmed. Surgery gives me an excuse to hide away from people as I am also greatly disconnected from the greater-than-human world.

- **January-April, 2014: "Normalization"**—I am working a commuter job in the city and am easily angered by people and push away from human interaction and the built environment. I seek solace instead in hikes in the California hills, imagining they are Malawian.

- **April-August, 2014: Waiting for the next step**—I continue to mourn the loss of my self-identity and channel my energy into planning for my return to grad school, hoping that this will give me purpose once again. I am slowly relearning American culture but do not make any friends and struggle in familial relations. I feel most comfortable outdoors.

- **August-December, 2014: Settling down**—I begin school in a new, initially harsh greater-than-human world, and struggle with the structure, social interaction, and the built environment, but I begin to be more comfortable with humans, I am interested in learning the local culture, and I spend as much time as possible exploring the greater-than-human world, which often feels Malawian in sensory-based ways. Simultaneously, I experience bodily stress as I adapt to the desert.

Next, I created my own model, which, I will refer to from here on out as a *reflection*, as it is intended to better conceptualize my personal processes, not create a predictive model for other sojourners. I began a simplified timeline of events and articulated it with a 5-point scale to retrospectively estimate human-centered or environment-centered stressors in conscious sojourner adjustment, with 1 indicating low levels of stress, and 5 indicating high levels of stress. Illustrating human-centered and environment-centered stressors as individual lines is a heuristic move to highlight how and where the environment is missing from former models, as well as call attention to various causes of stress. This is not intended to reproduce a divide or binary, but to examine, rather, the interconnectedness of stressors. The intention was to examine the relationship between human and environment-centered stressors, and how these can contribute to the overall adjustment process.
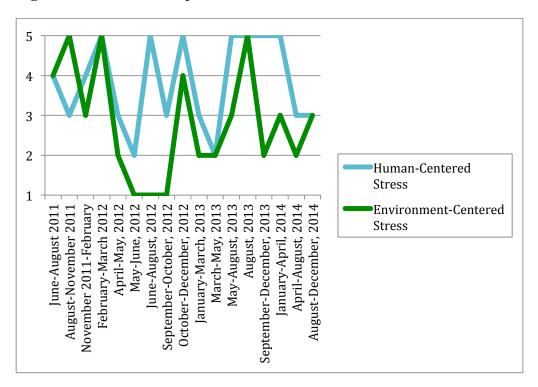
Figure 4. Ecocultural Adjustment Stress Reflection

It is relatively simple for me to pinpoint moments of stress using the narratives of my

personal ecocultural journey. What is more difficult to identify is growth, or adjustment.

Following Kimm's (2000) theory, these stressors would initiate growth over time. Because

ecocultural adjustment journeys, however, are not finite processes, but are ongoing, organic,

evolving experiences with unpredictable stressors, growth (and therefore, ecocultural

adjustment) is difficult to define, measure, and illustrate. Additionally, the re-entry process

disrupts patterns and forces them to begin again. In the case of ecocultural adjustment, one

way growth could be conceptualized is moving from anthropocentric ideology and behavior

toward a more ecocultural perspective, beyond the container metaphor to an understanding of

transcorporeality and the influence of the greater-than-human. In this case, re-entry into a

dominant Western society would cause pushback against this growth, reinitiating an

adjustment cycle.

It is also worth noting that the peaks and falls (resembling in, some ways, the W-curve) would not look so extreme if I had charted more or less frequent time segments. There are, however, distinct rises and falls in stress regardless. Future studies could examine the relationship between human and environment or nature-centered stressors and what this might mean for growth and ecocultural adjustment, and how these fit with existing models on cultural adjustment and adaptation.
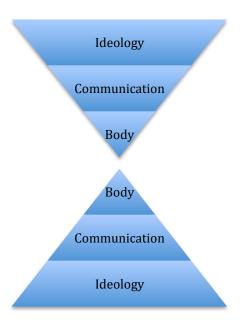
Emergent Reflections of Ecocultural Adjustment

Because this work gave me the opportunity to write very freely and personally, as well as reflectively follow the journey depicted in my journals and my blogs, it is possible that the pattern in which my themes emerged may be reflective of my personal ecocultural adjustment journey itself. The first theme that arose dealt with overall negotiation of the human-nature divide at the ideological level through the creation and maintenance of boundaries, as well as early inklings of transcorporeality. Next, both my reflective writing as well as my adjustment process moved inward, highlighting emotional, mental, and physical communication with/in/as and attachment to place and the greater-than-human world. Finally, my understanding of these themes was exemplified through my deeply embodied relationship with/in/as the greater-than-world, as I recognized the physical manifestation of the earth in my bodily tissue and how this situated me within the ecosystem.

This process of writing is reflective of the process of ecocultural adjustment and transcorporeal embodiment I experienced in Malawi; it was an inward movement through ideology, communication, and into the body. Following my return to the United States, I underwent a rapid reversal of this, as my body was detached from the ecosystem she had become a member of, my communication with the greater-than-human world was lost, and I

was forced to reevaluate, once again, my ideologies and, particularly, my structurally-influenced conception of the human-nature divide and my humanature relations. One *reflection* illustrating this process follows an hourglass shape, inward and out.

Figure 5. Reflection of Ecocultural Adjustment

Ideology

Communication

Body

Body

Communication

Ideology

Keeping in mind that this journey was deeply personal and that this was a particularly intense example of ecocultural adjustment due to the severe removal of physical barriers from the greater-than-human world, I wonder to what extent this inductive, inward (and upon homecoming, outward) process is shared by other sojourners. While very simple and, in many ways, in line with the simplicity of the W-curve pattern, this reflection brings attention to the influence of dominant ideology and communication (interpersonal, intercultural, and humanature), as well as the role of the body and its place in the ecosystem, embodiment, physical place attachment, and sub/conscious adjustment processes. Future studies could further examine models of ecocultural adjustment, working toward ways of conceptualizing

that can continue to open up these processes to further possibilities and seek to undo the human-nature divide.

Considerations for Immigration and Crises

The concept of ecocultural adjustment could also lead to better understanding and supporting immigrant and refugee groups, as well as military deployments and returns. My experiences were greatly cushioned by the privilege I carry as a white, middle-class, educated woman sojourning voluntarily, with the assurance of return to my family, and with a reliable organization (and particularly with a family support network in case of emergencies). This is not comparable to economically or environmentally compulsory movement and yet, the concept of *ecocultural adjustment* could perhaps be applied. Future research could focus particularly on the ecoculture shock and ecocultural adjustment processes of environmental refugees (El-Hinnawi,1985; Bates, 2002) and climate crisis refugees (Williams, 2008). It is also vital to examine migrations that may not seem directly related to environmental concerns. Ecocultural adjustment occurs, on some level, in all movements; examining specific groups in a rich, qualitative manner would shed light on how influential environmental factors are on adjustment and shock, as well as overall processes of immersion and integration.

Chapter 10: Saying Goodbye: Discussion and Implications

Most of the themes I discuss in this work return to sense or loss of self. My self-identity seemed poised to disappear as I felt ripped from my Malawian life, and forced into a situation where my identity was dictated by a past version of myself and a dominant culture I no longer fit into. I felt stripped of my power as an independent, solo sojourning woman; I felt stripped of my freedom and carefree outlook as an adventuring youth; I felt stripped of my relations-with/in/as-place as well as my sense of self-in-place. I felt thrust into a space of responsibility, purposeless social obligation, disconnect from the greater-than-human world, and technological reliance.

As parts of my individual *ecocultural adjustment journey*, my version of *ecoculture shock*, and particularly *ecocultural re-entry shock*, was the mourning of the loss of my environment and my ecologically embedded self. There were other, human-centered elements as well: difficulty with communication, overstimulation, challenges conforming to social expectations, and panic attacks when faced with the abundance and materialism of American consumerism. None of these operates independently from environment, however, which is why a more ecocultural definition of *culture shock* is necessary. The concept of *ecoculture shock* incorporates a much wider spectrum of transitional effects, allowing space for individualized and intimate adjustment experiences with the cultural and the ecological intertwined.

Ecocultural adjustment presents a more integrated view of anthropocentric and ecocentric viewpoints, thus breaking down this distinction. It acknowledges that adjustment is impacted by human-centered elements, while also considering the strong impact that can be made by change of environmental circumstances, creating space for the shock of change in weather patterns, climate, elevation, vegetation, air quality, creature sounds, visibility of

the stars, presence of water, availability of local foods, amount of concrete or skyscraper, and a countless number of other environmental factors. Ecocultural adjustment is present in every relocation process. I am reminded of this every time I return to Albuquerque after visiting the sea-level Gulf coast; climbing back up to our 5,000 feet of elevation leaves me headachey, fatigued, and breathless. Even my recent snowboarding day trip to Santa Fe deeply affected my body, as I worked her every muscle in freezing conditions at 12,000 feet on a dry mountaintop. I adapt to extreme desert temperatures and harsh winds, different allergens, drier air, varied seasonal foods, changes in my water, summer monsoons, and average temperatures, not to mention shifts in traffic patterns, pollution levels, and amounts of pavement or green space. My body responds to these variables just as my brain and behaviors must adjust to sociocultural factors such as language, food culture, and social and economic understanding.

Implications

The multiple themes that arose in this case study illustrate various ways that environmental factors (both human constructed and the greater-than-human) impact sojourners, creating ecocultural adjustment, ecoculture shock, and ecocultural re-entry shock effects. This study illustrates some particular examples of why environmental factors should be integrated into and fore-fronted in the intercultural, environmental, and ecocultural communication research community and, likewise, cultural factors in the environmental communication research community.

This study has broad implications for extant research. Firstly, the concept of *ecocultural adjustment* as outlined in this work goes much more deeply than simply tacking *eco* onto an established theory. It calls attention to the wide range of variables that contribute to adjustment processes from both cultural and environmental standpoints. This creates space

for bodily and embodied adjustment processes in addition to those that are human-centered, which can help shift conceptions of sojourner transitions as a strictly mental journey centered on learning local traditions and practices during relocation.

The concept of *ecocultural adjustment* also creates more space for both emotion and agency. If we (as Western academics and practitioners) stop considering adjustment to be a simple formula following distinct patterns that ultimately result in healthy adaptation and cultural normalcy, we can honor the individuality of sojourner experience by acknowledging that people may react very differently within unique adjustment journeys. This allows emotional and bodily reactions to be considered valid, and not the result of a disorder or a lack of strength. The loosening of theoretical standards and predictive patterns on sojourner adjustment also allows for human and ecological agency in these processes—sojourners can introspectively make decisions about and assessments of their own transitions rather than predictive patterns dictating the way they should be behaving or what stage they should be in at any given moment in their adjustment journey. Of course, this is an issue dear to my own heart, as I was and have been considered maladjusted and abnormal in throughout my adjustment journey. And why should I have been expected to be normal?

The concept of *ecocultural adjustment* also broadens the conventional definitions of communication as an exclusively human-human act and calls attention to the often sub/conscious interpretations of the human senses in gathering information, relating to the greater-than-human world, creating embodied attachment to place, and operating with/in/as nature. Because it makes a move toward opening up the dominant Western conceptions of communication, it begins to break down the barriers between the human and the greater-than-human world. Ecocultural adjustment moves toward a more comprehensive, transcorporeal,

embodied understanding of humanature relations and internatural communication (Plec, 2013). More closely examining the human-nature divide through the lens of various emphases of communication could help undo this divide that currently dominates Western human-nature relations. It also assists in undoing the container metaphor that pervades in dominant Western society, reminding us of our permeability and our transcorporeal, bodily attachment to our environments. In other words, it acknowledges that our bodies connect with the world in sensuous and sub/conscious ways. Similarly, it acknowledges the agency and influence of the greater-than-human world, the built environment, and the surrounding ecosystems that travel across, in, and through the corporeal human body, highlighting and exploring a vast web of relations and interchanges.

Summary of Key Terms

Many terms that emerged in this piece evolved organically out of need for more descriptive or inclusive ways of illustrating components of *ecocultural adjustment*, *ecoculture shock*, and *ecoculture re-entry shock*, that have not been drawn out before and can be of future use in research. *Transcorporeality*, for example, did not quite capture the tension I was trying to articulate, leading to the terms *transcorporeal battle* and *transcorporeal peace-making*. These assisted in better framing the relationship between my body, her permeability, and the greater-than-human world that was fusing with my being, articulating both my vulnerability and resistance to this process, as well as my eventual acceptance of this ultimately conducive relationship, which I conceptualized as a continual *cohabitation* of space and body.

The term *solitude-as-sensing* began as an examination of the relationship between solitude and Carbaugh's (1999) discussion of Blackfeet modes of *listening*, which is conceptualized as a whole-body, all-sensory experience. Because dominant Western

understandings of *listening* restrict this level of communication to the auditory, I incorporated the overarching notion of sensing as hearing, feeling, tasting, seeing, and smelling surroundings—as well touching and being touched by the greater-than-human. This also leaves space for subconscious and embodied senses that one doesn't necessarily have to name to experience. *Solitude-as-sensing* became a way to discuss the relationship between me, my body, and the greater-than-human world, particularly in terms of my own separation from human company and technology, which left me in the company of the greater-than-human world and in exploration of communication with all that encompasses.

The concept of *relations-with/in/as-place* is an extension of Milstein et al.'s (2011) theoretical framework of *relations-in-place*. In the same way that *relations-in-place* was borne from an examination and extension of a previously established concept, *sense of self-in-place* (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001), in order to illustrate cultural variance in relations with place, *relations-with/in/as-place* adds dimensions to Milstein et al.'s concept, taking into consideration the transcorporeal act of embodiment of and communication with and as place. This concept utilizes the *with/in/as* relationship (Milstein, et al., in press) to demonstrate the multiplicity of ecological relations.

Finally, in discussion of *ecocultural re-entry shock*, the concept of *body rebellion* emerged. This term is a move to articulate the loss of control over my own body as a result of my *ripping* her from the ecosystem in which she was situated. I terminated her cohabitation with the greater-than-human world and severed her from her transcorporeal connections, resulting in physical shock and anxiety-induced illness that I could not fully, consciously comprehend with my reasonable, Western brain. In this period of time, it felt as though my body were rebelling against me—my brain felt sympathy and a shared sadness, but my body

acted as though she had been betrayed, expressing, very physically, mourning for her loss of place and ecological belonging.

These terms and others have been and may continue to be essential for expanding concepts of adjustment. Further, as future studies turn to a transcorporeal examination of humanture relations and embodiment of place, terms like these will become even more necessary. As the field of ecocultural communication builds momentum, I look forward to seeing more emergent, expanded, compound, built-upon terms in our cache of academic language. There is great need for future studies around these and other communication concepts, particularly in an effort to undo the human-nature divide.

Call for Future Studies

Future studies building on the concepts of *ecocultural adjustment*, *ecoculture shock*, and *ecocultural re-entry shock* would be greatly beneficial for this moment of globalization, transnational movement, and intercultural and environmental mobility. More case studies on sojourner experiences would be helpful in further exploring these ideas, as would case studies on immigration, migration, and refugee movements. Analyzing these relationships in a richly descriptive and qualitative manner could also shed light on the effects of the loss of these relationships through relocation or destruction of environment.

Additionally, on a larger scale, the human-nature divide could be further broken down with the exploration of other well-established concepts (such as cultural adjustment) through an ecocultural lens. Again, this would go beyond simply adding *eco* to extant theories in a superficial move, but would utilize thick description, careful reflexivity, and an ecocultural frame to reassess and recast existing concepts to better meet human needs, foster humanature relations, and acknowledge the impact of the greater-than-human world. Additionally, the concept of *ecocultural adjustment* would be greatly beneficial in application to cultural

immersion trainings. Future case studies of sojourning and homecoming with specific organizations or for specific purposes could be helpful in reconfiguring trainings and integration support. Finally, the concept of *ecocultural adjustment* takes us one step closer to undoing the human-nature divide. This, in turn, would lead to healthier adjustment processes, not to mention a more responsible, just society.

Undoing the Human-Nature Divide for Environmental and Social Justice

Understanding *cultural adjustment* as *ecocultural adjustment* also helps to elucidate the inevitable and unbreaking connection between humans and the greater-than-human world. Thus, adopting the concept of *ecocultural adjustment* makes a move toward a more environmentally focused society. If more consideration is taken for how the greater-than-human affects human beings, more consideration will also be taken for how human beings affect the greater-than-human world. This is a vital step toward a more environmentally, and thus, socially, just society. As Warren (2000) notes, ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, posits, "there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (p. xi). Colonial settlers viewed the bodies of the racialized Other through the lens of the human-nature divide, with people of color more closely associated with the greater-than-human world and thus, less civilized (Allewaert, 2013). This Western divide has perpetuated through ages through white modernity (Bonnett, 2002), in which white populations systemically perpetuate the human-nature divide on both a spatial and racial level.

By collectively but individually and critically examining these unique spatial understandings, the communication research community can better comprehend and articulate the overlying structural influences that dictate humanature relations and the human-

nature divide. My continual battle over cleanliness within what I conceived as my territory is an example of this, as it serves as a reminder that my past has been strongly seated in the human-nature divide, with civilized white modernity (Bonnett, 2002) on one side, and the dirty, uncivilized and uncontrolled, wild nature on the other. Reflexive contemplation about these influences on notions of space and place and my personal compulsion to create boundaries between my body and the greater-than-human world is necessary for my own increased understanding and articulation of space and the role of communication within. It is vital for other communication scholars to conduct similar case studies, self-reflexively examining conceptions, understandings, impulses, instincts, and influence around relationships with/in/as the greater-than-human world.

Saying Goodbye

I've been back on American soil for over two years. My cells have shed and traded their Malawian essence for something different. I have become California smog and Albuquerque honey, imported Chilean bananas and Hatch green chile, Sandia Mountains dust and the breath of my dog, New Mexican treated water and oatmeal soap, Roundup and cellular waves. My posture has altered once again with my occupational change, I've developed desert allergies, and my skin and hair have changed in tone and texture. I've said goodbye to Malawi over and over and over again—geographically first, then I tried mentally. The emotional separation has been the most difficult. But my body has adapted, saying goodbye in her own way, cell by cell, slowly shedding Malawi's soil, water, and sky. Little by little, pachoko pachoko, pangono pangono, I'm learning to listen to her messages, and try to let go.

Appendices

Appendix A. Description of Volunteer Service

Descriptions of Volunteer Service are ghostwritten by PCVs using a basic template,

before being reviewed, edited, and signed by the Country Director. This summative overview

is kept on file for US Peace Corps records and also serves as a letter of recommendation for

future job applications. This is part of the mandatory PCV exit paperwork, and we are not

authorized for Close of Service (COS) without the Country Director approving this work.

This description details my work during my 26-month service with Peace Corps Malawi, and

hard copies included a closing valediction and signature of the Country Director.

Melissa M. Parks

Peace Corps Malawi

I.   Description of Training

After a competitive selection process stressing the applicant's skills, adaptability, and cross-cultural sensitivity, Melissa was invited to serve in the US Peace Corps. She accepted an assignment to serve in the Southern African nation of Malawi as a teacher development facilitator in a secondary school cluster.

Melissa entered an intensive ten-week training program on 16th June, 2011. Training included 88 hours of Chitumbuka language education, 105 hours of technical instruction, and 23 hours of cross-cultural sensitization. Technical training focused on instruction, classroom management, teaching methodology, and the use of locally available resources. Melissa was imparted with basic needs assessment skills for the creation of community action plans and project design implementation. At the end of training, Melissa tested her Chitumbuka skills and received a score of intermediate-high on the American Council on Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) Scale.

II.   Description of Service

Melissa was sworn-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer on August 16, 2011. She was assigned to the Ministry of Education in Malawi to serve as a teacher development facilitator. Melissa was posted to Bandawe Secondary Schools Cluster in Nkhata Bay, where she reported directly to the Cluster Leader, Lloyd Mkandawire.

Cluster teacher development tasks included establishing a cluster development program, visiting the eleven cluster schools and conducting classroom observations/providing feedback for teachers, and conducting teacher development workshops. She facilitated workshops on a wide range of subjects including:

- Learning Styles and Differentiated Teaching
- Teaching English Language and Literature
- Teaching Human Anatomy and Skeletal Function
- Using Locally Available Resources in Mathematics and Science Classes
- Conducting Continuous Assessment in the Classroom
- Teaching Reproductive Health and Making Reusable Sanitary Pads
- Starting and Managing a School Library
- Teaching Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Awareness
- Teaching Genetics in Biology Classes
- Teaching Nuclear Physics in Physical Science Classes
- Student Friendly Schools and Gender Equity
- Human Anatomy and Skeletal Function Examination Preparation
- Using Microsoft Office
- Designing PowerPoint Presentations
- Youth Awareness of Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS
- Recognizing and Teaching to Different Learning Styles
- Gender Equity and Women Empowerment
- Female Youth Reproduction Instruction and Making Reusable Pads in the Classroom

Melissa also designed and conducted a five-part workshop series specially created to assist with the English teacher shortage within the cluster. Teachers of all subjects were invited to take part in a training built to prepare them for language and literature instruction using the following workshops:

- Introduction to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) for Non-Specialists
- Learner-Centered Methodologies for English Instruction
- Teaching English Composition Writing
- Holistic Teaching of English Language and Literature
- English Examination Design and Preparation

Additionally, in an effort to increase teaching and learning resources, knowledge, and skills in the Bandawe Secondary Schools Cluster, Melissa funded and implemented a textbook distribution program for the eleven schools in this educational community. With the facilitation of the Peace Corps Partnership Program and with the aid of generous donors, Melissa raised $5,976 to match the community contribution of $2,060, equipping 2,308 students and 107 teachers with teaching and learning materials and 764 textbooks. In preparation for this, Melissa facilitated workshops for teachers and administrative staff on library management; textbook maintenance, care, and utilization; and how to improve student involvement in reading, examination preparation, and library programs.

In addition to her teacher development responsibilities, Melissa accomplished the following:

III.   Secondary Activities

In the 2011-2012 school year, Melissa worked as an English teacher at Chintheche Community Day Secondary School (CDSS). She was one of twelve faculty members at the school, which offered four grades of study and had an enrollment of two hundred students. She taught Form 3 English language and literature, which required eight periods of instruction per week for sixty students.

Melissa also served as a peer-nominated representative and secretary for Peace Corps Malawi Volunteers Supporting Volunteers (VSV), a peer support and Volunteer mental health program. Throughout her VSV service, she coordinated and hosted regional orientation meetings for new Volunteers, conducted visits at new Volunteers' sites, facilitated mental health and resiliency workshops at Peace Corps trainings, compiled VSV reporting forms, managed VSV-Volunteer communications, and served as an on-call peer counselor for all Volunteers.

IV.   Other Activities

Melissa also co-coordinated Teach SKY (Skills and Knowledge for Youth), a national teacher development program in partnership with Camp SKY, a national examination preparation course for secondary school students at the senior level. Her roles in the teacher development course were co-coordinator and workshop facilitator. She assisted in the design, funds sourcing, and implementation of the SKY education project along with a team of Peace Corps Volunteers from the Education sector. Melissa facilitated many workshops during Teach SKY on topics including continuous assessment, teaching composition writing, recognizing and teaching to different learning styles, cultivating critical thinkers, and gender equity and women's empowerment.

Additionally, Melissa was selected to work as a counselor for Camp GLOW (Girls Leading Our World). She worked with a Malawian counterpart counselor to guide a group of female secondary school students through educational activities on topics such as HIV/AIDS awareness, goal setting, public speaking, menstruation, gender equity, domestic violence, and reproductive health and sexuality. Many speakers, including the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, conducted motivational and informative sessions that Melissa had the pleasure of reinforcing. Two girls and a counterpart from Chintheche village were also selected to attend Camp GLOW. Following the camp, she worked closely with these community leaders to establish and conduct activities for Chintheche CDSS Girls Club.

As Chintheche CDSS worked to improve their teaching resources, Melissa supervised the conversion of a classroom into a science laboratory with funding provided by an Ambassador's Self Help Fund grant and materials donated by the community. The laboratory was completed in November 2012 and has greatly improved the quality of education at Chintheche CDSS.

Through a competitive application process, Melissa was selected in both 2012 and 2013 by Peace Corps administrative staff to assist with the design and facilitation of education pre-service trainings for incoming Peace Corps Trainees. She collaborated with administrative and technical training staff and fellow Peace Corps Volunteers to redesign the training curriculum and sector framework in accordance with newly introduced global curriculum requirements. She also co-facilitated many workshops including:

• Continuous Assessment and Malawian National Examinations
• Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment
• Introduction to Teacher Development
• Introduction to Adult Education and Workshop Facilitation
• Content-Based Instruction and Experiential Learning
• Learning Styles and Differentiated Instruction
• Your First Lesson
• Workshop Design and Preparation
• Workshop Facilitation and Subject Instruction Practicum

Melissa also served as a technical resource Volunteer for education 2012's In-Service Training, providing technical insight in teacher development for the Peace Corps Volunteers.

In addition to her education-based work, Melissa also volunteered at The Maru, a research center dedicated to exploring the biodiversity of Lake Malawi, performing SCUBA transects to identify and count cichlid species. Data collected for this project was compiled and used to identify trends in the cichlid population in the area, as cichlid species are localized in small areas of Lake Malawi, one of the most biologically diverse and unexplored bodies of fresh water in the world.

Furthermore, Melissa and her counterpart attended ANAMED (Action for Natural Medicine) training. Using skills gained during this program, her counterpart was able to plant natural medicine demonstration gardens for community education; with Melissa's support, she began to treat patients and raise Malaria and HIV/AIDS awareness in the Chintheche community.

Finally, in accordance with Peace Corps' third goal, Melissa maintained a regular online blog with thorough descriptions and photos conveying her experience in working and living in Malawi to her friends, family, and fellow Americans. She also corresponded with an elementary school class through the World Wise Schools program.

Appendix B. Political Map of Malawi

Detailed on this map, it is possible to see several locations of great importance throughout my service. The first is Lilongwe, the capitol of the Republic of Malawi and the location I flew in and out of to begin and end my service. This is situated in the central region of the nation and I often had to return here for various trainings and events. Next, note the location of Dedza, just south of Lilongwe, where I spent my Pre-Service Training (PST) at both the Dedza College of Forestry as well as in the small, adjacent village of Mpalale (not shown).
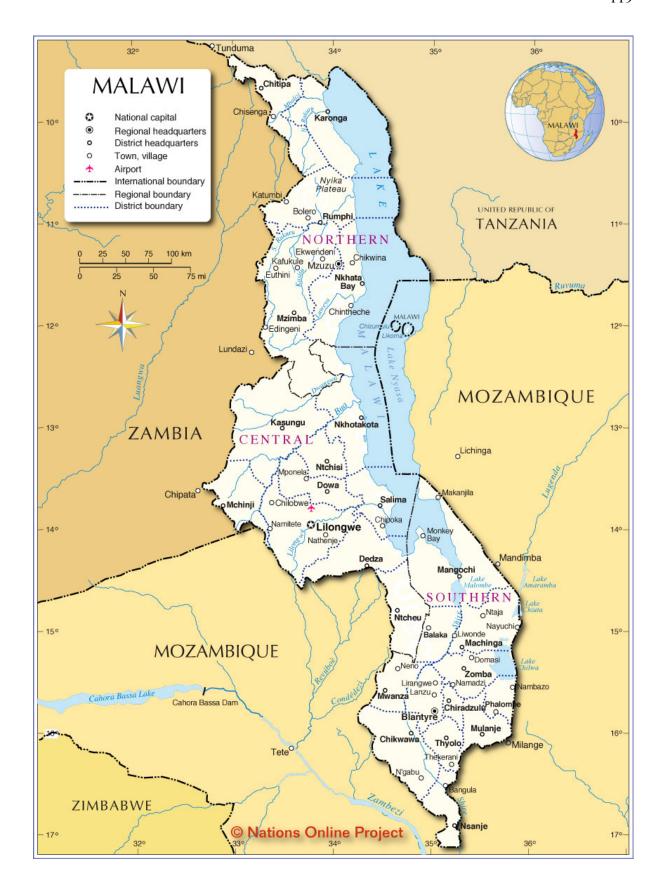
Finally, note Chintheche—my site, my village, my home—on the shore of expansive Lake Malawi in what is referred to as the northern lakeshore region. Nearby Nkhata Bay was my district boma (a word stemming from BOMA, or British Overseas Management Administration, district stations that served hubs during colonization). Just northwest is Mzuzu, the capitol of the northern region and the site of the 2011 riots detailed in Chapter 2.

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