

Making Sacred Trees: On time beyond the human in the North Maine Woods

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Abstract. A site where extraction and conservation, market and ecological cycles, and human and non-human rhythms exist concomitantly, the North Maine Woods (NMW) is the perfect site to study how distinct forms of environmental encounters—from transactional forestry to transcendent old growth—might force us to reckon with time differently and what that implies for our shared future. Drawing from theories of *commodities*, *sacrality* and *profanity*, and *time-reckoning*, I examine how global capitalism affects local ecologies by 1) transforming trees' social relations and 2) introducing different temporal narratives into the forest. Simply put, I ponder what makes a timbering tree different from an old-growth tree. When they are not relegated to the background or reduced to a unit of capital, trees can teach us that earth is valuable beyond its translatability into commodities and that making meaningful connections is integral to life, especially on a damaged planet. As such, tracing the roots that unite the forest network can illuminate what it means to be part of histories, communities, and the world beyond one's own species. Participant-observation, semi-formal and informal conversations, and ambling through the woods allow me to engage with the aforementioned concepts and questions.

Background. The North Maine Woods (NMW) is a commercial, or “working,” forest comprised of approximately 3.5 million acres of public-government and privately owned land. Although a large swath of the forest is owned by timber corporations, its reserved lands and recreation areas bring in over 100,000 visitors each year. According to the NMW website, the forest is three things: a *region* bounded by the St. John and Allagash rivers, an *organization* of landowners (from timber corporations to business moguls, like founder of Burt's Bees Roxanne Quimby, to families), and a *spirit* that is the source of the forest's power to self-replenish its resources and unify all the lives embedded within it. The sacred dimension of my research emerged from my interest in temporality, or what I think of as the stories humans tell about time, and, especially, how walking through the forest seemed to completely disrupt my usual ways of telling and experiencing time. In the search for answers to the paradox of the Anthropocene—that humans are responsible for the failing ecosystem but are unable to change its course—the concept of old growth has become analogous to that of a monument, which requires active preservation and abandonment simultaneously, turning the forest and its mother trees into a lost city of ancient relics. However, one of the hallmarks of the current cultural period, as Mark Fisher (2009) discusses in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?*, is a collective sense of a-historicity, a fracture from our genealogical, national, and species roots, which inspires an existential fear of the uncertain future. Do we truly live in an a-historical age? If so, what makes an old-growth forest feel timeless?

Experience. This summer, while tiptoeing from moss-and-mushroom speckled nurse logs to groups of tender spruce saplings in the small old-growth swath of the North Maine Woods. I relished the idea of being enfolded in a history, a place, a collection of living things that already predated and would likely outlast me. As Richard Powers writes in his book, *The Overstory*, I could see that “There is nothing more social than a tree.” Furthermore, themes from the sacred architecture and religious music courses I took last year played out in real time: the towering oaks were akin to cathedrals and movement in the forest assumed the quality of music. Meandering through the shady undergrowth, I discovered that the forest could teach me far more about myself—what it means to be part of histories, communities, and the world beyond the human—than I'd expected. That is, if I keep looking.

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