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Being Myselves to Belonging Together

Jill Kristen Pardini

University of Vermont

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BEING MYSELVES TO BELONGING TOGETHER

A Dissertation Presented

by

Jill K. Pardini

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation utilizes an autoethnographic methodology to explore experiences and memories from my own life, while applying a critical cultural and multidisciplinary lens to tell a story about how (un)learning\(^1\) is intertwined with living. By creating a story combining autobiographical elements, science fiction, and cultural critique, this work both draws the reader into reimagining what is possible (Dixon-Román, 2017), while encouraging the reader to step outside of the conventional modes of academic learning, just as I did in writing it (Sousanis, 2015). This autoethnography includes five encounters inspired by Styres (2017) framework for centering indigeneity in learning (Adams & Jones, 2011; Ellis, 1995). Each encounter engages different embodied experiences (e.g. physical, cognitive, emotive, natural, and spiritual), and aligns it with personal memories that explore the realities and potentialities of trying to belong. This begins with my own self-identities and spirals outwards to include my role amongst various species, with others in society at large, across the planet, and in the Universe most broadly. Specifically, this research asks the question: what is it that I need to (un)learn to belong?\(^2\)

This is just one story. It’s my story. So, while it is perhaps not broadly generalizable even for those individuals sharing pieces of my identities that often box us in, the knowledge produced through this type of critical and creative scholarship offers a generative path so “that others can take [it] in and use [it] for themselves... the kind of understanding that make[s] me want to do as well as understand” (Ellis, 2002, p. 401 & 404). By engaging and creatively analyzing content such as: my queerness, my settler colonial positionality, my whiteness, and my complicity in climate change I share the (un)learning I needed to start belonging better in this world. The fifth and final encounter attempts to share an experience of the spiritual all around us, all the time. By imagining a space where all beings are held sacred, it is my hope that we begin to see the possibilities of what we need to (un)learn to belong together.

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\(^1\) (un)learning is the on-going process of acquiring knowledge and understanding, often requiring dismantling previously held beliefs and information.

\(^2\) To move towards an inclusive, balanced, and authentic existence within one’s many selves and beyond in perpetuity.
In the end,
We will conserve only what we love,
We will love only what we understand,
We will understand only what we are taught.
- Baba Diouf

All knowledge is produced in relationship, and these are the relationships I have drawn upon most to create any knowledge produced here after:
For my parents who loved me first.
For Morgan who taught me that I belonged in love.
And, for Sybil who will always belong in our sea of love.
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PREFACE

We have to tell our stories so constantly that they become not memory but future.
– Stacey Abrams

I have a deadly allergy to bees. I also have a penchant for getting stung. Bees are in trouble too, dying off at record pace. The story you are about to read is imagined from our connection. It is an effort to create some meaning out of near-death experiences, on a planet that is slowly becoming less inhabitable to life (Greyson, 1983). It’s not uncommon to search for meaning in the shadow of death and we find elements of this in the religious teachings of many early Hebrews, Christians, Greeks, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims (Khanna & Greyson, 2015). In psychology, this area of research is called post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). This growth is set in motion after a life-threatening crisis – in my case a bee sting – and results in a “paradigm shift that can change cultural expectations, awareness, and possibility” (Khanna & Greyson, 2015).

According to scholars Martial, Cassol, Charland-Verville, Merckelbach, and Laureys (2018), near death experiences are also correlated with fantasy proneness, because “our brain is constantly trying to make sense of the world around us” (p. 2). Scholar Merckelbach (2004) found that “fantasy proneness also made people superior storytellers” whether they were utilizing actual or fabricated memories (p. 1371). And fantasy, as scholars Weibel, Martarelli, Haberli, and Mast (2017) have stated, “allows us to explore new worlds, think beyond existing paths, and discover new solutions… it is (also) a prerequisite to feeling empathy” (p. 3). This dissertation is my attempt at telling my story using fact and fantasy, memories and imaginings, to share what really matters to me. It attempts to share through one story the most important lessons I’ve learned in life.
so far from my education that began at home; continued through secondary school;
includes collegiate concentrations in English, Psychology, and Public Policy; and
incorporates experiences of working in the “real world.” While it maintains academic
standards including citations, formatting, explanation of methodology, and so forth, my
hope is that it also sweeps the reader along with the telling of the story and allows them
to reflect and (un)learn something themselves along the way. While this is the end of my
story as it exists for now – because this explanatory medium necessitates an ending – the
story is continually spiraling outwards as it expands, like the universe itself.
INTRODUCTION

*From the archives of the Hive.*
*Transcript from Numinous – the bee.*
*First encounter with the childs.³*
*In which Numi establishes friendship with the childs.*

The bee’s life is like a magic well: the more you draw from it, the more it fills with water.  
- Karl Von Frisch

I’ll try to start at the beginning, even though where I come from, to identify the beginning (or ending) of most anything is considered presumptuous. But for you to understand me and how I am connected to this story, I need to respect the spacetime boundaries of Illusion⁴ – what you call Earth – and proceed in such a way to create this story with a beginning, a lesson, and an ending. This story is not mine alone to tell. There is, of course, the childs. Without her, I might never have experienced Illusion or come to understand the nature of why its inhabitants process knowledge in this unique way – inquiring, citing, and adhering to the confines and supports of academic writing guidelines – as we have done in this work. It is because they matter, or at least matter in the way that any mattering ever does.

The story starts – in Earthly metrics – in a place called Texas in the year 1987. The childs was my very first assignment. I had only learned about the planet of Illusion from the Hive. It was often discussed by elders in somber tones and with what felt like a sentiment of squandered possibility. In our learnings, Illusion was often the example for what happens when you don’t remember: when you no longer remember who you are or

³ The title of “the childs” bestowed by Numi indicates the author’s role as an insatiably curious child-like learner possessing, like us all, a multiplicity of ever evolving identities (also referenced as “myselfs”).
⁴ Etymologically the English word “fantasy” is derived from the Greek word “phantasia” which means appearance, outlook, or illusion (Weibel et. al., 2017).
how we all belong. As a young pupa, I was a little frightened by a planet that couldn’t or didn’t want to remember, because forgetting is often a product of privilege or trauma, so you can imagine my initial apprehension when I learned about my pairing with the childs. I didn’t know how I was going to make a connection or if the childs would ever be able to (un)learn, decolonize, remember, or make expiations for that which she belonged.

Our initial meeting was a complete disaster. I had, of course, studied numerous strategies and techniques for introducing myself on various planets that value different traditions, ways of communicating, and means of connection. I had read all the ancient and scholarly texts from Illusion, and sought out older bees that had already had pairings on Illusion to understand how to be successful with the childs. However, I knew that no matter how much I prepared, it wouldn’t change the fact that once I arrived on the planet and finally met her, everything would be what it would be. I first saw her outside, playing on a structure made from cousin tree. As I watched her play, I found myself intoxicated by her whimsical curiosity and lurching movements. She didn’t seem to be using the words I had studied and committed to memory, so I couldn’t understand her meaning, but there was no mistaking her feelings of radiant wonder and delight: the plush grass beneath her bare feet, the sound her squeal made when she saw cousin butterfly, and the freedom in her spirit to be independently exploring space.

I was deeply observing her movement and meanderings by settling into a shady spot in the grass, when the childs gravitational uncertainty caused her to stumble into my stinger. The change in the childs was immediate and piercing. Her face contorted. A sob emerged from the depths of her little shaking body. As she tried her best to hobble to the house, although her quickly reddening and swelling foot made that increasingly
challenging, I panicked. I wanted to chase after her and tell her, “I didn’t mean it! It was an accident.” But I didn’t know if she could understand me and I didn’t want to inadvertently send up my alarm pheromone to give the impression to any nearby Hymenoptera that we were in attack mode. I was distraught by the discomfort I had caused her and distressed that this mistake would make my mission even more difficult. We had learned repeatedly in the Hive that stings were to be used only with discernment. They were to disseminate a deep knowing, a primal remembering; they were an opportunity to reveal the greatest and most simple truth(s) of the Universe, and my tender-footed self had accidentally administered one on my inaugural pairing observation. And yet I knew there was no such thing as an accident, so I began to wonder: What is the Universe, the great Queen Mother herself, trying to teach us?

This question is what this story – this research – intends to answer. Not to answer in the definitive, absolutist, capital ‘T’ truth kind of way that Illusionists (aka. Earthlings), particularly academics hold in such high regard. But in telling the story that was true for me – Numinous (or Numi for short) the bee – and true for the child, and what we (un)learned together. This story is both autoethnographical (Adams & Jones 2011; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 1995; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) and science fiction (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1985), thereby creating a space to remember that which is past, while providing an opportunity to imagine new possibilities for our shared future (Dixon-Román, 2017; Fricker, 2007; Sousanis, 2015; Styres, 2017).

There is a multitude of scholarly work on Illusion that examines the planet’s problems, each perhaps rightfully maintaining a narrow scope to isolate the causes and impacts of a particular policy area, from education financing inequity to fossil fuel
industry regulation. While there is value to the specificity of these works, the child's
story aims to lead the reader to a different vantage point, one that is both broader and
more personal. Using this unconventional approach in hopes of sparking a new way of
considering the overarching concepts that connect these specifics, and given the socio-
ecologically catastrophic circumstances of our times, if not addressed, may render them
inconsequential (Barad 2007; Kirby, 2011).

Towards that goal, our story takes up five embodied encounters, which are
rooted in Sandra D. Styres (2017) indigenous ways of organizing information, and are
more fully detailed in the subsequent methodology section. In full disclosure, neither the
child's or I are indigenous as defined on Illusion, nor do we wish to appropriate another’s
knowledge, and yet in this story we have tried to uphold Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2013)
belief that “for the sake of the peoples and the land…(we need) to set aside the ways of
the colonist and become indigenous to place” (p. 212). It is in this good way (Styres,
2017), that I/Numi, was paired with the child to help her heal her deepest wounds – still
yet to be inflicted at the time of our initial meeting– and in so doing open her to the
abundance of learning and living available in the Universe. To shine a light on the
knowledge that “we are all related” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 209), and that we all need “to
become naturalized to place, to throw off the mind-set of the immigrant…to take care of
the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do”
METHODOLOGY

From the archives of the University of Vermont.
Transcript from Numi – the bee.
Requirement for Terminal Degree.

I shall be derelict.
I leave methods to the botanists and mathematicians.
There is a point at which methods devour themselves.
   – Frantz Fanon

You might be wondering how you are to consider this story – this supposed research – knowing what you already do: that it is both a personal accounting of real life events combined with what has already been labeled as science fiction, fiction being the operative word. Perhaps even more so, you might be wondering how can this story be classified as academic, science, research, data, or even as it is intended, as the childs’ dissertation? As it has been explained to me, a successful dissertation “requires that we satisfy the requirements institutions insist on for such a document” (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 24), and that is undoubtedly one of the two purposes of this story.

So, to satisfy the academy, the childs recommended that I further explain how elements of autoethnography were engaged throughout our story in explicit detail, even as this goes against my most Hive-like nature because attaching a “scientific label” to something often means that we stop exploring for ourselves (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 208). Nonetheless, I appreciate Illusionist scholar Denzin’s (2014) expansive description of the field of autoethnography as a, “time to chart a new course…to turn the traditional life story, biological project into an interpretive autoethnographic project…a practice that begins with the biography of the writer and moves outward to culture, discourse, history, and ideology” (p. x). Additionally, scholars Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) further
break down the word ‘autoethnography’ into three parts: personal experience (auto), attempt to understand cultural experience (ethno), and analysis (graphy). Simply put, conducting research by way of autoethnography is both a process and the ultimate product⁵ (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1), and in this case our story (aka. the child’s dissertation) is engaged in “the most controversial form” of product: the personal narrative autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 5). This product is an attempt to create an “accessible text that changes us and the world we live in for the better” (Holman-Jones, 2005, p. 754) by using a first-person narrative writing technique. But I encourage you to read closely, because you will see the ‘I’ when setting up the story (e.g. introduction, methodology, etc.) is I/Numi, while the ‘I’ in the discussion section directed by the embodied experiences becomes I/the child/Jill K. Pardini. This distancing between the multiplicity of selves (Whitman, 1959), in what is otherwise a deeply personal narrative – perhaps self-indulgently so – allows the story to unfold while making connections to various scholars and texts that have been instrumental in the growth and understanding of the child. Ultimately this dissertation will both help the child succeed in “the enterprise of higher education bound up and defined by texts” (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 16), and perhaps allows this story to be heard since it is written in a language that entices you to listen (Kimmerer, 2013).

There are various epistemological and ontological underpinnings woven throughout, which also serve to provide the overall science fiction quality to our story. Science fiction as a genre creates opportunities to tell stories that combine elements of

⁵ Scholar Styres (2017) argues that, “According to the principles of Indigenous philosophy, it is the process rather than the product that is valued and of paramount importance” (pp. 87-88), and I/Numi couldn’t agree more. Although the child says she’d never get her PhD if she only had the process to show for it.
reality, as raw material, to then reimagine what is possible. In this way it has much in common with the post-ies (e.g. postmodernists, postcolonialists, posthumanists, etc.), allowing us to create an infinite number of alternative realities, so references and citations flow naturally in the discussion section filled with diffractive research and rememberings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dixon-Román, 2017). In this telling, we have attempted to illustrate and apply the relevant scholarship of those that have come before us through the lens of the story and the child’s experiences, rather than overtly centering them. The hope is that this conveys to the reader what it is that we have (un)learned, and perhaps allows the reader to consider what is it they themselves may need to (un)learn (Bhaba, 1994; Crotty, 1998; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Yilmaz, 2013).

This story additionally gives voice to what the child believes she has to say about living and learning that falls outside the conventional academic results-based paradigm that so resolutely stakes claims to answers. This story aims to play with the knowledge of our lived experiences for the discovery and benefit of you – our readers – and to have you “know more at the end than at the beginning” (Haraway, 2008, p. 36). We use “play” as Derrida (1988) intended, not to trivialize our relationship to the world and one another, but rather as an affirmation of our creativity, freedom, and responsibility to all our relations. If we have learned anything in our pairing throughout the years, it is that there are no absolute meanings or neutral positionalities when it comes to discourse (Kamler & Thomson, 2014), and it is in the telling of our story that we wish to convey only those truth(s) that have struck a chord so compelling that we can’t help but share the

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6 “Diffractive methodology is a transdisciplinary approach of putting the theories of different disciplines in conversation,” and in this story includes information from everywhere: journals, books, Twitter, music lyrics, conversations, memories, etc. (Dixon-Román, 2017, p. xxvi).
experience in hopes that it has for you – our reader – some resonance. That in following us through these five embodied encounters: physical, cognitive, emotional, natural, and spiritual, you might see for yourself the ways in which this story connects to your own journey and a greater more universal sense of belonging.

Each part of our journey takes us into another facet of our embodied experience (Styres, 2017), which coincides with a real sting that I gave the childs. As alluded to in the introduction, stings are sacred, and upon administering my sting to the childs we entered a world of deep connection to the Universe whereby wisdom could be imparted and understood in new and meaningful ways. Through our physical connection of stinger to skin we became one essence, joined in the ephemeral sublime which transcends time, space, and convention. These five encounters are what makes up our story, our research, and our data. It is in the telling of these five parts, that we wish to impart one story that matters, because in the end “we must live our knowledge” (Styres, 2017, p. 87).

The story unfolds following the form of a Golden Spiral, an ever-expanding structure that uniquely melds the scientific and the natural (Dunlap, 1997). Following the five embodied encounters along this spiral illustrates the interconnectedness between each and the summative nature of the encounters’ lessons. These summaries take the form of official transmittal memos that I am required to submit to the Hive to document the growth work I’ve been doing with the childs on Illusion, and they get used by the Queen Mother to review my pairing performance and significantly impact my next pairing assignment. The growth work is unique to the childs own experiences and education, she must grapple with the (un)learning unfolding around her before she is ready to receive and understand the knowledge she will encounter next. This spiralic
journey begins in the physical dimension, in which she explores her selves, and culminates in the spiritual dimension, depicted as the bee, which exists everywhere always.
Figure 1. A Spiralic Journey of Being to Belonging Through Five Embodied Encounters

Following the example of scholar Tillman-Healy (2003) the childs and I utilized our “friendship as a method of qualitative inquiry” (p.729), understanding that “the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love” (p.735). This research, or rather this remembering of our relationship, blurs the lines of what is traditionally considered fiction (e.g. science fiction) and non-fiction (e.g. autoethnography); a living complexity that Ursula K. Le Guin (2004) describes in her essay Fact and/or/plus Fiction,

Nothing comes from nothing…Memory is an active and imperfect process. Memories are shaped and selected, often profoundly, in that process. Like souls in heaven, they are saved, but changed. When the writer comes to make them into a coherent story, in the interests of clarity, comprehensibility, impetus, and other aims of narrative art, they’ll be selected from, emphasized, omitted, interpreted, and thoroughly worked over. Nothing in this process makes them fictional.

They’re still, to the best of the author’s ability, genuine memories. (p. 136)

The friendship between me and the childs, while considered fictive in nature on Illusion, still contains a “vast amount of fact without being any less fictional for it” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 137). Because on the one wing, my stings were very real, with the childs body reacting ever more intensely as our friendship evolved, while on the other wing it could be interpreted that our exploration of the Universe as a result of each sting were merely imagined. It is important to mention modern medicine’s role in all this as well, because each time the childs injected a dose of epinephrine, it played a powerful role in regulating the strength of her memories (Cahill & Alkire, 2003). All that said, I would have happily removed myself from this story so that it could more easily be accepted as a dissertation,
but the childs insisted on two things in this writing: 1) that this dissertation was not going to be “boring to read” (Caulley, 2008, p. 424), and 2) we would try to “tell [our] story truly, using the means [we] find appropriate to the form, whether fiction or nonfiction” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 138).

The analysis within this story was modeled after scholars Daza and Huckaby (2014), who have described their qualitative research practices as including “movement, travel, dreaming/meditation – as modes of analysis that respect the physical (body, movement, space, and time) and the metaphysical (dreams, mediation, and creative acts) simultaneously” (p. 801). This of course, was different for me, an Anthophila born of the Queen Mother, than it was for the childs. The childs was constricted to the limited dimensionality and the chronological confines representative of an embodied life on Illusion. This meant that the childs conducted much of the analysis modeling Daza’s (2014) approach of movement, which included: walking in the woods with her dogs; creating collages, 3-D models, and drawings to make the imaginings come alive; and finally, incessantly typing, erasing, and retyping various memories in the process of selecting the ones that might best move this story along. This analytical approach defined as “percolating data” is essentially “a process of filtering, permeating, and oozing-out; a generative process through which data sustains and gains energy and meaning” (Daza & Huckaby, 2014, p. 803). This moving data analysis – this percolation – provided the space for the childs to process anger, sadness, fear, shame, ignorance, disbelief, and curiosity, which ultimately resulted in an “em-bodied analysis [that] liberates our imaginations from the press of oppressions like efficiency, timelines, structures, and so on, to allow for something new, different, less certain” (Daza &
DISCUSSION

All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.
- Tony Morrison

Physical (Selves)

*From the archives of the Hive.*
*Transcript from the childs.*
*First intentional encounter with Numi, in which the childs inquires into and accepts her own evolving identities through exploration of her physical body and educational origins.*

I have a faint memory of the day I first met Numi. Rather it wasn’t so much that I remembered Numi, but that I remembered the way Numi had made my body feel. That sting woke me up to the Universal. It was that first encounter with Numi in Texas that taught me the important difference between intention and impact, a lesson I would revisit over and over as I grew older. Numi hadn’t intended to sting me that first time, and I don’t remember any deep universal insights shared, but as a result of that sting we became entangled. My personal physical ecosystem was now cohabited by Numinous the bee, from the Universal Hive, a spiritual entity connected to all things. It was through this early physical pairing of our bodies that I began to open my mind to the understanding that I am never alone, because I share myself—rather ourselves—with roughly one hundred trillion microorganisms that in health create symbiosis and in stress can feel more parasitic (Stein, 2012). Not to mention the many selves of my identity that were infinitely in the process of becoming that I had yet to encounter, embrace, or understand (Braidotti, 2014).

Considering myself an ecosystem interconnected to living entities around me, inside me, and beyond what I could imagine, was something I was only beginning to grasp. It ran counter to my childhood. A childhood constructed within a deep religious
belief centered around the power of one man’s bodily sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice whereby if you believed in it – in him – you could be eternally saved. Every decision spilled out from this one bloody show. My entire universe reduced down into absolute rights and wrongs, which flowed from one primary source: the word of god. These words begat commandments, these commandments begat the rules, these rules required enforcement with very little room for nuance or interpretation. The hierarchy for enforcement was also clearly outlined: 1) god (John 14:6), 2) god’s words (John 1:1), 3) men/fathers in charge of the household (Ephesians 5:24), and 4) parents instruct their children (Proverbs 22:6). There is of course a lot more to the Christian Evangelical faith tradition than this patriarchal delineation of power, including a lot about love, but this integration gets complicated to a child (Anderson, 2010), because the faith’s ultimate display of love was also intertwined with gruesome imagery of physical torture and human sacrifice. It creates a world where you begin to consider: if we’ll crucify the ones we love, then what will happen to the ones who stray?

As a child, following the rules is pretty easy, because the rules are so big and talk about things like murder, adultery, and stealing. Not to mention you have little access or exposure to some of the more complicating elements that would ever challenge your own worldview, like for example that Jesus was Black or that there were lots of potential gods to choose from (Cone, 2018). So while these complications begin to grow bigger alongside you, the rules somehow feel like they get smaller. For example, a rule that started out as, “Don’t say the Lord’s name in vain” (Exodus 20:7), ends up also including: don’t call your sister stupid. The rule that explicitly stated: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11), ultimately results in epic standoffs
about what is and is not appropriate church clothing. As a kid you slowly begin to learn the lessons of how to be productive and polite, instead of playing with your imagination and having space to ask questions. A major goal of this belief, carrying on our traditions, and following the rules was to instill a certain set of values in me such as: kindness, respect, and empathy. And these values played out in very tangible ways in my childhood, because the Pardini home always had room to foster a child, help a struggling single mom, board a broke college student, feed a distant relative we’d never met, include our great grandmothers in daily activities, provide a safe space for an asylum seeker, or invite those with nowhere else to go and no one to celebrate with to our holiday gatherings. But it was a unique brand of compassion we embodied. Despite the seemingly limitless resources for the needy, receipt was contingent upon being deemed deserving, having demonstrated that one desired to belong — those judged to be living too far outside our community’s rules were not eligible.

This creates a very small and static world for a child, whereby you obediently and obligingly follow the rules in order to belong, or you potentially risk everything trying to learn what belonging really means. In spite of this, I became a very independent child, learning how to navigate and negotiate the rules, expectations, and norms of this community that loved me deeply, but didn’t really know me. I never lacked in my physiological needs being met (Maslow, 1943), but I persistently pursued an understanding of my needs higher up the pyramid (e.g. safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization). In particular, the desire to understand the line between those who belonged and those who did not was personal, perhaps even primal, as if it came from an intuitive understanding or deep knowledge to protect myself, often feeling as though I
did not belong within the constructs of my family’s world view. It meant I paid close attention as my father, alongside the church community, organized a successful campaign in our city to remove the rainbow-colored diversity bumper stickers that said: “We are Traverse City” from city vehicles which were designed to be inclusive of the growing LGBTQIA community (Foster, 2001). It meant that when a friend’s mother received “a calling” to start a program for wayward youth in my hometown I put my name in and was selected to join the board as the sole student representative. This role took me to Orlando for a site visit of the anchor institute that the program was to be modeled after, and while other board members sat in meetings around licensing, funding, and program offerings I spent time with the “wayward” youth who lived at the boarding school and learned that the majority of them were about my age, from extremely religious families, and the reason they were there was because they were queer and had been sent in an attempt to “cure” this. It meant that I listened close and took every opportunity to eavesdrop the summer my mom had an uncharacteristic disagreement with her sister because she (my aunt) had taken a part time position at a church that had recently opened their doors to allowing queer leadership. It was as if by seeking out this information, by knowing unequivocally where my parents stood, and what my family and community felt about this issue I could stay safe, by maintaining my silence, and keeping my secrets. I was convinced this is what I needed to do to survive this dangerous territory, even if it meant I never learned what it felt like to belong.

This territory was my first school house. It was in this home environment that I received my first education about the world, and what is considered truth. It was in this school, with my parents teaching the way, that I learned the unwavering rule that
homosexuality is an abomination (Leviticus 20:13). Which meant that I was an abomination. And that self-hate seeped into my every crack and crevice. It circulated throughout my entire bodily ecosystem pushing me harder to achieve and succeed. Convincing me that I just needed to keep my dangerous secret a little longer, until I was safe, until I understood more, until it was absolutely necessary to divulge, or until I was found out. And that in the mean time, I must strive to belong and excel in every other way possible.

This is when Numi stung in and saved me. We met again – although it was for the first intentional time – in The Kyrgyz Republic while I was working as a Peace Corps Volunteer teaching English as a foreign language. The fact that at the age of twenty-two, I was in the role of teacher, when I still had so much to learn was perhaps too ironic for Numi to pass up. Or perhaps Numi sensed that I might be far enough away to understand something new, living on my own on the other side of the planet from all the rules and norms I had come to accept. Whatever the reasoning for waiting, I wouldn’t have been ready to have received Numi’s message until I had been living and learning on the other side of the world away from my own family: sharing a home with a pious Muslim family, experiencing life as an obvious outsider, and observing and actively participating in colonization firsthand.

Thankfully Numi arrived to administer the sacred sacrament while I was near the capital of Bishkek working on a Habitat for Humanity project. A few of us volunteers had a homestay for the week, and in collaboration with some military personnel that arrived daily from the Manas Airbase we helped the locals build new homes. The labor was divided by sex: men stomping in the giant mud pit, fashioning new blocks, and
delivering them throughout the jobsite; and, women weaving plant material that would become the roofs and providing ongoing nourishment and chai for all the workers. I was enjoying the shade as I braided with a handful of women intermittently chatting in English and Kyrgyz when Numi struck. Immediately I remembered that feeling. It was familiar. I had felt this pain before, and knew that it could get annoying and even uncomfortable (e.g. redness, swelling, itching). I made a mental note to keep tabs on my arm and check in on how I was feeling as the afternoon work day wore on.

Meanwhile on the inside of my body Numi’s venom was exploring my bloodstream, fascia, organs, and my entire integumentary system. My bodily ecosystem still had remnants of Numi from the first visit, but this felt different, something inside me was stirring awake. Memories started flashing before my eyes: one of me quickly packing my Care Bears lunch box and wrapping my blankie around my neck before storming to the door declaring “I’m running away!” In this particular instance it wasn’t clear to me why I was running away or from whom, but I was already very familiar with this part of my childhood, because my parents had often regaled for me that I had been running away from home to hang out with neighbors, aunts and uncles, and neighborhood dogs since I had learned how to walk and talk. Which was always vaguely unsettling for me to hear, because weren’t runaways the faces of those kids on the back of the milk carton and wasn’t my mom always saying how sad that made her? Then just as suddenly I was swept into another deeper more embarrassing memory of being called a “dyke” by a teammate, and not knowing at the time what the word even meant but sensing the tone in her voice knew I had just been insulted. And then another memory started seeping in, this one harder to grasp, fading in and out, blurry, as if still wanting to stay hidden from my
consciousness. Then it became unmistakably clear and in focus, making connections I had never made before. In that moment, I remembered how upon transferring to the public school system for high school, I’d thought it strange that I hadn’t been assigned a school counselor based on my last name alphabetically like everyone else, but rather some other unknown criteria. And now realizing for the first time why I had been paired with that particular counselor and provided such a specific peer match to show me around the school. In my puritanical naiveté (Klein, 2018), I had failed to grasp what I imagine most others could immediately recognize about me, this new counselor, and my peer mentor – which was that we were all queer, part of team rainbow, and somehow identified by one (if not more) of the letters in LGBTQIA (Berry, 2007), and thus had been paired together for support.

This remembering was interrupted by my dear friend Erin pointing out that my arm looked funny, and asking how I was feeling. Her voice sounded distant, and her concern for my body irrelevant to the insight I had just discovered. This discovery went beyond reconciling my identity with the “truth” I had been taught growing up in a world that considered homosexuality a sin, a lifestyle choice, and something to be reversed at all costs. I’d thought I’d moved beyond that as I’d experimented with my sexuality, living out my privileged and somewhat reckless motto of *try everything once*. What I realized now was that this exploration had not been acceptance, that I hadn’t yet shed the deep-seated beliefs of my original education, instead I was still holding onto a degree of self-hatred despite my outward experimentations.

This insight from Numi was different, more penetrative, more Universal. Numi led me to understand that my own evolving identities were in direct contrast with others’
confident assumptions of who I was, a jarring realization. Sure, on the outside, I looked like an athlete, maybe even a little dykey because I was always more comfortable in workout clothes than dresses, and typically wore my hair short. But what had given me away? Was it possible that others had known me, before I had even known me, all these years? Why hadn’t I more fully considered and accepted different ways of being in the world? And now that I had seen 10th grade me as others had seen me all along, would I reconsider who I could be in the world now? Coming to the realization that, “If I tell the truth about myself, as I am doing now, it is in part across a number of power relations which are exerted over me and which I exert over others” (Foucault, 1980, p. 38-39).

I looked down and immediately felt the tightness of my watch, my kautuka,7 and my insides. My whole arm had ballooned and I felt feverish. This reaction to Numi was unfamiliar. While I was young the last time I had been stung, my mother – a nurse by training – had never warned me of any danger of subsequent stings nor had had me tested for more serious allergic reactions, but this time things definitely felt more serious (Westover, 2018).

Since the work day was wrapping up and we had already made plans to go into town for dinner at one of our favorite spots, I decided to stop at the Peace Corps medical office to have a professional take a look. At the very least, it could result in replenishing my supply of Benadryl, a valuable rationed commodity during the darkest coldest loneliest winter nights in At-Bashy, where all the seasoned Peace Corps Volunteers knew that taking them, even when not medically indicated, could help you secure sleep during

7 “Kautuka is a red-yellow colored ritual protection thread, sometimes with knots or amulets, found on the Indian subcontinent…A kautuka is a woven thread, cord or ribbon, which is traditionally believed to be protective” (Wikipedia, 2019).
the long Tien Shen mountain freeze. The doctor snipped the sacred threads of my Kautuka off my wrist to perform her exam, providing some temporary relief, and then concluded that my allergy was severe enough for her to send me off with a fresh supply of Benadryl and a note to ship an Epi-pen to my village when the next medical shipment arrived. My friends and I decided this emergency merited some good old-fashioned Soviet medicine (i.e. vodka) to help quell the redness, swelling, and itchiness (Clark Howard, 2008). It’s unclear if the vodka helped accomplish anything, except to help secure a new nickname for myself: Bugbee, to go along with a long list of acquired aliases (aka. Dolly, Jillybird, Jillybean, Jiller Kristen, Jillis, Puffy, Island Jill, Booboo, Pards, Mem, etc.), but at the very least it did help keep my mind off my increasingly distended and distorted arm. When I woke up the next morning, my entire arm was still so swollen and sore that I knew I wouldn’t be able to help the women braid the plant materials for the next stage of the house construction.

Gender norms had long been one of my perpetual adversaries, and with a visible physical ailment to help make my case that I couldn’t perform the traditional female tasks, I took this as an opportunity to challenge the gender boundaries rampant throughout Kyrgyzstan and upheld at our job site. It took some convincing, some proving, and some humor, but I persuaded the men of what seemed obvious: that I couldn’t braid because of my arm, but that I could join them in getting barefoot to stomp in the mud pit being filled with straw to help mix the solution to create blocks for building. I played up my lifelong soccer career to convince the foreman I had the strength and the stamina to march all day and mix that mud. I insisted that I could keep up with them, and sealed the deal by explaining that if they didn’t let me march I couldn’t be
useful on the building site with only one functioning arm. The men finally conceded, and
I got busy removing my sandals and fashioning a makeshift sling for my arm out of my
belt. Then I marched and stomped alongside them. With my body literally stuck moving
in place, my mind had time to reflect on and remember what Numi had shown me, and
how I needed to consider for the first time in a long time how little I might actually know
about myself – ourselves – and how I might need to reconsider and (un)learn much of
what I had been taught up until this point.

While in college, I had made it a point to try things that were not allowed in my
family, things way outside the rules of acceptability: everything from watching television
to studying world religions to experimenting with mind-altering substances (Pollan,
2018). But attempting to follow my friends’ pop culture references (so often unfamiliar to
me as a result of my curated childhood) was the least of my concerns as I strived to
explore this newly open and expanding world (Klein, 2018); the deeper challenge was
whether I’d truly overcome the values of my youth, or if I still held onto the resulting
self-hatred despite my attempts at superficial rebellion. I remained afraid of what it might
mean if I picked one of the letters in LGBTQIA or identified somewhere along the
gender spectrum other than where expected.

Despite this residual fear rooted in my upbringing, college did provide relief from
the seemingly arbitrary rules and expectations I’d always been confined by, and the
opportunity to consider and reconsider for perhaps the first time: who was I, who did I
want to be, and what did I value? Beyond allowing me to push against the values and
boundaries that had been placed on me up to that point, it was in college that I had started
to gain real exposure to diversity. My hometown – a second home kind of community –
had plenty of socioeconomic disparities, and I had encountered both extreme wealth and
dire poverty as my father had oscillated between careers at a church and in the oil
industry. But diversity of religion, race, sexuality, gender, and worldviews were far more
unfamiliar, and as I learned more, I began to realize that what I had been told about the
world and how I had learned to engage with the world was not ok. I, in fact, was not ok.

The sting in Kyrgyzstan showed me what Numi saw in me, helped me feel what
Numi felt about me. As we traveled together through my memories I realized that
although it manifested differently as a young adult, I had modeled my life, my very way
of being in the world in which I pursued beliefs and actions with a single-minded focus,
after the extremism experienced in my childhood. My early education had been an
indoctrination to believe with absolute certainty that there is one right path. And this path
was exclusive in nature, it relied on the degradation of much of humanity, and allowed
for the destruction of people and planet. It refused to acknowledge its responsibility and
complicity in ravaging the earth and enslaving our neighbors. It demonstrated its
narrowness through unfettered opulence, xenophobia, and privilege. It filtered its
entitlement through a righteous wrath, which could easily be forgiven and forgotten in
private atonement with God, but never public reparations. These beliefs permeated my
very essence, and as a result I had silenced and closed off pieces of myself. Perhaps not
even pieces, but essential parts that comprised my whole (Styres, 2017).

As I continued to trudge in the mud, my body began to tire, matching the
emotional exhaustion resulting from the swirling feelings of remorse, rage, and grief
brought on through my reflections and rememberings. Suddenly, Numi redirected me to a
more recent memory, something that had happened during my first six months in my
Kyrgyz village. I was preparing to leave my host family for my first solo trip, which we were all nervous about. I only had the inchoate Kyrgyz vocabulary skills of a child still forming language by that point, and wasn’t entirely familiar with the routes that I needed to take to get to the capital. I needed this trip to be timely, in a country that uses the same word for “now” and “wait.” Plus, I needed to build the confidence of living and traveling in a still unfamiliar country that I had committed to call home for the next two and half years. As I prepared to leave my family’s compound—using the outhouse, gathering my backpack, and filling up my water bottle—my host parents gestured for me to come and sit with them in our main room. We sat on the couch, with my host father and mother on either side, and my three little adorable host sisters chattering away at our feet. My host dad was holding out a necklace\(^8\) indicating I should put it on, while my host mom held some sage. Then he started saying something, or rather he started chanting, more like singing. It was beautiful, melodic, and loving. I realized these sounds couldn’t have been Kyrgyz or Russian, only Arabic. He was praying. He was praying for me. And as he prayed my host mom quietly lit the sage and began to wave the fire and smoke over and around me. I don’t know exactly what was said, because I don’t understand Arabic, but I could sense they were praying for my safe passage, and my safe return. And amidst this intimate smoky unfamiliarity was a deep familiarity. It reminded me of home, of my own family. When my own parents would stand with me in the driveway, or sit with me in the car, or find a quiet place at the airport to pray for my safe passage and my safe return. Their beliefs while divergent theologically manifested similarly, in an effort to create

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\(^8\) Often referred to in Western cultures as an “evil eye” necklace. In Islam such a necklace was believed to protect the person who wore it from the “evil gaze.” This gift made sense considering how often I stood out in Kyrgyzstan for my skin color, language limitations, hair, and dress.
meaning in our shared Universe. As I felt the mud between my toes and the burning of my calves, I remembered all of the prayers, blessings, and love and tears welled up in my eyes for I began to see what Numi was quietly revealing to me: that knowledge depends on one’s perspective, position, and power, and that there is no one right path to discovering what is true for you – that knowledge belongs only to you.

And if that revelation was true, it opened up the possibility that there were so many more truths to (re)consider. In one radiant flash my insides relaxed and I took a deep easy breath. And just like that, I was no longer in the mud pit. I was somewhere that simultaneously felt cavernous and snug. It was like I was inside sound and color and shape, or perhaps that my essence had morphed into the very essence of sound, color, or shape (Abbott, 1952). Everything was expanding and contracting in rhythm with a familiar cadence, movement, vibration, breath that was echoing and reverberating everywhere around me and within me all at once. I felt as though I was surging along brightly lit intertwined tubes that could have been the veins of a massive root system shining through the dark silky humus, or the kaleidoscopic patterns of colored corals found on the ocean floor, or the unbounded swirling cascading light of the constellations, and maybe all of them at once. And then I placed me; I was inside me. It was as if Numi had Ms. Frizzled me into my own intestinal system (Cole, 1990). I was floating, rotating, and bumping around the walls of my clearly irritable and inflamed insides, and it occurred to me that my sickness, didn’t need to be mine anymore. What had once been my physical inheritance (Derrida, 1972): secrets, stress, and an insalubrious microflora; could for once flourish as a whole and healthy ecosystem. I couldn’t tell if Numi was with me, but as I slipped and sloshed through the twists and turns of my duodenum it was
as though I was pushing out the toxins. This left me feeling cleansed and connected to an infinitely unified source, not the sun, the moon, nor the stars, but bigger, more ancient, more eternal. I wanted to talk to Numi. To understand. To ask questions. I had so many: Is this what you needed me to know? Is this the deep understanding of the Hive? Am I healed? But as soon as this line of inquiry left my mind or what I hoped was still my mind. Everything went dark.

I exhaled. A gurgley sputter, drawing the attention of my fellow mud stompers. At which point I awoke from what felt like a dream to the simple and yet Universal realization that things were not as they had been told to me. Everything felt different. I felt different. I realized that it was ok to be different. Different from what I had learned, and instead (un)learning how to be my new self – ourselves. I could remember and honor the good ways I was taught, yet begin to forge my own path to understanding. I could forgive my inheritances, and set out on the long path towards healing knowledge. I could let go of that wounded sick child within me, heal, and try to become whole (Grof, 2012).

I felt liberated after that encounter with Numi; my physical body which had always been trained to work, play, and follow the rules suddenly felt boundless, perhaps because it no longer had the unpredictability of debilitating excretion to slow me down or perhaps because I felt finally free to be me. My newly established physical health gave me the capacity and attention to attune to so much more beyond ourselves. For the first time, I felt free to explore the world with an openness and expansiveness that moved me from place to space to taste the flavors, to hear the languages, to question my knowledge, and to consider the ways of being that are infinitely variable. By welcoming and considering all the entities within that are needed to maintain my own personal bodily
homeostasis, I began to open up to all possibilities beyond that needed to be included and considered to create a more whole harmonious world. Numi had shown me that I had only begun to truly understand and know myself, and that in doing so I could release the anguish and rigidity that were rooted in my childhood and had manifested so clearly through ailments in my physical self, my very own gut. But this newfound physical freedom came with unanticipated side effects. As if by swallowing the mystery of Numi’s Universe, I also felt its immense uncertainty, and I wanted to know more.
Transmittal Memo

To: Queen Mother, The Hive
From: Numi, Illusion
Embodied Dimension: Physical
Re: Intentional Encounter #1 with the childs’ selves

Purpose
This is the first intentional encounter with the childs. The goal of this encounter was to teach the childs about the possibility that she was raised with an understanding of the world that structurally and systematically reinforced the absurd notion of an absolute truth, which has impacted her potential identities. This dangerous and sometimes genocidal approach to understanding reality is common on Illusion – whether it is framed economically, politically, religiously, or across species – for it helps Illusionists to quickly sort information, easing decisions that center on matters of safety, surplus, and scarcity.

Process
By transporting the childs through her own unhealthy intestinal tract, thus dislodging memories of her own difference and the possibility that truths exist across multiple perspectives simultaneously, taught the childs that it might be safe to reconsider the possibility of being queer (Clare, 1999). By questioning the fundamental structural beliefs that held her world together, it unraveled and loosened the folds of truth (Barad, 2007), creating for the childs an opportunity to consider that being at home with oneself allows one to feel at home in the world.

Paradigm
Through our encounter, the childs accepted uncertainty, which in her developmental experience had been associated with weakness and powerlessness (Westover, 2018). Her binary world of arbitrary rights and wrongs had been destabilized by her exposure to differing religions and cultures during her time in Kyrgyzstan, forcing her to reflect upon her own dangerous difference, her queerness, experienced from inside the narrow reality of her earliest education. Theorists on Illusion have known that everything is relative and contingent upon interpretation for quite some time, but the childs is only now catching up her truth to those post-theorists from before her time (Derrida, 1972, Foucault, 1975). In summary, the childs (un)learned that living life on Illusion can not be reduced to extreme polarities, but rather has to be explored and experienced in its infinite nuances, contexts, and complexities. By loosening her grip on knowing what’s supposedly true, the possibility to reconsider her previously internalized beliefs regarding her own emerging identities can now begin to heal and become whole (Grof, 2012).
Cognitive (Interspecies)

From the archives of the Hive.

Transcript from the child's.

Second intentional encounter with Numi, in which the child's encounters the importance of connection across all species in dismantling humanism and colonialism, and the value of children's leadership in this.

Having just come to terms with how little I understood myself as my Peace Corps service came to a close, I was convinced I needed to know more, which to me meant that I needed more school. More training, degrees, or credentialing that signaled to the world: “Look, see for yourself, I know something.” Public policy school seemed like a reasonable choice to try to fill in my gaps about how the world functioned, because even now that I accepted the multiplicity of what was possible, as far as I could tell it still seemed that it was laws, policies, and power that ran the world. As I relocated to Baltimore City to pursue this intention, I couldn’t begin to imagine how many different countries, cultures, and communities I would engage with, and perhaps most enlightening, how I would come to understand my own. I wish I were an anomaly, or could excuse my own ignorance and unconsciousness as a byproduct of growing up in the white middle-class bible belt of the Midwest, but the educational erasure I experienced is intentional. The United States protects its status and reputation as a global super power, while trumpeting democracy and freedom, as it simultaneously fails to acknowledge, educate, or elevate the issues of inequality or confess to the extirpative practices that have been a part of our country from its beginning (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Margolis, 2004). Inequalities of all shapes and sizes abound: racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and ageism, and yet without direct exposure, experience, or education, we still spend much of our time and resources trying to convince people that inequality is woven into the history
of our systems and institutions, our own implicit biases, and general population ignorance.

Graduate school itself is no exception, as it is heavily steeped in inequities, most of which go unstated and unexamined. Schools are designed as institutions to provide the learning, not to (un)learn their own ignorance, so they inevitably perpetuate further harm. For example, it was in graduate school that I learned the step-by-step process of policy-making from Bardach’s (2000) *Eightfold Path*, which to his credit he acknowledged that issues of time and space can matter so sequencing can sometimes go in any order: 1) define the problem, 2) assemble the evidence (e.g. literature review, data, research, etc.), 3) create policy alternatives, 4) create the criteria for evaluation (e.g. measuring and monitoring progress), 5) project the outcomes, 6) consider the trade-offs, 7) make the recommendations, and 8) sell the story, and you are speaking the language of policy-making. Of course this is a compressed version of what I learned in school, as I was also exposed to various other scholars who considered the paradoxes involved in policy analysis (Stone, 1997); the politics and power present in agenda making (Kingdon, 2003); and, the values laden in each policy iteration (Heineman, Bluhm, Peterson, & Kearny, 1990). But even still, the whole “art of policy making” felt reductive (Shambaugh IV & Weinstein Jr., 2003). It felt easy to manipulate and potentially rife with errors based on fundamental choices, power imbalances, and the human fallibility of anybody involved along the way: data sources, variables quantified and included, interpretations of information, purpose of the project, and ultimate audience (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). I would come to understand this in a deeper more ominous way as I had the opportunity to put my policy making into practice through community research projects and internships.
One thing did seem to remain true however, and that was that the language of policy-making seemed to be the language of world-making, and I wanted to be part of making a better world.

I couldn’t wait to get started. My first internship was with the Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees (MORA), and when I arrived at the state office complex I was immediately informed on step one: what the problem was, and step seven: how we were going to solve it. The problem was that Maryland – and Baltimore City in particular – had been experiencing an increase in their refugee resettlement rate over the past few years, which meant more people in need of more services. The solution was that the federal Office for Refugee Resettlement (ORR) had notified states that supplemental grant money would be available for states to provide additional supports to families and children. My job was to sort out the other steps: provide the evidence that Maryland deserved this funding, determine options for which programs and personnel would best utilize this money, create the evaluation criteria to measure and monitor progress, estimate the outcomes and impact should funding be received, and find a compelling way to share our story.

So when Numi showed up again, I was in the process of finding a way to effectively tell our policy story to secure more federal funding. Specifically, I was coaching soccer to a group of refugee boys. I had been overwhelmed by the trends and patterns I had noticed in MORA’s database, essentially more and more children arriving every year from all over: Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Nepal, and Bhutan just to name a few. I was frustrated by how under resourced, under staffed, and overwhelmed service providers seemed to be with incoming arrivals, in
addition to serving those families that needed more long term supports. I was concerned how the families I met would possibly integrate and thrive in their new surroundings considering all the changes they were experiencing (e.g. language, culture, etc.). Which is why on one of my site visits to the community center that hosted trainings for New Americans, English language classes, had a daycare, and a community garden, I noticed a bunch of kids playing pick-up soccer so I went to watch.

I didn’t know it at that moment, but that one decision to go watch, enjoy, and play a game that all of us knew well, and each in our own way, would change my life. To play didn’t require any in depth language or cognition, only our bodies in motion. It didn’t ask anything more of us than to agree to the “spirit” of the world’s most “beautiful game” and to try (FIFA, 2018). That first evening of play turned into weekly drop-in sessions, which turned into a formal team registered in an organized league, which ultimately turned into a non-profit that celebrated its ten-year anniversary this past August. That evening of play also began my own decolonization of knowledge of what I had been taught and believed to be true about my own country, a country that was never mine to begin with, because the land doesn’t belong to any of us, only all of us.

It was Numi who helped me understand this. By this point, a typical Saturday morning for me included picking up the fifteen-passenger van from the community college, filling water bottles, grabbing a bag of donated snacks, and heading to the community center to pick up the boys to head to our weekly match. Game days were similar in that something unexpected always came up, with variation by the day. Sometimes it was needing permission for a younger sibling to come to the match, because a player was babysitting. Other times it was a misplaced jersey or ripped sock.
There was always the challenge of having more kids than we had seatbelts for.
Occasionally we had to track down a kid by phone or house visit, because they had slept in or were desperately trying to finish a chore before their parents would let them leave the house. But on this particular day, it was Numi that demanded my attention. I felt the familiar prick while I was standing near the van reviewing the team roster, trying to make sure we had everyone we were supposed to and no one we weren’t supposed to, and getting the last of the soccer balls back in the vehicle before we left. I hadn’t seen Numi, so I questioned whether or not it really was a bee sting, and not just a bug bite. But the familiar sensation sparked just enough concern that I checked my backpack for my epi pen, and realized I had never taken it out if my suitcase upon arriving in Baltimore.
Because I didn’t have any meds, and without seeing what exactly stung me I texted Morgan – a woman I had recently started dating – who had already left for the field with her load of kids and said: “Hey, I’m not sure, but I might have just been stung by a bee. Wanted to let you know, because I have an allergy, but it’s not a serious one. I just wanted another adult to know.”

The van ride was as boisterous and animated as always, a playful mixture of middle school lingo meeting English language exploration alongside occasional murmurings and exclamations in French, Swahili, Arabic, or Tigrinya. These boys loved our adventures out of the City, and they loved playing soccer even more, so the energy in the van was pulsing. I noticed I was feeling a little hot, but shrugged it off as summer in the City. By the time we arrived at the field I was itchy and noticing a redness creeping out from near my elbow where I had been stung. I had had hives and swelling last time, so as we unpacked the van and found a shady spot to begin our warm-ups, I went to find
Morgan to see if she’d be willing to drive to the pharmacy to grab me some Benadryl. When I found her in the car with another volunteer, she looked very concerned at the sight of me. She immediately noticed the general redness and swelling, and said this looked a little more serious than anything Benadryl could solve, but agreed to go pick some up. I headed back to the kids, trying to continue with our routine and preparation for the game as normal even as my voice felt a little weird and sounded a little scratchy. As we lined up for the pre-game check-in with the referees they asked me if I was ok, and I said I had gotten stung and was having a mild reaction and that one of our helpers had already left to grab me some medication. What I didn’t perhaps fully realize is to what extent I was visibly presenting my symptoms, and how distorted hives and swelling can make someone look when they are no longer isolated to one area, but are circulating throughout your whole body. But by this point the game was about to begin and I wasn’t going anywhere, even as my kids seemed distracted and worried by how swollen I looked to them up close in our team huddle.

The truth was I knew that my body was physically reacting to a bee sting, but what I cognitively didn’t know was how dangerous and even life threatening this allergy could be. I also knew how my body had reacted to Numi’s sting in Kyrgyzstan, and how that experience had been nominally uncomfortable and mildly inconvenient. But I hadn’t really looked into the issue further, I hadn’t even bothered to do what Morgan had done on her short drive to the pharmacy, which was look up allergic reactions to bees, particularly the signs and symptoms to watch out for that demand immediate medical treatment. When she arrived back to the field with a bottle of Benadryl in hand, she could also see I was covered head to foot in hives, my body had ballooned in weird ways and
places, and my voice was raspy and interspersed with coughing fits. Having just read up on the most severe signs of allergic reactions and seeing them in front of her, she said I needed to go to the emergency room. Instead I took four Benadryl and said I just needed to get through the game, then drop offs, and then I’d make time to check this out. I was well practiced in the ability of minimizing physical pain, having grown up in a family that made prioritizing one’s health somehow feel selfishly indulgent. Sensing my uninformed definitiveness, both Numi and Morgan kicked things into high gear to get my attention. On Numi’s part cycling and swirling the allergen throughout my body in such a way that I almost felt disassociated from it: radiating heat, pulsing hives, and an intense itchiness lingered on every surface. On Morgan’s part she called her mother—a medical doctor—to get an expert opinion about what to do when someone is presenting nearly all the symptoms of acute anaphylaxis, yet is refusing to seek emergency care.

At that moment as I was attempting to articulate an instruction to a few of my players on the field, I had no voice, all that came out was rasping wheezing. As I coughed and sputtered, I could faintly make out Morgan relaying an address over the phone, and then I was lost in a memory of my mother at my grandparents’ cottage, a place we went every summer and one that I associate with many of my fondest childhood memories. It had all the water toys you could want as a kid (e.g. jet skis, paddleboards, boats, hot tub, etc.), it was always stocked with food and drinks, and there were always so many people around you could get lost in the cacophony of a card game or find some solace along the creek scouting for frogs. I remembered how one summer my mom’s eye was swollen, red, and goopy. How it seemed to bother her, but she played it off like it wasn’t a big deal and that everyone needed to stop fussing over it. It was only after her sister made her an
appointment, and insisted on taking her into town to get it checked out that we learned how her eye had been infected by a common virus found in hot tubs, and how without the proper treatment (e.g. eye drops, flushing with clean cold water, rest, and sun protecting goggles) that she could have lost her vision in that eye had the virus been left to fester without proper care. I remember thinking how unimaginable that seemed to me as a kid, that one moment you could be enjoying a hot soak in the tub, only in the next moment to have that same rejuvenating experience cause near blindness. I remember imagining my mother with partial blindness trying to adapt to her new existence and all the ways that could change our family. I remembered being so thankful that my relatives had taken action, prioritized my mother’s wellbeing, and insisted she seek care. I also remembered how we all made fun of the big sunglasses she had to wear and called her “Babe Winkelman” for the rest of our trip, even though they were a part of the sight-saving treatment she needed, only further proving my point of how health and wellness were trivialized in our family and anything short of medical emergencies were mocked or diminished. I remembered that this wasn’t the first time or the last time that I would experience a family member avoiding medical services or outright denying illness, pain, or symptoms. Somehow in our family seeking medical attention was seen as weakness, and only necessary if something was obviously physically wrong, but it was avoided and considered superfluous if there were no clear symptoms to point to (Westover, 2018). So by extension any issues concerning mental and emotional health were completely disregarded. This memory sunk in deeper as I connected the dots to how it took my first encounter with Numi to help me realize that my own physical diagnosis of irritable bowel
syndrome was merely a symptom of a deeper shame about being queer in my Evangelical family. Which made me wonder what was Numi trying to teach me now?

Then I heard something, “Coach, coach, coach?” As my own eyesight came in focus, and what might have been dizziness or temporary loss of consciousness dissipated, I realized I was back at the game and kneeling on the side of the field. That’s when I noticed all of the kids on our sideline had moved over next to me, and by the concerned look on their faces I began to consider for the first time the severity of this moment. That this moment was exactly the thing that could kill me. I started to mentally juggle all of the logistics in my head: who could do the drop offs to make sure all the kids got home safe, who would return the van to the community college since I’m the only one with the faculty badge, and what additional trauma would I stir up in these kids’ lives if their coach got wheeled away from the field in an ambulance? That’s when I saw her. Morgan was running across the park complex, and even from far away I could see the familiar neon yellow packaging with the bright blue flip top. She had an epi-pen. The address I had faintly overheard her relaying was not to 9-1-1 services to send an ambulance as I had steadfastly refused to assent to this, but rather it was the pharmacy’s address so that her mother could call in a prescription for the medication.

By the time she reached us, she was already prepared to plunge the epi-pen into my thigh. I mouthed to her my consent as still no sound was coming out, and she moved swiftly and confidently as though administering life-saving medication at a Saturday morning soccer game was a part of her regular routine. She held the pen to my thigh for the recommended ten seconds, but it only took that first moment for my throat to release and the constriction in my airway to open up. I sucked in air. Gulping it in as she pulled
the pen away. I thanked her and the words actually came out. By this time the epinephrine was coursing through my body. My adrenaline had kicked into overdrive, and I felt hyped up. This was my first shot of epi, so I hadn’t really known what to expect, but it seemed to be working. I was able to breath, speak, and shout instructions at the players almost as usual. I felt invigorated like after a plunge into the icy cold waters of Lake Superior.

By the time the kids were safely dropped off, and I was on my way to return the van, I called Morgan. I wanted to thank her again for taking action, action that had almost definitely saved my life, and to ask her if I could repay her by bringing over some take out for dinner. I didn’t really know how I felt. Perhaps a little delirious between the amount of Benadryl I had put in my body making me drowsy, combined with the shot of epi that made me feel hopped up. I was definitely still covered in hives, a little swollen, and uncomfortably itchy. But I figured the worst was over, and at the very least I could bring her dinner to make up for what was an uncharacteristically stressful day of volunteering for her. I was also considering for the first time how lucky I was that on that particular day one of my volunteers had been Morgan. Not only were we sort of dating, but she had a direct line to a medical doctor who could – and was willing to – call in a prescription near our soccer field from five states away. I wondered what this meant for us as we were still sorting through spending time with one another, labels, and all those considerations that come at the beginning of any relationship. I’d never been in the vulnerable position of needing rescuing, and not only did Morgan rescue me, but she did so while honoring my preferences (in this case not calling an ambulance). I wasn’t used to being in such a vulnerable state, and I definitely wasn’t equipped to deal with this sort
of public display of physical weakness. I had a lot of thoughts flickering through my head, but I knew this was not the time to make any rash decisions about her or us, and yet I couldn’t shake the idea that she was the only person I wanted to be with at the end of this topsy-turvy day.

As I made my way to her apartment, it was as though I could feel the epinephrine wearing off from the inside. That the 0.3mg dosage had circulated in its entirety and the medicine had done its duty. This was concerning, because I still felt a long way from recovered. We sat down to eat, and Morgan began telling me about the morning from her perspective, which I only now understood as terrifying. Because she had been the one reading medical guidance online, and talking to her mom, both of which had confirmed that once an allergic reaction starts interfering with the airways (e.g. difficulty breathing, swelling throat, coughing, wheezing, etc.), all symptoms I was manifesting, that the situation can be life or death. She had accurately drawn the conclusion that I had no idea how serious the situation ever was, and assessed that I was unlikely to be convinced to go seek treatment under my own volition, which left her two options: let the reaction get so bad that I could no longer stubbornly resist or take matters into her own hands. I couldn’t tell if I was merely trying to empathize with her predicament and feeling bad as a result since I was responsible for putting her in this position to begin with, or if I was actually physically feeling worse. Whatever the cause of my increasing discomfort, Morgan noticed it too. My face was flushed, I could feel my chest constricting, and then I realized it was happening…again. Morgan jumped into action. She called her mom, she found some blankets for the futon, and a small tube of anti-itch crème, that I began to apply starting with itchiest spots first. Her mom confirmed
that people who experience anaphylactic reactions to stings, can experience multiple cycles as the allergen moves through the system. Having taken Benadryl and getting the shot of epi had only warded off the symptoms temporarily, but I wasn’t in the clear until all the allergens had been excreted from my system, which can vary based on context, patient, treatment, and so forth.

This meant for the next 48 hours I needed to monitor symptoms, particularly around breathing, and be woken up every hour or so to ensure that my pulse wasn’t wildly oscillating or that I didn’t lose consciousness. Graciously and a little aggressively Morgan insisted that since I wouldn’t go get in-person care at a medical facility (the obvious and safest choice), I at least needed to let friends help monitor me overnight. She called my dear friend Meghann who left her cart of groceries in the check-out line to immediately come and assist. I wasn’t familiar with this kind of response where people would drop their priorities and activities to help without hesitation. After all, I had been raised in a family that didn’t react much to physical illness – unless in extreme circumstances – and didn’t really acknowledge mental illness since it’s invisible and therefor deniable. So my friends’ willingness to watch over and care for me felt unusual, but I knew I didn’t want to be alone so the three of us geared up for a long uncomfortable night. They took turns waking up every hour to check my breathing and pulse, prepared doses of medications, and did the disgusting duty of slathering my body with anti-itch cream to try to calm the frenzied itchiness that permeated every pore. In the midst of this, I experienced, under Numi’s guidance, an other-worldly night filled with travels and teachings that allowed my mind to escape the fiery itchy pain my body was enduring.
The moment my eyes shut I was there. Where “there” was, I wasn’t totally sure. It was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The place was inhabited by what appeared to be people perhaps no different from me. Although they seemed to be dressed in something – like clothing – but theirs altered in color, form, and texture as they moved about. I couldn’t be sure, because I knew at least part of my consciousness was still back in Baltimore, covered in cream and writhing on a futon, but it appeared as though their clothes – or maybe their bodies – were changing in relation to the environment (e.g. temperature, color, texture, etc.) around them. No one looked the same, but there was a similarity in the form and function of the materials, which seemed to help the people blend into and adapt to the place and one another. Everything felt deeply rooted to the land, as if the contours, topography, waterways, and geographical landscape were the defining factors around how everyone coexisted. There were no tall buildings, and the structures that I could make out were so well blended into their natural surroundings it was hard to tell what might be taking place inside. There didn’t appear to be any large meat animals here, but there was enough movement and sound throughout the landscape that upon closer inspection I was confident I would uncover an incredibly healthy and diverse ecosystem. As I stood there looking around and trying to get my bearings, I noticed the dense forest to my left, the lush garden plots following the bends along the river to the right, and off in the distance an aquamarine shimmer reflecting what seemed water large enough to be an expansive ocean. I felt a flutter near my ear, and heard Numi buzz softly, “Welcome to the planet of Inclusion.”

I knew enough about Numi by now to know that this planet could be anywhere in the Universe, because it most definitely was not anywhere on Earth (aka. Illusion). I
asked, “Why am I here?” This inquiry was met with silence other than the sound of few birds zipping and chattering away in a nearby shrub. I looked down at my blood-stained soccer shorts from where the epi pen had punctured my skin earlier that morning. I took a deep breath. And I started walking along the path by the river, thinking to myself that water always goes the most simple way, so I too would try to keep this adventure simple. As I turned along one of the bends, where the water pooled and eddied near a big boulder, I saw a little girl bent over dipping a large nautilus shell into the water. I considered continuing along until I came across someone a little bit older before seeking out help or answers, besides she seemed busy conducting her household chore collecting water, but then she looked up and we locked eyes. I smiled, hoping this conveyed that I was friendly and not a threat, only lost and trying to figure out what I was doing here and more importantly how I could get back home. The girl then calmly said, as she gathered the last few drops of water into her shell, “I’ve been expecting you Jill.”

I tried to stay calm, but my heart was pulsing and I was feeling nervous. My body seemed to be fluxing back and forth between dimensions simultaneously fighting an allergen coursing through my blood stream and feeling apprehension about this little girl who had been expecting me in a place five minutes ago I didn’t even know existed. I finally managed to answer, “Oh, really?”

Before I could go on, the girl skipped across the river water spider style and introduced herself with a gentle bow of the head, “I’m Este.”

“I’m Jill” I mumbled back, and then added, “but I guess you already knew that.”

Este smiled and said, “We’ve been waiting for you. Follow me.” I knew enough at this point, having had the previous encounter with Numi inside my own intestinal
system, that my best option and the most practical one was to give into the experience, so I did as she asked, and followed her. She skittered and scattered along the path, occasionally stopping to take in a scent, or reach out and touch a bough. Once or twice I watched her pick up a rock, hold it gently, and put it down again. I was mesmerized by her clothing or suit or skin, unsure of its exact nature. Because now that I was closer to it, to her, I could see how it wasn’t only changing in color to account for the environment, but it was also changing in texture to adjust to the temperature and conditions. It almost appeared to be alive, sentient, composed of living matter that was harmonizing itself and subsequently harmonizing Este with her surroundings. Then I nearly laughed out loud, thinking to myself now how when I first saw this little girl my settler colonialist brain had assumed that this was a primitive little girl collecting water to bring home to her family to cook or clean, a responsibility that I knew was getting harder and harder back on Earth as temperatures rose and ecosystems continued to get decimated by development. This didn’t seem to be the case here – on Inclusion – and I was slowly beginning to realize that Este wasn’t a scared little girl doing chores for the household potentially threatened by this adult foreigner in her midst. Instead I was opening up to the possibility of understanding just how sophisticated this whole planet and this little girl in particular might be.

At that moment, Este stopped, and turned towards a beautiful birch tree. She began to peel back a layer of bark, which struck me as odd considering how every other interaction I had seen her engage in had felt so intentional and conscientious, but then I noticed a laser beam underneath that quickly scanned in her face and instantaneously we were inside the tree. As soon as we dropped into the trunk of the tree, we shot through the
tube like a luge, swooping and swirling until we landed in what I could best describe as a headquarters, a sort of situation room, that had scientific capabilities the likes of which I never seen before. As I tried to take it all in, from the holographic multidimensional modeling that seemed to be displaying real time imagery both at the macroscopic level and the microscopic level simultaneously, to the growing organisms, flora, and fauna filling various spaces throughout the room. I nearly bumped into a mini ecosystem where it appeared as though a clam was helping to heal and rejuvenate some bleached out coral.

Then I heard Este’s magnetic voice call me over. She offered a chair, and a glass of water, and realizing only then just how exhausted I was, I flopped down and took a sip.

Este spoke seemingly to the ceiling, “Inclusion West,” and as she did a holographic image of a vast and mountainous region illuminated the room.

I asked, “Where’s that?”

“The West side of our planet,” she replied taking in the confused look on my face.

“There you sit now allows you to experience all of Inclusion at once. Yes, we’re a small planet, but we’re also an incredibly advanced, diverse, and interconnected one. I’ve noticed you watching me, and you’ve seen how my body seems to shapeshift and transform depending on the environment that envelopes me.” She looked at me inquisitively raising one eye brow and then continuing, “We’re not wearing anything. We’re in our natural state, what you on Illusion would call naked.”

I interrupted, “But you don’t look naked?”

She smiled and then explained, “It’s the water. The water is what connects us to one another. To all our relations here on Inclusion. Imagine that like you, we need water to drink, to survive. But water also makes up a large percentage of our bodies, something
like over 90 percent. We’ve developed bio-eco-technology within water molecules, which enables us to communicate, understand, and connect to all our relations. Today when you spotted me by the river, I was collecting a water sample in my nautilus, to bring back here so we can continue to monitor the harmony and balance for all life on Inclusion something we constantly attune to.”

“Wait, so are you saying you can communicate with everything here? Everyone? Throughout the whole planet?” I questioned. As I asked this question my mind was also imagining a sort of Orwellian-Huxley-esque dystopia where the water has been manipulated to control the masses, and considering all the ways that this technology, in the wrong hands, could go very wrong.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. Realizing now that she probably did know what I was thinking because I’d foolishly taken a drink of the water she gave me and now I was connected to this whole water wheel data cult system. “Let me try to explain. We all understand one another, and nothing gets lost in translation. But more importantly, being able to communicate with one another helps us to include every entity, every story, every experience, every perspective, every voice, every song, in every decision that we make here on Inclusion.” Este continued on, as my eyes began to flutter with the excitement of what that could mean. “On our planet we have come to understand and respect that each organism serves a unique purpose, and it is in the best interests of everyone to listen and respect the needs of one another. Because we know that each of our languages holds valuable knowledge and information that help keep our planet’s ecosystem vibrant, and our species thriving whether they live on the ice floats off the South side of Inclusion or in the mountainous crags you see now in the images of the
West.” As this soaked in, I could see people as she zoomed in on Inclusion West. They looked different than Este in build, facial features, and hair texture. Their bodies seemed built to provide protection from the work they were doing collecting and carrying boulders down the path, but as they shapeshifted in relation to the sun or the shadows it also seemed as though this heavy work was effortless. As if their bodies were replenished in real time of any energy they exerted. Almost as though they were seeping up or reflecting inward the environmental energy from the rocks and the sun, and this energy cycle helped make the work look easy, fluid, and routine.

“So this headquarters, or whatever it is where we are now, holds the data of all sentient entities throughout this entire planet, and is compiling it into a data system here that stores and sorts the information based on Inclusion’s shared values and collective goals?” I nearly shouted, on the edge of my seat, running my hands through my hair as I tend to do when excited, until it was sticking up and out and every which way. The magnitude of what this meant was only beginning to sink in. My cognitive synapses were firing on overdrive, considering how this could eradicate interspecies inequalities, and create an ecosystem aligned along natural evolution, while ensuring not only adequate resources but abundance. And then I added, “Wait, where exactly are we on the planet, right now?”

Este could perhaps see the wheels in my brain turning, and offered, “Well we’re technically on an extension of Inclusion. We were able to develop technology to create spacetime locations – like this lab – that exist as a part of our planet, and yet do not have to be physically built on its surface. This allows Inclusion to prioritize the living entities that exist throughout our ecosystem, since we don’t have to clear large swaths of land,
trees, or animal habitats in order to create large meeting spaces, or entertainment spaces, or work spaces, but instead people can use portals like the birch tree we used to come here to carry out those functions that are secondary to caring for our planet and one another. This extension technology serves a broader aim of our most important guiding principle: that every entity’s experience is included and valued equally as knowledge. Including me—while I am only a ‘little girl’ in your eyes, I am also the leader – for now – of Inclusion.”

“You?” I said in a tone that I hope both conveyed my deference and amazement, while concealing my surprise.

“The leaders are always children on the planet of Inclusion” Este replied matter-of-factly.

“Why?” I asked generally confused and revealing the deep-rooted implicit biases regarding children’s limited capacity so common in my culture.

“Despite our differences from humans on Illusion, we are the same as you in many ways, including the fact that kids tell the truth. They haven’t yet developed the theory of mind to make strategic decisions based on nefarious or narcissistic motivations. They are innately curious and are willing to try new things, and they thrive in a loving, caring, and harmonious ecosystem so are willing to course correct to help ensure and maintain this equilibrium. Finally, as the youngest inhabitants with the most years ahead of them, they arguably also have the strongest motivation to ensure the planet and society’s continued peace and prosperity,” Este finished.

I mulled this over to myself. Kids in charge, and they have the capacity to take in every song, perspective, and data variable from throughout their whole world at all
times…What did this mean? I couldn’t tell if I was terrified by this prospect or electrified by the possibility of it? I couldn’t agree more that kids, especially those around Este’s age, really did seem to me to have an aura about them, a way of moving through, inquiring, and encountering the world that seemed almost other-worldly. They exist without falling prey to the more unfortunate tendencies of adults – the calculation of an economic bad actor or the temptation of collecting on corruption. While not impervious to the overwhelming sensation and onslaught of their emotions, their resilience and adaptability would serve any person in a position of leadership well.

As I was turning to ask Este some follow up questions about the tenure of leadership and whether Inclusion has ever experienced a species extinction, I opened my eyes and I was back in Baltimore face-to-face with Meghann who was whispering, “Jill! Jill. Hey Jill, wake up. It’s time to take more Benadryl.” I can only imagine the look on my face, because Meghann cocked her head to the side slightly and said, “Is everything ok?”

“I just had the wildest experience,” I exclaimed. Meghann looked exhausted. I realized it was 3:00am and she had fallen asleep in the armchair between her turns waking me, applying anti-itch cream, and doling out my meds.

So I said, “I’m good, let’s get some sleep.”

And I was good. It was as though I had seen what is possible, perhaps not the technological advancements of spacetime portals just yet, but that we did live on an incredibly diverse planet, one filled with a multitude of species, languages, and knowledges. We lived in a country that at least superficially valued diversity and difference, extolled in our de facto national motto as “E pluribus unum” or “out of many,
one” (Act of Congress, 1782). Of course, a motto is easy to create, and harder to follow. The reality of our country’s founding is irrefutably riddled with atrocities, genocide, and the codification of land, people, language, and knowledge (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). These truths are often overlooked, underplayed, or worse, completely absent from our educational curriculum, resulting in generations of people ignorant to the chaos and violence that created our country. I began to wonder if this was what Numi meant: why the Hive was afraid of the people of Illusion, because we can’t or don’t want to remember our own histories? I began to consider how suppressing this knowledge, and how refusing to admit to or repair the harm that was done to the land and people harms us all (Fricker, 2007). I began to see why Inclusion felt so peaceful and appeared so vibrant, because from the beginning they had chosen to value all perspectives and with that collective approach they learned, developed, and created advancement that utilized knowledge from every source.

I felt a chill, so I sat up, and reached for my hoodie. It was my Soccer Without Borders (SWB) hoodie that I wear to most of our matches. Our name, an altered version of the more well-known non-profit Doctors Without Borders, a connection that in my current state as a sick soccer coach made me smile to myself. In that moment and in the context of what I had just seen on the planet of Inclusion, I couldn’t help but consider what those two words: “Without Borders” aspired to? According to scholar Walia (2013) “physical borders enforce a global system of apartheid, and…conceptual borders keep us separated one from the other” (p. 2). The fundamental premise being that “land does not belong to ‘us’; we belong to the land” (Walia, 2013, p. x), and it is only the mentality of “settler colonialism [that] depends on an exclusivist concept of nation, based on control
and ownership of land and territory that is demarcated by borders” (Walia, 2013, p. xiii). This colonial global system is why I had come to know twenty-five refugee boys and their families resettled in Northeast Baltimore, why I had returned to coaching soccer after a long hiatus from the game, and why I was laying on this futon sticky and itchy. Their homes and home countries designated by arbitrary borders – many of which had been drawn and redrawn as colonial powers faced opposition from the rightful inhabitants or as they pursued profitable natural resources in the region – were no longer options for them and their families. Qualifying reasons for their refugee status are narrowly defined by the United Nations, “A refugee is a person forced to flee their country because of war, violence, or persecution. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (UNHCR, 2018). This definition doesn’t even begin to include people who will inevitably be forced to leave their homes due to the increasing dangers of climate change, which is already causing massive droughts, flooding, fires, and unusual storms across the globe (Purdy, 2015). If as though the international community only wanted to take responsibility for those persons fleeing the more overtly human-made conflicts like war, politics, or religious persecution, instead of acknowledging our blame in the climate catastrophe that is awaiting us all in the Anthropocene. A term that itself only further inflates our own self-importance, creating the illusion that humans have hit epoch status, when in fact all of humanity has lived but an instance (Brannen, 2019).

I thought about the long bureaucratic process most of my players had endured just to arrive in Baltimore: waits in refugee camps for months often years, biometric screenings and background checks, laborious re-traumatizing interviews paired with
demands for documentation to prove how precarious their situation really was and why they were seeking refugee status, medical screenings and vaccinations, and how all of that was just to arrive in a receiving country. A country like the United States that has a long history of brutality towards populations deemed “different”: Indigenous communities, enslaved Africans, Chinese during the gold rush, Mexicans around the Great Depression, Japanese post-Pearl Harbor, migrant families at the southern border, and on and on (Haynes, Merolla, & Ramakrishnan, 2016). I had already heard from my players accounts of harassment and assault at the city bus stop. I had witnessed the xenophobia and racist taunts they endured as we traveled around Baltimore County competing against the predominantly white, more affluent soccer teams in the league. I had come to experience alongside them the neglect and disregard they encountered as they tried to navigate city services and bureaucratic offices for entitlements they desperately needed and easily qualified for (e.g. TANF, SNAP, energy assistance, etc.). And, on a daily basis, I knew how deficient their schools were in creating an inclusive environment that recognized their strengths, languages, experiences, and the knowledge they had to contribute to their educational community.

The moment these children enter our school systems, the deficiency labeling begins, and the parameters for success are predetermined without consideration of the unique needs or knowledge of the students. This deficiency labeling is woven into our best policies and best practices – some of which have evolved out of decades of advocacy, legal battles, and activism – and yet continue to prioritize, empower, and privilege colonialist paradigms. While these policies and the language and labels used within them have evolved and improved over time, they still lack a regenerative inclusive
approach to policymaking in education (Dixon-Român, 2017). In one example, by promoting English first, only, and always in the classroom and beyond, a child’s knowledge of self, community, and culture is slowly eroded. It begins to distort our realities, because words can be strong connections to knowing, understanding, and place. And when we incentivize students to forget and to replace their first words, the words of their world, their own songs, we lose out on the multidimensionality of their knowing. Without providing spaces and ways for the diversity of species to share their knowledge, we’re all missing out on things we can’t even begin to understand or envision.
Transmittal Memo

To: Queen Mother, The Hive
From: Numi, Illusion
Embodied Dimension: Cognitive
Re: Intentional Encounter #2 with the childs and interspecies

Purpose
This is the second intentional encounter with the childs. It took place on the planet of Illusion in a city called Baltimore, opening the pathway to the planet of Inclusion. The goal of this encounter was to illuminate the ways the childs knowingly and unknowingly participates in and perpetuates humanism and colonialism.

Process
Great risks were taken in order to shake the childs from her naïve sense of global inclusivity and diversity, which primarily centered human knowledge as the apex. A strong dose of the Hive’s medicine was administered to penetrate the childs delusion that she herself was immune to colonialistic or humanistic ways of being because of her brief time living, working, and traveling throughout Illusion. Dosing the childs while she was working in a multicultural youth setting further emphasized the need for vigilance in undoing the damage of settler colonialism and humanism that has been propagated by her and many others throughout the planet. Inclusion offered a new way of understanding to the childs, whereby the leadership of the entire planet was entrusted to a child who embodies a “beginner’s mind” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 252) and embraces “play as a condition of the Universe” (Bogost, 2016, p. 113) in order to allow for and create infinite possibility.

Paradigm
Through our encounter, the childs realized that by limiting her understanding of the world to those pieces of information obtained and prioritized only by way of cognition, and from a narrow subset of society, ultimately limits what is possible. For as scholar Gopnik (2009) puts it, “we live in a Universe of many possible worlds, all the ways the world could be in the future and also all the ways the world could have been in the past, or might be in the present” (p. 19). Instead, by opening and including the perspectives of all living entities (Haraway, 2003), and valuing the leadership of children, as was done on Inclusion, we could understand differently and more expansively to symbiotically co-exist and create a more harmonious world.
Emotive (Other)

From the archives of the Hive.
Transcript from the child's.
Third intentional encounter with Numi, in which the child is pushed to examine her relations to others and complicity in societal injustice.

After the near-death experience on the soccer field, and the overnight delirium I endured on Morgan’s futon, I got serious about understanding my relationship with Numi. After all, I lived in the shadow of one of the best medical systems in the world, and finally had decent medical insurance that would allow me to get tested and treated so it was time to learn what was medically going on with my body when Numi stung me. I got tested by an immunologist and the results were definitive: I was severely allergic to every type of honeybee, wasp, hornet, yellow jacket, and all Hymenoptera relations. I was advised to begin immunotherapy immediately, which is essentially a few shots mixed with a serum infused with venom from a variety of Hymenoptera. I was to start with three shots weekly, at the smallest dosage, and was required to wait at the clinic for a minimum of thirty minutes each time to make sure I did not go into anaphylaxis. The scientific reasoning of this treatment being that if I am slowly introduced with increasing doses to the venom that can kill me, then at best I achieve immunity and at a minimum I build up a tolerance to buy me more time to receive the necessary lifesaving treatment should I ever get stung again.

“Stung again?” I thought. It seemed unlikely, statistically speaking, but then again I did spend a lot of time outdoors and seemed to be somewhat of a statistical outlier having had multiple stings already. I posed the questions to my immunologist: why did
he think I was getting stung so frequently and if there was anything I could do to mitigate future stings?

He replied, “That really isn’t my area of expertise. But yeah, it is unusual that you’ve been stung as many times as you have over such a short period.” He proceeded to share information I’d already found easily available online ranging from how I could wear layers that covered my skin to avoiding eating bananas before going outside. Nothing I hadn’t heard before, so this question about why I kept getting stung nagged at me. Was it a kind of pheromone I was giving off? Was it how I moved through the natural world? Was it something in my genetics or epigenetics? Why did Numi keep making contact, contact so powerful it could kill? My doctor wasn’t knowledgeable about the root reasons of my continued stings, which seemed indicative of western medicine’s tendency to only treat my symptoms. I decided to ask my questions to another kind of practitioner, a doctor of philosophy with expertise in bees to see if they had any answers for me. First, however, I wanted to do my own research and see what I could find out about this relationship between bees stinging humans. Numi stinging Jill.

I had the time and the resources to consider all of this, because I had recently left my role as the director of Soccer Without Borders Baltimore to work in the Baltimore City Mayor’s Office. Soccer Without Borders was now firmly established in the non-profit community, and I felt it was ready for new leadership to expand programming and services to more kids and families. Not to mention, over the years I had grown increasingly frustrated by the more systemic challenges our newcomer families were facing, and I felt a pull to put more of my policy training into practice, leading me to accept a job at the Mayor’s Office for Health, Human Services, Education, and Youth. It
was a significant shift from working with some of the most overlooked people in the City to some of the most visible and powerful. However, I had mistakenly assumed that in this role I would have a more consistent schedule, with fewer emergencies demanding my attention and energy, so I could devote more time to dealing with my health and spending time with Morgan.

Numi also had other plans, but this time when they struck again, I was more prepared, at least physically. I had been tested, I had been receiving my immunology shots for weeks, and I had a better understanding of what to expect after a sting and how to proceed based on the onset of symptoms. Numi found me on a run, and as soon as I felt that familiar sting I sprang into action. I reset the timer on my watch so I could keep track of when symptoms started to appear. I called Morgan to meet me back at the car. Upon reaching the car, I found a sharpie and marked an ‘X’ on the sting site, and then circled the first red layer of swollen hives with a label that said fifteen minutes to track its progress. I washed down the four Benadryl, two Prednisone I now kept with my epi-pen and pulled out the pen itself while I waited for Morgan in the passenger seat. I could see her running across the park looking concerned, so I tried to calm myself by taking a few deep breathes, attuning to any changes, raspiness, or shallowness in my respiration. And I had already pulled up on my phone the driving directions to the nearest emergency room that took my insurance – thirty minutes away – I was ready.

“Did you take your epi-pen?” Morgan asked wide-eyed, gripping the steering wheel, concentrating on getting out of the parking spot quickly and safely.

“Not yet, I have it here if I need it. Because the doctor said to use discretion with the epi-pen, since I can develop a tolerance to it in the same way that I’m trying to build
up my tolerance to the venom. So I’m only to use it, if I really need it, like if I feel anything going on with my breathing or my hives start spreading rapidly” I replied, checking my watch and noting the redness had expanded beyond the first black circle. We continued driving in silence, both checking the status of Google maps to make sure we weren’t headed into any traffic or missed an option to take a faster route. It had now been thirty minutes since Numi stung, so I made another black circle around the expanding red hives and noted the time interval. My throat was feeling a little weird. But I didn’t know if it was placebo, or psychosomatic, or anaphylaxis, since I had been focusing so hard on my breath since getting stung. I took another deep, long exaggerated breath in.

“You sound a little raspy to me?” Morgan offered, knowing I’m more receptive to input when offered as an option amidst many possibilities rather than a directive. I breathed out, and felt the familiar sputter of my respiratory system impacted by the venom.

“Alright, I’m giving myself the epi-pen at roughly thirty minutes post sting” saying out loud as though we were in an episode of Grey’s Anatomy and I’d just shouted “Push one unit of epi” to my trauma team. It hit my system fast, and immediately I could tell the difference in my breathe. Breath is such a funny thing, something we do constantly, rhythmically, practically mindlessly most of the time, and it becomes such a part of us that we don’t realize how powerful it is or how it can feel different, until you are missing its regularity. I took a few more deep breathes. Slowly inhaling. Slowly exhaling. Breathing in and feeling the adrenaline moving through my body, and breathing out trying to stabilize my extremities that were shaking with the epinephrine. We were
still fifteen minutes from the hospital, which felt like an enormous amount of time to fill. Especially when you consider it could be the last fifteen minutes of your life’s consciousness, making the latest news report on National Public Radio sound inconsequential. I thought about what Morgan had told me about the last time I had been stung and left helpless on her futon. She had told me that during one of her turns waking me up during the night to check on my breathing I had seemed really out of it, but that I had sat up swiftly, started shaking and crying, and told her “I don’t want to die. I’m not ready.” It had stood out to her both for its clear emotional impact on her, but also as the first time she had ever seen me cry. The first time she had seen me so vulnerable. Just the fragile, scared, and mortal human that I was. She said I had seemed so sad and scared like a little child. And that’s what I was after all, a sad and wounded little child at my core.

“You haven’t said anything in a while, you feeling ok?” Morgan gently prodded. I knew she was checking in about my breathing, and hearing me talk is a good way for her to get a sense of how I was doing. I had turned off the radio, so now we were sitting in near silence forced to listen to ambient traffic sounds, and the British accent of Google maps directing our every move.

“I was just thinking about last time this happened, and how you took care of me, even though you didn’t have to, when I really should have been at a hospital” I offered as a way to let her evaluate my respiratory response and to acknowledge the important role she had played in saving my life. However, I was unable to say those actual words, as I was still learning from Morgan how to feel my emotions, identify them appropriately, and articulate them kindly with words. So while the bee immunotherapy was good, it
wasn’t the most important thing I had been learning these days. The most important thing I had been learning was being in a relationship with Morgan. She was very in tune with her emotions, and prioritized her feelings in her day-to-day decision-making. It was something I admired about her, something she was modeling for me in our relationship, and something I was learning to respect and attune to within myself. There was no denying that Morgan was the driving force behind establishing care with my immunologist, attending my shot appointments, and making sure I carried my medication with me at all times. She had even gone to the trouble of making up little medication kits, which included an epi-pen with a baggy taped to it filled with the accompanying medications Benadryl and Prednisone. She had put one in my work bag, my glove compartment, in my treat pouch carried on dog walks, and anywhere else to ensure accessibility in the face of another sting. It was through these types of gestures that I was beginning to feel something special for Morgan. She made me feel safe. She made me want to be better. She made me wonder if this is what love felt like?

“Well we never need to have that experience again, do we?” she continued, “Because now you know what you are allergic to, you’re getting treatment, you carry medicine with you, not to mention you have decent health insurance.” This checklist sounded like it was more to reassure her than me, so that once we arrived at the emergency room we could tell the medical professionals all that we’d done demonstrating our medical proficiency and expediency. This knowledge and preparation would no doubt go a long way in ensuring we got quick quality care, paired with our status as educated, white patients in an inherently racist and classist system. Plus we could speak the
language of health professionals, effectively advocate for my needs, and were confident in our knowledge of the circumstances.

“I sure hope not” I faltered. Immediately nervous by the sound of my own voice, which didn’t sound like me at all. I looked again at my watch: fifty-one minutes since the sting. I looked down at my leg, the redness was still expanding, but had remained isolated to that one leg. A good sign, considering last time it had spread throughout my entire body. We were about five minutes out, so I was hoping Morgan didn’t notice the fluctuation.

“Are you ok?” she said pulling up to a stop light, shifting to face me, and turning up one eye brow inquisitively. Nothing gets past her. I exhaled loudly.

“It’s just my throat is still feeling a little tickly,” I admitted.

“Tickly can mean anaphylaxis. Grab the epi-pen out of my purse” she directed.

“You have one too?” I asked genuinely surprised.

“I always carry one with me,” she said as she forced a concerned smile. I rummaged through her purse and found the epi-pen complete with its own baggy of meds. I took a few more breaths and wondered how many other things does Morgan do on my behalf that I didn’t even know about? And how does she remember to do it? And what was motivating her to be so prepared to take care of me? Was it fear of losing me? Or could it be love?

“I’ve got it, but you don’t think I should use another one, do you?” I genuinely wanted her to weigh in here.
“Does your throat, tongue, or breathing feel different or difficult in any way? And don’t think about the fact that you’ve already used an epi pen today. Just answer the question” she replied.

“Yeah I guess my throat and tongue do feel a little weird, and I still feel a little constricted in my chest. Like I can’t take a completely full or deep breath.” I answered.

“Then I think you should use the second epi-pen, because even when we get to the hospital it doesn’t mean you’ll necessarily see a doctor right away. We might have to wait.” I knew this was true, so I glanced at my watch – nearly one hour since I had been stung – and then looked at the phone – and heard the Brit say we’ll be arriving at our destination shortly. And with that I plunged the second epi-pen into my other thigh, trying not to think of the hundreds of dollars of medication I had just self-administered, but instead remembering how uncertain my last Numi encounter had been, how it kept cycling through my system because the treatment had been so delayed and haphazard, and trying to establish new boundaries for my relationship with Numi moving forward.

Under the circumstances, the reaction to and impact of the sting seemed to be going relatively well. I had clocked and tracked my symptoms, I knew exactly how much medication and what dose and at what intervals they had been administered, and now we were snuggly tucked into a patient care room, as it turns out “anaphylaxis” is the magic word in bypassing the usual emergency room wait. We had made it. I was under a heated blanket, which was unnecessary for early autumn in Maryland, and Morgan was finding a new channel on the television.

Morgan had already updated the intake team on my condition and status, so now we were just waiting for the physical examination. My system had finally calmed down
from all the epinephrine surging through it, and I was starting to feel sleepy from the Benadryl. As I closed my eyes, I began to cough. I began to cough one of those coughs that you can’t quite catch up with. That sort that starts and pauses then continues and then begins to waver between lower and higher octaves seemingly trying to figure out for itself what it wants to do. To this day I don’t believe that it was related to my sting, only that it was a coughing fit that can come when anyone drinks something a little too carbonated or has a bite of food go down the wrong way. But when Morgan heard that coughing, then when I couldn’t respond to her question about whether I was ok or not because I couldn’t stop coughing, and because she had already been through what she had been through with me, she darted out of the room, and even over my coughing fit I could hear her yelling for a doctor and demanding someone come check on me immediately. She didn’t sound mean or angry, in this loud tone of voice I had never heard from her before, only urgent, demanding immediate care, because that’s why we had come to the emergency room in the first place.

I saw two people in scrubs rush into the room towards me, and then everything went dark. Complete blackness. I felt tingly all over. When I opened my eyes again, the sun was shining so brightly I immediately closed them, the transition from dark to light too severe. I tried again, this time squinting, attempting to make out my surroundings. I lifted my hand to shield my eyes, then saw I didn’t have a hand, or an arm, or my body. Instead I had wings, antennas, legs, and a stinger. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I realized I was hovering over center field of Camden Yards, looking down at baseball players scattered across the field with the stands entirely devoid of fans. I heard a buzzing, not yet aware of my own sounds in this new form, and then I saw Numi in flight
right next to me. “What are we doing at an Orioles practice? You must know I think baseball is boring” I danced, trying to be funny.

“This isn’t a practice,” Numi stated simply. I pondered this for a moment, considering the implications: I knew that while baseball was considered America’s pastime, it had been struggling to maintain a fan base amidst concerns that the game was too slow to keep up with our instantaneous interconnected internet world (New York Times, 2017). Despite this recent decline in attendance, it made no sense that there would be zero fans present at a game, with only the two teams on the field and a few individuals who appeared to be security wandering the stadium.

“What’s going on? This place can hold nearly 46,000 people and there can’t be more than a dozen in the stands!” I asked.

“I am showing you a glimpse of your future,” Numi calmly explained, “In only a matter of months, this will come to pass. For the first time in Major League Baseball’s 150-year history, a game will be played without any fans in attendance.” This didn’t make any sense. The Baltimore I knew was obsessed with its sports teams. The Orioles barely ever made it into the playoffs, and yet their fans remained faithful. In the world of football, many residents still held a grudge against the NFL Colts team that had abruptly left the City in 1984, a wound that had only slightly healed when the Ravens had won the Super Bowl in 2000 and again twelve years later. The only circumstances I could imagine that would lead to an empty stadium like this was something like a national security threat or some sort of infrastructure issue like major water lines under the roads immediately surrounding the stadium bursting. This second idea seemed the most plausible because pipes were always bursting around the City, as the infrastructure
underground was desperately in need of major repairs, something City leaders knew, but could rarely find or prioritize the funding to address.

“What happened?” I finally had the courage to ask.

“We’ll go back even further, and I’ll show you.” Numi said before zipping off. I had just gotten used to the sensation of hovering, enjoying the cooling breeze as my wings fluttered about me. I knew by now that Numi wasn’t the kind of bee to wait up, slow down, or explain much in detail, so trying not to over think anything, I flew after the buzzing sound and directly into yet another portal that transported us. One minute I was flying, feeling the warm sun at my back, wiggling my stinger. And then just like that I was in a rowhouse, in a dark room lit by screens, the tv was turned on to the news, and I could hear helicopters in the distance. I looked around. I knew this place, this room. This was my home. An eerie feeling came over me, as I flew towards the tv set to get a better view of the people on the couch. It was me and Morgan. Well it was sort of me, because part of me was also in bee form looking at myself scrolling twitter, and part of me was still back at the hospital under a warm blanket hopefully not still coughing, or perhaps hopefully still coughing, because coughing at least meant my airways were still open.

“Isn’t this dangerous?” I asked Numi worriedly, “I mean in all my favorite fantasy books it was always a bad idea for a person who was moving through spacetime portals or changing forms to interact with their actual embodied self while in that altered state or space?”

Numi sharply replied, “Stop worrying about yourself! You will be fine. Instead ask what we’re doing here.” I considered this for a moment. What was I doing here, and what did this have to do with the empty stadium? Morgan and I almost never watched
television in real time, instead relying on the ubiquitous streaming services to avoid the commercials I loathed as invasive noise pollution. I circulated around the room to take things in: the tv was turned to CNN and anchor Don Lemon was saying words like “riot,” “state of emergency,” and “curfew.” The human me and Morgan kept altering their attention between the tv screen and their phone screens where, as I got closer, I could see they were monitoring their twitter feeds to try to get a better sense of what else might be happening around the City that the major news outlets weren’t covering (Tufekci, 2017).

As I hovered between them, trying to read the content on their little screens, I heard it. A loud announcement being broadcast from the helicopter saying in a very staccato and ominous tone: “The City is under curfew. Stay inside your residence. I repeat: Baltimore City is now under curfew, we ask that you remain inside.” I flew quickly to the window, and turned towards the sound of the hovering helicopter. It was easy to spot, between the loud announcement it was broadcasting repeatedly and the search spotlight that it was moving around in a seemingly haphazard way. Then it turned on me and just as I was covered in its bright glaring glow everything changed.

I came to amidst a loud energetic crowd. But this wasn’t only a crowd, I realized it was a protest, as evidenced by the signs, flags, banners, drumming, and unified shouts. I looked around and felt a little relief when I saw Numi over my right thorax. I tried to say something, but was immediately drowned out by the protesters’ chants of “No Justice. No Peace. No racist police!” I saw Numi start weaving through the throngs of protesters, and I followed. I realized we were on East Pratt Street, one of the major thoroughfares along Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, one of the parts of the City tourists go when they come to town for a sporting event, a convention, or to visit our attractions. I
could see the unique skyline of the National Aquarium ahead and the top of the mast of the docked USS Constellation. I couldn’t believe how many people there were. So many different people, carrying so many signs, moving along roadways usually jammed with car traffic. Then I noticed the heavily-armed police and soldiers. They were everywhere, looking completely out of place in their dessert brown colored standard issued gear, some carrying weapons and shields, wearing helmets, and all of them had gas masks clipped to their sides for easy accessibility. I saw the makeshift barricades that had been set up to try to corral and contain the crowd. My mind was racing and my heart was nearly keeping pace with the flapping of my wings. I couldn’t make sense of anything going on around me. Only last week I had joined colleagues for lunch at the kabob place around the corner, and now Numi was showing me our city under military occupation. Based on everything Numi had already revealed to me, I could deduce that Baltimore was experiencing unrest similar to those that had emerged from the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida; or the eruption that took place in Ferguson, Missouri after the police killing of Michael Brown; or the outrage that broke out in Ohio after officers killed twelve-year-old Tamir Rice. All of them children – now dead – leaving behind only further bloody evidence of our country’s pervasive racial injustice (Alexander, 2012). Is this what happened here, in Baltimore, where I lived, where I worked at the pleasure of the most powerful person in the City?

It was as though Numi had read my mind, and just like that we were off bobbing and weaving through the crowd. I was trying to keep up and trying to avoid running smack into a Black Lives Matter or a Stop Killer Cops sign, when Numi flew straight up. The sounds of the protesters’ chants, the drumming, the crowds dissipating below us.
Before I knew it, we were on top of a beautiful brass dome looking for a way in to a building, a building I recognized immediately as City Hall – my office – a place I was still trying to learn to navigate both literally with numerous passageways and secured entrances, as well as figuratively amidst the politicos and the policy wonks. I was desperately trying to make connections with both longtime personnel who often knew how to get things done and the newcomers like myself who were hyped up on the notion that local government was the most effective avenue for positive impact on peoples’ lives. We flew through walls and ceilings, making a literal beeline to Numi’s ultimate destination. I recognized it immediately, we were in my boss’ office, where a framed copy of the Obama campaign poster that simply read ‘Hope’ hung near the window.

Numi and I were the proverbial bees on the wall, as I watched my future human self, my colleague, and my boss sitting around her desk on a conference call. I wasn’t sure, but it sounded like we were on the line with the top brass at the Baltimore City Public School system. As Numi and I listened, I could piece together that we were discussing flyers that had been made, posted, and shared throughout the district’s 191 schools (approximately 84,000 kids) encouraging students to walk out in protest of the recent death of Freddie Gray in police custody. It was clear the City was on edge following a week of protests while Gray had laid in a coma after sustaining a broken neck while riding unsecured in a police van, before dying on April 19th, 2015. I understood that his funeral had been held earlier that morning, and had been widely attended by City officials, community leaders, and Gray’s family and friends. Local and major news outlets had covered the burial, with all eyes turned on Baltimore after the peaceful protests of the previous week, and the controversial decision by the newly elected State’s Attorney Marilyn Mosby to file
charges against the six police officers involved. I got the sense our team was trying to figure out with the input from leadership at the school district headquarters how many students we anticipated participating in the walk out, and with only about two hours left until it was planned to commence, what, if anything should the City and the Mayor be preparing for.

Then I was startled by the sound of my own voice saying to folks on the conference call that, “I spent my lunch break scanning the social media accounts for the kids and teachers I’m friends with at schools throughout the city, and nearly every single one has reposted the flier, retweeted it, liked it, or posted more generally about the right to free speech and assembly.” It sounded as though I was trying to convey that we should take this walk out seriously, and anticipate potentially large crowds of kids protesting. They were protesting the specific tragedy of the death of Freddie Gray, but also protesting the broader more systemic issues of racism, social injustice, and institutional bias.

My colleague piggy-backed on my comment adding in, “And earlier today I reached out to some of the students on the Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council, and some of those kids are not only planning to participate in the walk out, but I got the distinct impression some of them might have been part of creating the flier and organizing the event, without explicitly admitting as much.” This wasn’t surprising, since the Youth Council was comprised of an ambitious and geographically diverse group of students – one from each of the 14 districts – each of whom had a unique set of skills, interests, or networks that had propelled them onto the council to begin with. The line was silent for a moment, as everyone seemed to let this information soak in and consider what our next
steps should be. I thought to myself, isn’t this what we teach kids? That they should do their part to make the world a better place, and isn’t this what this walk out was all about? The students organizing themselves and planning to walk out of school in protest to speak out against rampant injustices they experienced, of which Freddie Gray’s life and death was indicative. I don’t know what my future self was thinking in that moment, but it was then that my bee self realized that I was the youngest person on that call, so perhaps was more supportive of the students initiative for organizing this walk out.

I could sense Numi was getting ready to transport us once again, so I interjected desperately, “Wait! I need to know what we decided to do. And what happened at the student walk out? How did things escalate to the state of emergency with armed soldiers and a weeklong city-wide curfew? What about the trials of the six police officers? What about Baltimore?” And just like that I was back in human body form. Still tightly swaddled up in a warm blanket, but now hooked up to an IV drip with the faint sounds of The Price is Right coming from the hospital tv while Morgan looked down at her phone.

Morgan noticed me slowly blinking awake, and jumped up saying, “You scared me!” immediately followed by, “I’m glad you’re ok.” As she reached for my hand, and then noticed it had a needle taped to it from the IV drip, so instead began affectionately and gently stroking my arm.

I was about to respond by saying, “What happened?” But then didn’t know if I meant what had happened to me since I started having a coughing fit in the ER or if I was referring to the future scenario Numi had just shown me of Baltimore in bedlam. I tried to coax out a smile, and simply said, “I’m sorry.” And I was sorry. Sorry I had been stung and put Morgan through another chaotic day worrying about keeping me alive. Sorry for
my whiteness and the ways in which it afforded me privileges and safety in a society
designed to uphold whiteness as the standard against which others are measured. Sorry
that I didn’t even begin to understand all the ways in which my whiteness explicitly and
implicitly made me complicit to systemic racism. Sorry that even Numi had known I was
more prepared to encounter the obvious other of Este and her fellow Inclusionists, before
I was ready to fully see and understand the racial others right in my very own
community. Knowing that saying sorry wasn’t remotely good enough, and realizing that
after this encounter with Numi, I needed to commit to a more pro-active anti-racist
existence, and engage in deep reflection about how to be me – white me – and do my
work in a predominantly Black City that has a long history with slavery, race, and the
fight for equal rights, knowing what was soon to come.

It took about an hour to receive the IV medications, after which I was discharged
following a last check by the doctors. As we headed back home to recover from this
unpredictable day, I began to remember and reflect on Numi’s revelations. I couldn’t be
completely certain, but it seemed that any assumption that I could prevent the impending
happenings would be unrealistic and perhaps playing into the unfortunate white savior
trap. Rather, I think Numi was trying to teach me something about the insidious ways of
whiteness, which as a white person I’m not aware of or regularly attuned to out of
necessity, because my life and well-being is rarely at stake for my ignorance. I was
beginning to think Numi was showing me concrete evidence of what happens when we
continue to conduct business as usual, knowing that this business is perpetuating the same
inequities, injustices, and trauma it was always designed to produce. We conveniently
distance ourselves from these truths by saying that’s simply the cost of doing business, or
how things are done, as though we don’t have a choice in the matter (Kimmerer, 2013). As if people weren’t responsible for the policies we’ve created that perpetuate these toxic imbalances.

I could see now how dangerously high these toxicity levels were registering in the City, and I knew now how close to an explosive tipping point we were. The toxicity of white supremacy undoubtedly impacts the lives of people of color disproportionately, as evidenced by Freddie Gray, who came from a part of the City long forgotten by economic investment or educational opportunity. As a child he was exposed to lead paint while living in city-owned low income housing, for which he had received a settlement, something so common in Baltimore they were called “lead checks” (Marbella, 2015). Toxic paint Freddie outlived, but he couldn’t survive his Blackness. His Blackness that had been routinely patrolled, patted down, picked up, and ultimately policed to death. Policing practices that we definitively know treat Blackness differently from whiteness (Alexander, 2012). But what I was beginning to see now was that when we all share the same air, land, and water, and ultimately societal systems, the toxins experienced by some will eventually poison us all.

As scholar Harvey (2017) puts it, “racism is like smog in the air. We all breathe it in, every day…And the impact is serious [if] left untended” (pp. 34-35). Black scholars, activists, and leaders from James Baldwin to W.E.B. Du Bois to Fred Hampton to Angela Davis have been telling white people for generations that this problem of racism is something for white people to reckon with – to repair – because these schemas are rooted deep within us and organize the world that works for us (Harvey, 2017). As long as this environment persists, people of color are forced to face this toxicity that threatens their
very lives on a daily basis, and despite impressions, white people aren’t immune either, although impacted in differing ways. In this shared society – shared Earth – we are all complicit and all impacted. Which means white people have a hard truth to reconcile regarding where we came from, who we are, and the reality of our supposed achievements in a false meritocracy. It means accepting the reality that in most cases, “white people do not really have ‘white’ histories we can celebrate” (Harvey, 2017, p. 53). It means confronting the complexity of our identities, finding the language to speak about ourselves and our heritage and in doing so, naming the ways in which we’ve inherited and benefitted from white privilege. It means admitting that white people have never been superior, only that we rigged the rules of the world so as to serve our needs, our greed, and protect our interests (Kimmerer, 2013).

What was it again that Numi had said to me with such exasperation in our encounter? “Stop worrying about yourself! You will be fine.” I can’t be sure, but I suspect this was a double entendre, meaning both “Shut up, and pay attention” in that precise moment, but also a deeper admonition. A statement that my concern for myself in response to racial unrest and the City’s demands for justice was misplaced, that even if efforts were successful in righting the wrongs of the white supremacy, I would likely be just fine despite being a current beneficiary of this injustice. Options already exist for moving down this path of reparations. The policy path could include finally passing the late Representative Conyers’ H.R.40 bill, something he had introduced annually since 1989, which would study and develop reparation proposals for African-Americans. Maybe the path will be a judicial one, modeled after The Truth and Reconciliation Commission assembled in South Africa after the end of apartheid. Maybe the path will be
an educational one, something like bill H.3 in Vermont requiring public schools to teach with historical accuracy and racial sensitivity the sordid events like colonialism, Indian boarding schools, neo-liberalism, slavery, and global capitalism that have brought us to our toxic present day. Maybe it will be some combination of all these efforts simultaneously, or implementing an idea not yet even imagined. But maintaining the status quo is no longer an option. The status quo is killing us all.

Kids know this. Children don’t start off racist. They are taught to be, conditioned to be, almost destined to become racist over time through observation, experience, and immersion in our racially toxic constructed climate. As Harvey (2017) explains in her text *Raising White Kids*, “racial development is no different than physical, intellectual or emotional development” (p. 13), and teaching kids – particularly white kids – to be anti-racist is “not telling them about something they didn’t know existed, but helping them understand what they witness, experience, and/or participate in every day” (p. 34). The kids in Baltimore showed us what happens when we don’t listen to the wisdom of children, when we don’t take seriously their anger at the injustices they encounter, and when we don’t take action to begin the healing we all so desperately need. Their student protest played a critical role in catalyzing the 2015 Baltimore Uprising, and while protests are powerful in “providing an actual experience of an environment where difference abounds…[where] discussions of injustice and embodied resistance simply are the landscape” (Harvey, 2017, p.91), we need further action. These kids made a decision to collectively act on their rights, uplift their voices, and use their bodies in protest, because what other choice did we give them? If left to us, the adults, the teachers, the policymakers, the leaders, we’d still all be conducting business as usual.
Transmittal Memo

To: Queen Mother, The Hive
From: Numi, Illusion

Embodied Dimension: Emotive

Re: Intentional Encounter #3 with the childs and the other

Purpose
The purpose of this encounter was to illuminate the ways in which the childs whiteness affords her privileges and renders her complicit in white fragility and supremacy (McIntosh, 2003; DiAngelo, 2011), and considers the ways in which the childs must more actively attune to and engage in anti-racist efforts.

Process
By encountering the childs in a familiar environment but at a future point in time, this encounter awakened in her a deeper feeling of awareness of the pervasive injustices all around. Scholar Styres (2017) describes this process as, “an unsettling process of shifting and unraveling tangled relations of power and privilege” (p. 36). The childs was forced to see her familiar city, workplace, and home completely upended by the power of people organizing against the very system in which she was a cog in the wheel, demonstrating there is much more to (un)learn to understand the extent of racism and white privilege, and her role within and against it.

Paradigm
Through our encounter the childs experienced her complicity in racism how it seeps into thoughts, feelings, actions, and systems and weighs us down like a suffocating force of gravity restricting our ability to create a healthier more just and inclusive world. And racism, like gravity, often goes unseen and undetected, so much so that even in the childs own journey to belong she was far more equipped to first encounter the interspecies other that displays differences more overtly through language and culture, than to recognize the more subtle insidious racial othering right in front of her. This intricate system of racial inequality that she both benefitted from and perpetuated on a daily basis in her work for the City of Baltimore. The childs realized that ideas and theories about anti-racism, aren’t merely an abstraction, but rather something that must be cultivated and acted upon, with very real intention in order to create tangible impact. This encounter demonstrated to the childs that she must better understand herself – her emotions – as a more powerful facet of engaging in the world and by doing so it could help her remain open, inclusive, and expansive so that she may better understand where her work needs to begin and continue along becoming aware of and undoing her own white privilege and fragility.
Natural (Planet)

From the archives of the Hive.
Transcript from the child.
Fourth intentional encounter with Numi, in which the child recognizes the need for unity in the face of ongoing destruction of our planet, and her responsibility to help those closest to her change.

Having had a glimpse into the near future, and knowing these events were destined to become a reality, I turned my focus on the one thing I knew I could impact: myselfs. Wanting to understand myselfs better, in order to be better, when the time came, I dove into the research on Numi, but the more I read the more I began to wonder if I had it all wrong. Particularly after having taken the form of a bee myself, I felt a newfound kinship with Numi. While I knew that each sting had brought with it revelations and lessons, I’d still felt as though the life-threatening nature of the stings themselves indicated an intention to bring about, or at least an indifference to, my own death. But what if this wasn’t in fact true, and Numi’s sole purpose was to get my attention at all costs? Trying to teach me? Trying to save me? Perhaps trying to save both of us?

Since I’d been stung at the soccer game, I had become hyper aware of bees. I not only noticed them and their behavior and trappings everywhere – their distinct sound, their intricate hives – but they increasingly seemed to be making headlines. The data was clear: bees were dying and at record pace, and the world was worried. The more I learned, the more concerned I became; if our planet loses our bee population, it will have dire consequences for all of us. Bees are the main pollinators for our food, and without them scientists posit a nearly unimaginable agricultural collapse (McDonnell, 2015). It seemed as if everywhere I turned there was another news broadcast, report, or study that
substantiated this claim that bees were under a major threat from humans in a variety of ways: parasites, pesticides, pathogens, habitat erasure, and climate change (Schildgen, 2018). Bees seemed to be becoming the poster child for the message that we must get serious about climate change. Without action, rates of colony collapse disorder could escalate, and without bees filling their rightful niche in our interconnected ecosystem, scientists feared the worst. Even Einstein, a scientist whose name is synonymous with genius, was purported to say, “If bees disappeared off the face of the earth, man would only have four years left to live” (Shilton, 2017; Isaacson, 2007).

Amidst all those stories about humanity’s role in the killing of bees, I also came across one breed – the African Killer Bee (aka. The Swarm) – which by the sounds of it was coming to kill humanity (Tsing, 1995). I became obsessed with the African Killer Bee, because they felt like they provided some insight into my encounters with Numi, perhaps helping me better understand what I needed to (un)learn. African Killer Bees were bred into existence in 1956 by a white scientist named Warwick E. Kerr, who in a strikingly colonial fashion, attempted to appropriate the characteristics of an African bee species into a non-native bee to create a more efficient and profitable honey producer. The result was a hybrid he couldn’t contain that was notoriously aggressive, quicker to react to hive disturbances, and more likely to sting (Tsing, 1995). By 1985, these invaders had arrived in the United States hiding in oil-drilling equipment shipped from South America (Tsing, 1995). The more I read, the more this breed came to symbolize for me the lessons Numi had taught me: about how one’s origins impact how you experience the world; how the unintended consequences of colonization cannot be contained; and, how racial undertones effect everything from how we treat our children to how we perceive a
breed of bugs as invasive and dangerous. As it turns out, Africanized bees have been found to be superior honey producers, and are more resilient to a number of parasites and fungal diseases that have been contributing to the mass extinction of bees worldwide (Tsing, 1995). The more I learned, the more I felt the weight of my role as a human in their extinction, and the more I became convinced that Numi and I could be connected along some deeper natural frequency. A connection that had the power to kill or save us both, was one that intrigued me and brought up far more questions I wanted to ask of Numi.

Propitiously, I didn’t have to wait long before I’d get another opportunity to interact with Numi; they decided to strike again, while Morgan – my now fiancé – and I were on vacation on the island of St. Maarten. As far back as I can remember, I’ve always loved the water and, like Hippocrates, believe in its healing properties. This seems natural since all of us begin our lives in utero surrounded by amniotic fluid, our bodies are half comprised of water, and the planet we inhabit is made up of roughly 71 percent water. To our knowledge, Earth (aka. Illusion) is the only planet where water exists in all three forms: solid (e.g. snow, ice, glacier, etc.), liquid (e.g. oceans, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, etc.), and gas (e.g. vapor in the air, clouds, etc.) making life here possible. My personal affinity for water was likely fed in part by having grown up in Michigan surrounded by the Great Lakes, the largest group of freshwater lakes on the planet. Growing up near this water, you soak it in, and it becomes a part of you. I loved the expansive feeling of being on the water and the freedom I felt all throughout my entire body when immersed in it. I loved its various sounds, and how it shapeshifted so magically so that in one moment you could waterski on its placid surface and then in the
next tube recklessly over its choppy surf. I loved it in every form from the glittery
shimmery snow pack blanketing the Tien Shen mountains to the consistent torrential
downpours of rainy season on the Malaysian peninsula. Islands in particular were places
that I found ecologically enchanting.

Morgan and I had planned our time on St. Maarten to include a slew of tropical
island activities: scuba excursions, kiteboarding lessons, and canopy hikes. Not to
mention the simplest and most pleasurable one of all: swimming, floating, and
submerging ourselves in the pristine waters adjacent to our beachfront home for the
week. I’d always felt there was something magical about the isolation of an island, how
they create completely unique and magnificently diverse ecosystems. The sometimes
absurd beauty of this is evident in examples like the Maldives island of Vakkaru, which
scientists have determined was created by Parrotfish poop (Zielinski, 2015). I loved
imagining walking around a pristine unpopulated fish poop island, it always made me
laugh aloud. It was as though on an island, the discoveries of Darwin (1859) didn’t seem
so historical, and that if I only looked hard enough and listened to the local knowledge I
could witness in the present some incredible natural phenomenon unique to this space,
this place, this island situated in the vast expanse of water.

It was halfway through our stay while hiking with Morgan in a nature preserve,
that I encountered Numi. They snuck up and stung me under my arm as I had stopped for
a drink of water. Mid-sip, I felt their puncture through my shirt, and my eyes got big.
This time I actually got a look, they looked exquisite in their current form, a bright almost
neon orange color with black markings. I took a moment to savor this image of them,
filling it away in my memory, wanting to hold their beauty in my mind. I’d never caught
them in the act before, so to speak, or perhaps they had never permitted me the privilege of experiencing their radiance. Maybe it was because until now, I never would have seen the beauty. Before I knew about my allergy, I was largely oblivious to the species; after my stings began, my feelings oscillated between fear and anger at them, knowing the threat they posed to my very life. But now, after my most recent encounter and all that I’d begun to understand about the fragility of their own existence, I felt a gratefulness and a bond. Instead of feeling scared or irritated by the inevitable disruption this sting would have on our day, on our trip, I noticed myself feeling excited at the possibility of getting some more of the answers I so deeply desired.

I gulped down some water, then took a deep breath turning my face to salute the sun, before calmly sharing with Morgan that I had been stung. She was busy rummaging through our pack to reapply her sunscreen, before she sharply looked in my direction and said, “You better not be kidding me right now!” I couldn’t totally tell by her response if she was mad or joking or just hot and tired from our hike. But I did know that I had just substantially added to her stress of getting a sunburn, by casually mentioning that – yet again – I’d been stung. As I waited for her hands to stop moving, and for her to take in a few calming breathes, I started the timer on my watch. “No babe, I really did. Can you hand me the meds out of the bag?”

She let out a groan, “I knew we should have skipped the hike today and stayed by the pool,” as she pulled out the pre-packaged epi-pen and pill kit she always made sure we had with us at all times. We started walking, a little brisker now, since we were headed down and because the clock was ticking, Morgan said sternly, “You know before we booked this trip I researched the medical facilities on St. Maarten and called to make
sure they accepted our insurance, which they didn’t. By. The. Way. So I added a temporary international health insurance plan to our coverage just in case anything happened while we were here.” I kept walking. Of course I hadn’t known she had done all that. Doing something like that had never even occurred to me. She continued, “Plus, I researched in advance how far away our condo was from the nearest emergency room, and I left the hospital address pulled up in my Google maps. See!” She emphasized, holding out her phone to show me just how prepared she was for this exact emergency.

I stopped and looked at her phone. There it was, ready to go. I involuntarily shook my head, as I considered how methodical and mindful she was. And then I began to consider how much worry and stress I must cause her, since she clearly thinks about my relationship with Numi as much – if not more than I did – but we thought about it in very different ways. Numi for her, meant a threat to my life, with no knowledge of the life-changing lessons they imparted. Numi for me felt more like finding out the answers to the Universe. I uttered, “Wow Morgz you really thought this through.” Which wasn’t a total surprise, after all hadn’t we met in policy school where our training was essentially contingency planning, and hadn’t we figured out over the past few years of dating how different we really were? In fact, we often joked about how you could give us any situation or scenario and most likely we’d have a completely different take on it. A friend of ours had turned us on to a funny Slate article “A Unified Theory of Muppet Types,” because we both loved the Henson muppets, and in it Lithwick (2012) theorized that every couple has a chaos muppet (e.g. Grover, Gonzo, Animal, etc.) and an order muppet (e.g. Kermit, Scooter, Bert, etc.), which is the key to any well-functioning system. But there’s a fine line between creating chaos for the adventure, and creating chaos out of
dependency. It probably goes without saying that in our relationship: I brought the chaos and Morgan tempered with order.

That’s when I realized Morgan was still talking. This whole time my mind had been wandering around thoughts of what a burden I must be on Morgan, with my stream of consciousness then skipping to my affinity for Gonzo, which led to considering my admiration for Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism, and then ultimately landing on how I had over the years adopted Hunter’s fashion sense – or one could argue fashion nonsense – whenever I was on an island (Wenner & Seymour, 2007). Always sporting a short-sleeved button down with wildly colorful patterns and prints of flowers, birds, or boats, and trying to become with every fiber of my being my beloved alter ego of Island Jill. As I now tuned back in, Morgan was saying something about how it doesn’t look like we should have any traffic, a common problem on an island of this size where there are limited roadways and traffic can bunch up whenever another plane lands or a cruise ship docks for the day.

We made it back to our car, where I found a pen in the glove compartment, and dutifully marked the spot of the sting and circled the surrounding red ring of hives, labeling it with the time elapsed since my sting – forty-two minutes. This already felt like a success. The hives were pretty minimal and were staying close to the sting site, and I hadn’t felt anything abnormal with my breathing yet, despite not yet administering the epi-pen. As Morgan was getting herself situated to make our drive to the hospital, I suggested, “What if we don’t go into the hospital?”

“What do you mean?” She said sounding unconvinced and a little concerned.
“No, wait, hear me out!” I could hear myself getting excited by the idea brewing in my brain. “What if we do the responsible thing, and we drive to the hospital, so we can go in and get help if we need it. But we just wait outside, because look!” I pushed my arm in her face, “I think the treatment has been working. I haven’t even used the epi-pen yet, or felt any need to, and it has been wayyy longer than any of the times before.”

She started pulling out of the Nature Reserve, and just offered a curt, “We’ll see.”

On our drive, I appealed to her frugality and practicality, explaining what she already knew. That this is why I was getting the immunotherapy. This is exactly what the doctors had said could happen, that my tolerance to stings could improve, meaning I no longer reacted to bees in such a severe way. I argued that if we didn’t waste time in a foreign medical facility that we could go home and make a nice dinner with the fresh fish, tropical fruit, and veggies we had picked up earlier, and how nice it would be to enjoy a relaxing evening by the pool as the sun set off in the horizon. I could tell I was making progress. I knew my sweetie, and I knew she liked nothing more than to relax and take in the beauty of her surroundings while on vacation.

By the time we reached the hospital parking lot, she put the car in park, and then turned to me, “Ok. But we’re going to wait here for one whole hour. And you are going to monitor your hives and your breathing, and be honest with me. Only then, if things are fine, if you really feel fine, then we’ll go home. Got it?”

“Got it!” I said feeling triumphant. Followed by a yawn, I forgot how sleepy Benadryl always made me feel. I was just about to doze off when…

Numi – who must have overheard our bargain – appeared, and before I could rest we were catapulting through space. Hurtling along at an incredible speed, so fast that I
could feel the heat radiating from the energy it took to propel us forward. I was tumbling, twisting, and turning at times feeling nauseous from my inability to determine direction—up from down, east from west—and at other times feeling in awe of having been able to catch a glimpse of the dripping melting colors that encircled us as we thundered on. Then it was as if we slipped through an invisible entryway, and stopped completely. Well, not stopped, but started floating to a different rhythm connected to an entirely different magnetic orbit.

Then I saw it. Earth. As my body slowly rotated, it suddenly came into full view, and it was stunning. Our home, and it looked like paradise. Seeing this giant “Blue Marble” encompassed by a “Thin Blue Line” from this outer space perspective was like nothing I’d ever encountered before, nor could find the words to describe. Maybe Stewart Brand had been onto something in the sixties when he believed he could change the world, simply by putting a picture of the planet on the front of his Whole Earth catalogue. Astronauts call it the overview effect, which is a shift in awareness—in consciousness—resulting from having experienced the Earth from outer space as the “Pale Blue Dot” that it is (Sagan, 1994). They see this diverse, borderless, interconnected, ecosystem against the backdrop of the cosmos and are never quite the same again.

As I took in this incredible image, still slowly somersaulting through space, I realized we must be approaching our destination. I swiveled my head—what I hoped was left, then right, then back again—trying to locate Numi. They were nowhere to be found, and I braced myself for impact. The ground was softer than I thought, akin to taking a tumble on a powder snow day. It didn’t hurt, but it didn’t not hurt. I stood up, steadying myself, taking a second longer than usual and still feeling a little woozy. Maybe it was
the bee sting, or maybe it was getting used to having my feet rooted again to a surface. I wasn’t sure what surface exactly, because some things were making sense, while other things were definitely not. As with my previous encounters with Numi, the laws of the Universe didn’t always apply as usual; for now I seemed to be standing on the moon with no reasonable explanation of how I’d arrived in one piece, still wearing my Gonzo island outfit.

“What am I supposed to do now,” I said aloud to myself, in part to see if space altered sound in ways that being under water did. I didn’t hear anything. A terrifying thought began to creep in. Was I dead? Did this mean that my stupid idea back on the island to wait things out in the parking lot had cost me my life? Is this where my soul – my consciousness – goes after I die? I opened my mouth to yell as loud as I could “WAAAAALLLLLPPPPPPP!” (Whitman, 1959) something I did on earth when experiencing the beautiful solitude in nature. Silence. I reached my hands up to my mouth to feel if it was open, it was. I was beginning to panic, my mind was racing, if I was dead back on Earth, but here with Numi now, what did that mean for what would happen to me next?

“Relax kiddo,” came an all too familiar voice, “Remember you are in space. There is no sound here” my father reassured me. I spun around, thinking he must be behind me. No one, just more empty landscape off into the distance. I kept turning and looking in every direction.

“Hey kiddo, I don’t think you’ll be able to find me,” he started and then continued, “What I mean is, I don’t think you’ll be able to see me, because I’m not
physically on the moon with you—I’m home in my own bed experiencing this as a
dream, and our minds are linked so we can communicate.”

“What!” I said, again hearing no sound. This was my biggest fear coming true,
my father being able to hear my innermost thoughts. I remember as a child wishing for
that superpower myself, to make sense of the often unpredictable emotions, behaviors,
and activities happening all around me, but the idea of the reverse being true was
terrifying. “Is this some sort of sick joke?” I snarled, completely overwhelmed by the
realization that was slowly sinking in.

“No not a joke. My consciousness is with you somehow through this dream, and
we can speak to each other,” he added giving me just enough assurance to help me get
my bearings, but not allaying my deeper fear by answering the question about whether or
not he was able to understand my every thought.

I decided I would ask him directly, because he would never lie, it goes against
his beliefs, “Dad, do you hear only what I’m saying to you, or are you picking up on
everything that’s crisscrossing along my neural pathways?”

“Only what you’re saying kiddo!” he said in his vacation dad voice. “But I can
also see what you see up there, from your point of view. Think of it like I’m ground
control and you’re Major Tom” he followed up, as I heard him chuckling to himself at his
own quick wit and good fortune to have had the opportunity to drop a reference to a
classic tune and help clarify our situation at the same time.

I sighed a deep sigh of relief. “Funny, Dad,” I said aloud, and then thought to
myself that’s just what I need: my dad literally on mind control duty – control being the
operative word here – as I bumbled around space trying to figure out whatever it was that
Numi was trying to teach me. Numi had really outdone themself with this journey. To recap: I was walking on the moon, without a spacesuit, talking to my father with my mind, who was dreaming comfortably in his Michigan home and tuning into my spacewalk like it was a live streaming event. In addition to the clear physical impossibility of the situation, I was struck by the paradoxical nature of the situation. Here I was in an incredibly unpredictable environment feeling uncertain and vulnerable, joined by the man who throughout my life had made me feel both loved and scared. While we stood looking down at the planet he had raised me to love for its natural beauty while he simultaneously was resting his head after a long day’s work as an executive in the fossil fuel industry. We’d always been buddies. From an early age, I joined him at sporting events, on work trips, and competed against him in activities indoors and outdoors. He had been the only family member who had come to visit me while I was in the Peace Corps, so a little moon jaunt wasn’t so completely out of the ordinary, except that it absolutely was.

As I was playing back these images from my childhood, remembering the happier times in our father-daughter relationship, a sudden insight washed over me. Since my father couldn’t read my mind, I didn’t have to be afraid. I didn’t have to be afraid of him like I was as a child. Afraid of being found out. Afraid of coming out. Afraid of being me. I was engaged now to Morgan. And for the first time I had the opportunity to show my dad things from my perspective, something I had been trying to do for years. Because at the moment, he could literally only see things from my point of view. I suddenly felt hope surging through me perhaps on this other-wordly adventure together orchestrated by Numi, I might be able to get through to him in a way that was too limited

Now my mind was racing at all the things I wanted to show him – from my perspective – and considering how experiencing Earth from the Moon could be the perfect opportunity to revisit some of our oldest and ongoing challenges from immigration to the environment to our relationship. I wanted him to see what I now saw—the interconnectedness of all people and our planet, the desperate need for us all to embrace and protect that, and in doing so to take responsibility for the part we each have played in perpetuating injustices against the earth, society at large, and our own loved ones. I had hope for the first time in a long time, that perhaps he would be able to see and understand this, that the overview effect could help my own father reconsider and reimagine what is possible for the good of himself, our family, and our planet.

I was flooded with memories of his trip to Kyrgyzstan to celebrate his birthday. I remembered thinking how unsure he seemed about everything, seeming even clumsy, awkward. I remembered thinking how strange it was to observe my father in that way, someone who publicly always projected confidence and control. A persona he embraced, because he often was the guy put in control of things. In all of my previous memories traveling with him, he had been the one who had made the travel arrangements, booked the lodging, organized the activities, and negotiated all the ins and outs with various service providers. But on this trip, on my turf, I had planned out his entire vacation, and I tried to pack in as much of the Kyrgyz experience as possible. I have vivid memories of walking through the expansive bus and taxi depot in the capital city of Bishkek, where I had already forewarned him he’d be mobbed by drivers not only offering to take him
anywhere, but aggressively trying to wrangle his pack from him to put in their trunk thus sealing the deal. I taught him how to say, “No thank you” in Kyrgyz, hoping his utterance of the local language might quell the crowds that swarmed him, but soon realized his timid pronunciation was no match for their insistent ingenuity. I remember how I had grown so used to the precarious road conditions of the mountainous switchbacks that led to my village that I usually fell asleep in the taxi, so when I woke up because we were slowing down for some sheep in the road to clear, I was surprised to see my dad’s white knuckles gripping the door handle and the seat, his full body tense, and wide eyes trying to decide if he wanted to grab his camera to take a photo or keep hanging on for dear life. I remember taking him to my host family’s Jailoo \(^9\) which was more off the grid than even I had been anticipating, and translating for him and my host father as they toasted one another while sharing a bottle of vodka on the side of a mountain under the clearest starry sky I’d ever encountered, perhaps until this exact moment as I gazed out into the galaxy from the Moon. This forced me to snap back from all my recollecting and remember I now had a mission, and I didn’t have much time.

I knew I had to choose my path wisely, because my encounters with Numi never lasted long and often ended almost as abruptly as they began. I wanted to make the most of this opportunity with my father, so I decided to go big. I was going to walk and talk with him about our shared planet, because I’d recently read an article in Scientific America that said kids can change their parents’ minds about climate change, specifically “fathers and conservative parents showed the biggest change in attitudes, and daughters

\(^9\) Traditional summer pastures where Kyrgyz families take their herds to graze, typically in the valleys near water amidst the mountains.
were more effective than sons in shifting their parents’ views” (Denworth, 2019). So I had to take my one shot! A conversation I knew could be aided by the amazing view if I kept walking towards the glowing orb off in the distance. I figured if I started big, by discussing our planet, it meant our discussion could perhaps go anywhere and perhaps include some of the other intimate issues we’ve disagreed about over the years. I mulled over how to begin this conversation. Sticking to the facts wouldn’t work (Festinger, 1957). Maybe appealing to his pro-industry worldview could be effective, convincing him of all the uncredited and uncompensated work Nature is already doing for all of us (Battistoni, 2016). I could try to appeal to his bottom line as an oil man, pointing out that economists already calculate oil profits as secondary to big data as the world’s most lucrative asset, and projections predict oil will be a less valuable resource than water as climate change progresses (Arnold, 2018). Whatever my approach, precision of language was important with my dad, and it was best to steer clear from emotionally charged sentiments. He was not much of a talker himself, using his words efficiently and judiciously, an approach perhaps reflective of his training as an engineer. When people asked what my father did for work, I’d usually say cheekily and a touch remorsefully, “He’s worked for the axis of evil. You know the big two: religion and oil.” If he knew that, this conversation would never get anywhere. I could also just keep walking towards the glowing orb of Earth ahead, and hope the image itself would have the desired effect on its own. But just then I thought of the perfect segue and without hesitation I said, “Hey dad, remember that time when astronaut Scott Kelly posted that picture from space of the Great Lakes?” Pausing before adding, “And he captioned the image with something like ‘Even in darkness, the Great Lakes are unmistakable’” (Krietz, 2015). I knew he would
remember, because everyone in T.C. (aka. Traverse City) had shared that story around as proof that our hometown was the most beautiful place on earth, and my dad was obsessed with photography, so I was convinced this was the best way to open things up.

He responded with enthusiasm, “Oh yeah, that was an incredible picture! I remember. We’re really blessed to be from there aren’t we, kiddo,” he added.

I thought to myself: you have no idea just how privileged we are, not just to be from beautiful Traverse City, but to both be white, able bodied, English-speaking, documented, and comfortably middle class. An embodied class obsessed with meritocracy as if our successes have been hard earned (Bourdieu, 1991), which continues to perpetuate and prop up the myths that allows those of us in the middle to hoard opportunities in plain sight (Reeves, 2017). Instead I merely said in agreement, “Yeah, it really is an amazing place to call home,” and then decided to probe a little further, “Hey dad, remember when you came to visit me in Kyrgyzstan, and it was right around the time you had been offered that job?”

“Of course I remember that. I really had a lot on my mind during that visit. And visiting you, seeing you so familiar in such an unfamiliar place, after having gone nearly a year without seeing you at all, really impacted me too” he said sincerely.

I replied, “Yeah I have really fond memories of our time together there,” which was completely true. “Do you recall a conversation we had in the beer garden at that ‘fancy restaurant’ I had you take me to, because I couldn’t normally afford it on my volunteer stipend?” I waited for him to gather the image of that place in his own mind, and then continued, “You told me about the job offer, which surprised me, because you normally never shared things that were in progress – so to speak. Normally you shared
your news or decisions particularly with us kids – like the time we were going to move to Traverse City – only after you had already drawn your own conclusions or made your final decisions. Anyways, it surprised me at the time, and if I’m being totally honest it flattered me, that you would care about my opinion at all. In my memory of that day, you asked me a question about whether or not I would think you were a hypocrite – and I distinctly remember you using that word – as if the worst thing in the world you could imagine was being someone who changes. I can’t be totally sure, but I got the distinct impression that you were worried about how I – and others I imagine – would perceive this decision as more self-serving or as you said yourself hypocritical after all those years managing the church’s business to leave to take this potentially more lucrative leadership position back in the oil business.”

Before I could go on, he replied, “Yeah, I remember I was really struggling to make that decision and doing a lot of praying about it. I remember you asking me some really good questions around why the decision was so difficult, because you pointed out that if it was easy to say ‘No’ because the church was where I wanted to remain until retirement I wouldn’t have considered the offer further. And if I had been inclined to say ‘Yes’ right away than it would have been clear that I was ready for new challenges back in my area of trained expertise.”

“Yeah,” I jumped in adding, “The feeling I got was that you did seem really excited about the opportunity to dust off your engineering skills and take on new challenges. I sort of got the sense that when you imagined your life and the day-to-day ins and outs of continuing your role at the church you could see exactly what that looked like ten to fifteen years into the future, and that felt kind of static and predictable. Where
when you talked about the offer the energy company put in front of you, you sounded excited about all the things you didn’t know about their work and your role in it, and how you might spend the final years of your career. That got me excited for you, because I hadn’t really known you to be so curious about the possibilities of the unknowns.”

“Huh?” he voiced, “What do you mean by that?” Knowing that this was my chance to blow things wide open, and at the same time realizing we were getting close to what I hoped would be a spectacular view of our planet. I was trying to time this just right, so I slowed down my pace to a dawdle, and turned my head to check out the footprints I was leaving behind.

“Well, what I mean is you were kind of always the dad with definitive answers. The world for you – and for me while I lived under your rule – was very black and white. There was right and there was wrong. There was good and there was evil. There was a heaven and there was hell. And while most of the time, you had sound logic and reasoning to back up your perspectives, I know now that nothing is really that straightforward, without emotion, or reductive. I remember as a kid, when I’d question your position, and we both had solid rationale for our arguments, you would inevitably end the interaction abruptly with a sharp and definitive ‘Because I said so.’ I remember even then telling myself that if I ever became a mother, I would never utter those four words to my child. Basically, I always knew you as the answers guy, not the questions guy.” I finished, nearly breathless from the childhood vulnerability I had just shared.

Now I was nervous, because I couldn’t see my dad’s face, which is what I depended on to expertly decode his emotions or determine where he might take a conversation next; without it, I had little data to pull from.
Now we only had our words. And I knew from experience that with my father, words could be dangerous, they could get out of control in a moment of sadness, fear, impatience, confusion, or anger. It’s that moment when Broca’s area shuts down, and we’re left to the tyranny of language where only pyrrhic victories prevail (Van der kolk, 2014). My ears were still ringing from what he had said to me the last time we had even spoken, lashing out in a conversation about my identity and role in the family as a queer woman: You’re toxic. It happened at a family wedding, the first time I had dared to show up with Morgan as my plus one. That alone had been a big step in our family where everyone was still trying to figure out rather uncomfortably whether to include, or how to interact with, the homosexuals.

There was still silence from my father. My mind wandered as I awaited his reply. It occurred to me toxicity had come up before in my encounters with Numi to describe the miasma of colonialism and white privilege. In those instances, I had been inherently connected to the toxin, both knowingly and unknowingly perpetuating colonialism and whiteness, something I was willing to acknowledge my role in. So why did I feel so wounded receiving the same label from my father? Then it hit me. It had to do with the power and spaces between the relationships. As a colonizer and a white person, I benefitted from the power imbalance, and while I never actively tried to wield this power no doubt it existed and no doubt I had inadvertently perpetuated injustices along the way. Therefore, it was my duty to acknowledge my complicity in these systemic injustices, and try to be better (Fricker, 2007).

But in the scenario with my father, I had felt the sting of the toxic label, because I was the wounded one, the one traditionally without power in that identity and
relationship. I experienced identity prejudice from the very person who had created me, protected me, and raised me (Fricker, 2007). Even though he had little power over me at this point in my life, this interaction had created a lot more space between us. And I had contributed to this space too, having said things in response that I now regret. Memory is a curious thing, disallowing me to escape his wounding words, while easily allowing me to forget the specifics of my own damaging diction. Then it occurred to me this was the exactly what I was trying to discuss with my dad in this moment. The powerful significance of our choices, actions, and words, and their greater impact on the planet. That collectively for our planet to course correct to combat climate change it would require each of us to do our part: taking shorter showers, unplugging electrical cords, and patronizing socially responsible businesses. This had to be paired with the more significant systemic changes like weaning our economy off coal and fossil fuels, curtailing unrestrained capitalism, and conserving precious natural resources. That’s when I realized that while I had been busy making healing connections in my mind, my dad still hadn’t replied. I heard him clear his throat and braced myself for impact.

“It’s hard being a parent, kiddo. Parents often pretend to know a lot more than they do just to get through the day, and what we do know, we hold tightly to. Sometimes it’s to provide stability for you – the kids we’re responsible for – but more often it’s to create stability when it feels like there is none.” I knew this was his olive branch. And while I didn’t know the pressures of parenting from personal experience, I knew from the sincerity in his voice how true it felt: being responsible for life is the most important work we can all do. At that moment I felt light washing over my face, as I looked up and scanned the view to try to take in the full splendor of the Earth looking back at us in all
its swirling contrasting wonder. Until then, I hadn’t realized how cold I had felt in the
dark shadows of the moon, but now with the reflection of light from the surface of the
Earth, I felt myself awakening.

“We must have been on the dark side of the moon, and now we’re coming up on
our primo view” I replied with a smile, simultaneously accepting his peace offering by
using one of his catch-phrases, and trying to be playful with my Pink Floyd reference,
which I knew he wouldn’t miss. We had always shared music, and loved singing loudly
along to the classic jams on all our road trips together. In fact, I still had all the words
memorized to Don McLean’s epic eight-minute song American Pie.

“Wow! This is unbelievable” he exclaimed. I needed to stay focused on my
mission, because I was still trying to open him up about our bigger problem: the planet in
peril.

“Hey look, I think we’re coming up on South East Asia. Is that the Indonesian
archipelago?” I asked, knowing this was another county we both had ticked off our
bucket lists for international travel destinations, and one country where I had experienced
the world’s ecosystem in an unforgettable way. He had gone for his work in the oil
business, while I had visited with my dear friend Lindsay who was teaching me to surf.
Lessons that had been cut short by the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It was unlucky that
the timing of our Bali surfing vacation aligned with the precise gyre and tides that
brought the huge trash vortex into our path, but it was certainly heartbreakingly
educational. I’d never experienced anything like it. One day you’re walking pristine
sandy beaches trying to fend off vendors peddling teak wood carvings and batik, and the
next day you’re sputtering, coughing, and dry heaving on the sand from having just
emerged from a wave of trash comprised of the human world’s detritus: diapers, plastic bags, toothbrushes, cell phone cases, and a million other tiny bits and fragments of our waste. Only days ago, the shoreline and beach front had been the island’s main attraction, and now you could smell it before you could see it. Locals explained to us that this vortex was temporary, that the same forces that pulled it towards us, would conspire and shift and take the garbage patch someplace else and we’d back on our surfboards in no time. Some even tried to spin the situation as a boost to the local economy, because major beachfront hotel chains and restaurants determined to get their waters and beaches clean and clear would hire local kids to walk, surf, boat, and swim around to collect any residual trash that didn’t swirl away. And they were right. It was remarkable. No sooner than the floating trash island had arrived, it disappeared seemingly without a trace. But not before it had left its mark; I would never forget waiting for the break surrounded by garbage, garbage that could have very easily been my own discarded from the other side of the world.

“Yeah, I think you’re right! From this viewpoint it’s hard to tell which island is which, since we can also see all that land that normally rests below the surface of the ocean,” he stated, mesmerized.

I went for it, jibing, “Yeah ‘normally’ really takes on a different meaning from up here, huh?” Trying to open up his consideration of normality, and then tacking hard, “From here you can really see how everything is perpetually in motion and interconnected. Like how trash that gets thrown away in the U.S. can find its way into the water, catch a current, and end up in deepest parts of the ocean – the Mariana Trench. How each of our intentions, decisions, and actions have impact – no matter how...
seemingly miniscule – on one another and this planet we share. And we have no place else to go. So there can’t be any sides, because we’re all on the same side. Nothing is stable, because we’re all constantly in motion, changing, emerging, expanding, and becoming. But this is our home and we’re all responsible for life here.” There was no way he could miss my intended meaning, which was wanting him to make the connections between his chosen path in the oil industry and climate change. Changes that were happening at such a rapid pace with such increasing frequency that projections suggested I would bear witness to much of the early devastation to this planet that was passing before our very eyes, including the decimation of the bee population. I wanted him to know the role he played in these irreversible losses and that he could choose to change, but perhaps what I really wanted was to be forgiven for my own inherited complicity in benefiting from these extirpative energy practices. And perhaps deep down what I wanted even more, was for him to one day choose to accept me as I am, queer and all. The proverbial line was still quiet, and I imagined him at home in bed, taking in all of this incredible imagery from my vantage point – for once – and ruminating on what to say next.

When all at once, my whole body felt limp, hot, and profoundly heavy. I opened my eyes. I was back in our rental car, with the radio’s steel drum music playing faintly in the background nearly drowned out by the sound of the air conditioning. Morgan looked over at me, “You’re awake! It’s been over the hour we agreed upon to wait, how are you feeling?”

“Honestly, like I’ve just realized the full force of gravity for the first time,” I said trying to sit myself up in the passenger seat and struggling slowly with each movement.
“Ok, drama queen,” Morgan said, “Well, if you’re feeling like your allergies are fine, especially your breathing, then we can go.”

“Oh yeah, all of that is fine,” I said trying to remember everything that had just happened and questioning if any of it really had ever happened at all. “Let’s go for a swim.” And just like that we were heading back to the condo.
Transmittal Memo

To: Queen Mother, The Hive
From: Numi, Illusion
Embodied Dimension: Natural
Re: Intentional Encounter #4 with the childs and the planet

Purpose
The purpose of this encounter was to illuminate the ways in which the childs came to understand herself in relation to the planet’s vast and evolving ecosystem in which we are all interconnected, and to consider her role in and responsibility for the damages incurred against our planet, including her responsibility to push those closest to her to examine their own impacts.

Process
Better prepared for this encounter, the childs’ immunotherapy will be paramount to both surviving the sting and synthesizing the Hive’s purpose for engaging. In this encounter, the childs is given an opportunity to reconcile with an individual who through a complex relationship has loved her but also caused emotional damage to the childs, as well as damage to the planet. The childs is forced to grapple with the realization that we all belong to “one world entangled in the lives of others” (Purdy, 2015, p. 47), we are all responsible to one another, a connection that is rarely simple or straightforward.

Paradigm
The childs has already undergone the preparations to physically, cognitively, and emotionally engage with this encounter, having endured danger, failure, and ignorance in her previous encounters. However, this encounter ultimately required her to reconcile the natural world with herself. As scholar Gopnik (2009) describes it, “Understanding ourselves and one another lets us imagine new ways of being” (p. 8). For the sake of the childs, the Hive, and every living entity in between, she has to (un)learn that it is no longer enough to heal herself, but that she is also responsible to help heal the world, and that begins with those closest to her. Scholar Kirby (2011) makes the point that it was people and institutions that created the boundaries and parameters by which we operate now, and without those it is possible to “think very different about the world” (p. 20), a concept that can be aptly applied to our natural environmental relationships.
Spiritual (Universe)

From the archives of the Hive.
Transcript from the childs.
Fifth and final intentional encounter with Numi, in which the childs examines the spiralic nature of her journey thus far, and of all beings’ belonging in and responsibility for our Universe.

Things felt different now. After the last encounter with Numi, it felt like our relationship had found some balance. That lingering unpredictable threat of death had vanished. Perhaps there was space enough for both of us. The immunology treatment must be working. Or maybe it was that I had come to respect and understand Numi and ourselves in new and different ways – after all we’d been on some epic educational field trips together. Or maybe it was some combination of the two. Whatever it was, Numi had given me some space the past few years and lots had changed in my life: Morgan and I were married, I had returned to school to pursue my terminal degree, and we had moved to Vermont.

We quickly fell in love with our new life in Vermont where our pups had an actual yard to romp around in, traffic meant a two-car backup at the four-corner stop, and we could work from our home office to the sounds of frogs and cicadas peeping and croaking outside the window. We explored endless trails, swimming holes, and birding posts, and quickly determined our favorites. We planted a garden, created a path from our backyard to the public use trails, and discussed whether we wanted to expand our family. So many of those nuanced conversations happened as we hiked our pups together in the rain, snow, or sun. On just such an outing Numi came to visit once again.

We’d finally made it deep enough onto the trail to let the dogs run off leash, which of course meant they were ecstatically sniffing and wagging as they wandered.
led the way, making sure the pups didn’t get too curious about exploring the nearby pond, because baths were not on our agenda for the day. As I took my first step on the wooden planks of the muddy trailhead, I felt a familiar sting. Then I heard the vociferous buzzing. Then I was swatting and swirling, realizing with terror that I’d stepped on an entire hive hidden under the path. I yelled, “Beeeeeexes!” And then I started running back to the trail’s entrance trying to escape the swarm encircling me.

As soon as I took off, the dogs started chasing me. Not wanting them to be stung or worse, to run into the road at the beginning of the trailhead, I stopped and shouted, “Quick, help me leash the pups!” Morgan had raced after me and was now close enough to see and experience the swarm for herself. She yelled, “Jump into the pond!” I took one look at that foul water filled with runoff from the adjacent farms, and wanted no part of it, even in these dire circumstances. We hadn’t even wanted the dogs to go near it, so there was no way I was about to plunge in willingly, even if it would cause this rain of bees to disperse. We finally got the dogs leashed, between our twisting and whacking, and Morgan took the reins so I could sprint to the car. It didn’t seem to matter. Numi’s crew was not to be outrun or outmaneuvered. I fumbled for the keys to unlock the door and dove into the passenger seat. Bees of course had followed me in. At this point I had forgotten all about our truce, grabbed the owner’s safety manual from the glove compartment, and began bashing anything that moved. I was in complete survival mode – killing to avoid being killed. Finally, the faint droning sounds stopped. I took in my surroundings noticing a few winged creatures struggling at my feet and promptly stomped them. I looked around
again – nothing moving. There was silence other than my own frenzied breathing. Then I surveyed the damage.

I examined my body from head to toe and found five stings. One on my calf, one on my quad, one on my hamstring, and one on each forearm. I rifled through the center console to find a sharpie to mark an “X” on each sting. Then I rummaged through my bum bag to take my medication (e.g. Benadryl and Prednisone), inject my epi-pen, and start the timer on my phone. Once I felt certain I had taken every medical precaution I could in that moment I took a deep breath and started to consider what we should do next. I had never received multiple stings at once. I had no idea how my body would react to this level of venom. I didn’t know if my immunotherapy could protect me from a whole hive. About this same time, I could see Morgan swiftly entering the trailhead parking lot with our dogs, headed straight for me.

She jumped in the car, and without hesitation said, “Punch UVM emergency room into Google maps.”

I could feel the adrenaline from the shot of epi coursing through body now, and as we turned onto the main road I asked, “Did you get stung? Those bees were everywhere.”

Morgan did a quick body scan while shuffling her hands on the steering wheel and confirmed, “I don’t think they got me.”

That was a relief to hear, and also made me curious: Why had Numi come with the power of the whole Hive? Should I have shown more restraint and respect for the Hive, instead of fleeing, fighting, and killing? How is it possible that Morgan went unscathed? Was I going to survive this? It did occur to me that our relationship had
drastically changed over the years, nearly in direct correlation to the lessons I had (un)learned from Numi and the therapy I was getting. Perhaps Numi was trying to remind me that immunotherapy was not making me invincible, only rather allowing me to coexist with less precarity on the planet. I considered for perhaps the first time what our indigenous ancestors have always known, “we understand only when we understand it with: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 47).

Morgan was precision in motion. We arrived at the emergency center and she assertively explained my medical history. She used all the trigger words: “anaphylaxis,” “coughing and tongue swelling,” and “hives” to get me admitted immediately. Once in the exam room, the medical team was fully briefed on my situation, and I was given an IV with additional medication and told to remain until further notice for monitoring. I could tell the staff was impressed by how easy I had made it for them to check my multiple stings, which now looked like bloated blotchy black “Xs” surrounded by swollen mounds of itchy redness. And how I knew exactly how much time had passed since my stings had occurred, not to mention the exact dosing and timeline for all the medications I had self-administered prior to my arrival in their care. Between us, Morgan and I made it clear we were not novices when it came to sting response. So as the parade of people filed out past the curtain, I turned to Morgan and said, “The dogs can’t be left in the car for too much longer. I’m fine now, so why don’t you run them home, since I’m going to fall asleep with all these meds pumping through my system.” She looked at me with her jaw clenched and her brow furrowed.

She squeezed my hand, and said, “Ok. But call me if you need anything, and I’ll be back as fast as I can.”
I said, “I know you will, drive safe. And give the puppers a treat when you get home, since I cut our hike short today.” Smiling a little droopily from all the sensations my body was feeling at that moment: from the stings, the meds, and also from a deep sense of love and gratitude that I had for my wife. I watched her slowly unfurl her hand from mine, pause to smile, kiss my hot forehead, and then turn to exit. As she walked towards the curtain her footsteps seemed to synch up with the subtle drip drip drip from my IV bag. A sound that at once became intensely loud, so booming that I had to close my eyes to try to damper the pulsing vibrations I was feeling at the cellular level.

The increasingly all-encompassing sound was paired with a change in temperature, and the sudden feeling of being enveloped, almost embraced, in a small space. I reached out and could nearly touch the slick sides of whatever I was in, and in that moment I knew Numi had transported me yet again. I felt as though I was suspended in liquid, but of a viscosity that prevented me from sinking to the bottom. I needed to find out what was causing that incessant noise, so I tried moving. It didn’t take long to find the edge of my enclosure, the walls of which seemed to be somewhat translucent. Where was I? I wiped the surface and looked out. It was raining.

Or rather, I was raining. More specifically, I was inside one rain droplet as a part of what appeared to be an incredible downpour. I quickly moved to other parts of my droplet. In every direction, for as far as I could see, were more rain droplets. Droplets of all shapes and sizes. Not one seemingly the same as another. I held my position, trying to tell if the other droplets had people encased inside like I seemed to be in this one. I wiped down the surface, held my breath so as not to fog it up, and stared hard trying to make sense of this. It was tricky to tell. I couldn’t be certain that other droplets also had a rider,
but because of the opacity I also couldn’t be certain that they didn’t. I exhaled a deep
breath, immediately fogging up my view, and settled in for whatever lesson Numi had in
store for me.

I sat back and leaned against the walls of the raindrop, taking in the sounds of the
water orchestra that surrounded me, when a sudden chill came over me. Goosebumps
perked up along my entire body, and I sensed Numi wanted my full attention. I rotated
onto my knees to try to make out what was happening, but before I could wipe the
surface, my raindrop was rocked as it collided with another, immediately merging into
one larger droplet and bringing Numi, who had apparently been ensconced in the other
droplet, into contact with me.

“Where are we going?” I asked them. To which Numi replied, “Falling downward
towards The Sea of Belonging. The place where we all come to connect and belong.”
Something about how they said this made me sense this was a journey our past
encounters had been building towards, something that incorporated all our previous
(un)learnings. As I often did when in deep thought, I slowly took my glasses off, rubbed
my face with one hand, and then rumpled and mussed my hair with both hands. I had
obviously never heard of the Sea of Belonging because it existed in whatever dimension I
now found myself in thanks to Numi’s hive blitz, but I also knew that in every encounter
so far I had come to (un)learn something valuable so I took a deep breath and gently
asked them, “Who’s the ‘we’?”

“All our relations,” Numi offered, adding “Take a look at your connections right
now,” as they gestured at the surrounding expanse. I moved to another part of my water
droplet, and soon enough realized each droplet held another being, with many seeming to
interact through their respective enclosures while others placidly floated along. There was a frog, a birch tree, an electron, a dandelion, some copper, an acorn, and so much more, all seemingly sentient and aware of each other. Just then, something caught my eye, and I moved quickly to press against the surface of my droplet for a closer image, holding my breath so as not to fog up my view.

It couldn’t be…was that really what it looked like? It had to be. The amniotic sac almost moving in sync within the water droplet. There was no mistaking the umbilical cord. Which was attached to a small, yet complete and beautiful form, a human fetus. I was mesmerized and began to understand that the Sea of Belonging included creatures in all stages of becoming. And just at that moment, as if the fetus could sense my desire to better understand, the tiny being said softly, “We’re all becoming, and we all share one empathically entangled evolving ecosystem.”

I was stunned. While this entire journey continued to be far outside normal believability, for some reason speaking with this unborn child seemed especially otherworldly. But it wasn’t so much that the baby could communicate, rather I was struck by the unexpected balance of innocence and wisdom that emanated from her, briefly bringing to mind my earlier encounter with the child leader Este on the planet Inclusion. Before I could think of anything remotely coherent to say in reply, I felt a familiar sensation quiver throughout my entire body. I felt instantly cold and then simultaneously warm. I remembered this. I had felt this same way when I had first dropped into the Sea of Belonging. Goosebumps popped up everywhere. I must be on the move or entering a new space, place, or dimension. I tried to steady myself and get ready for what would happen next.
My droplet shuddered with movement then stabilized, and just like last time, I made my way to the outer edge and wiped my hand on the surface to get a better view. But something felt different: grittier. I brought my hand to my nose to first smell, and then to my mouth. I paused. Took a breath. Then tepidly licked my hand. Salt. My hand now unmistakably tasted salty. Something was very different than before. As I used both hands to further wipe down this new exterior surface, I said to myself bemused, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in the Sea of Belonging anymore.”

Everything looked a bit cloudier, perhaps due to the salty substance seemingly coating the surface. I still seemed to be floating along in a similar pattern to when I had been in the Sea, making me think I was in yet another liquid dimension. However, here I could feel a permeating warmth, and make out a faint pulsing drumbeat. In that moment I realized I was now not only inside the fetus’ droplet, but many degrees smaller as a speck of moisture on her tiny face. I looked up at her now-gigantic and oddly familiar eye and we took each other in, sparking a hint of recognition in my mind. I knew this eye. I had seen her before. And it wasn’t a drum I could hear, it was a heartbeat.

“That’s very astute of you, Mem,” she said.

My own heart pounded and my thoughts raced, “Mem? Mem! Did she just call me Mem? How could she have called me that. No one calls me that yet…except for…for…”

“I’m impressed by your willingness to suspend your disbelief, and allowing your curiosity to meet me here,” she continued.

“But how did you know what I was thinking?” I stammered aloud. “I mean who are you?” I couldn’t get any more words out.
“You are in my world now, so I know everything. You are my Mem,” she stated matter-of-factly. If this was true, then that meant that she was my…

“Your daughter. Yes, I am. And we’ll be meeting very soon on Illusion.”

I couldn’t believe the words I had just heard. But it had to be her, because hardly anyone knew that I wanted to be called Mem someday by my child. I had created the name from the words: remember and memory, because I always want to live in relationship with my child in such a way that they would want to remember me and would associate deep love from their memories with me as we grew and changed together over the course of our lives. Practically, it was also a way for my wife and I to distinguish ourselves from one another, as we played with language, while raising a kid in a two-mom home. Finally, it was laying the roots to perhaps one day be called Memere if it should happen that I were to ever become a grandmother, which felt a bit like getting ahead of myself since I was not even yet a mother – technically. I gathered myself and replied with tears of joy and deep desire in my eyes, “My love, is it you? Can it really be you?”

“Numi sent you here. They knew you had some things to (un)learn, and thought that I could help. Are you ready?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. She sounded just like her moms already, not wasting any time and wanting to dive right into the purpose and task at hand. “Yes, of course. Numi always seems to know exactly the medicine I need. Can you start by explaining where exactly ‘here’ is?” I asked.

“You’re in the midst of a Golden spiral.” While I wasn’t sure it related to our present surroundings, I was familiar with the Golden spiral, the geometrical pattern found
throughout the natural world, in everything from fiddle heads to the nautilus to tree branches to spiral galaxies to bee colonies to the female uterus (Dvorsky, 2013). She continued, “Numi made you the shape of water, so that you were able to flow easily from one cosmic dimension to the next. First, you were a rain drop falling from the Universe. Then, you were submerged below the surface into the Sea of Belonging and discovered cohesivity with all your relations. And now, you’ve been transported into my amniotic sac emerging as one of my in-utero tears, which is why you tasted salt.”

As soon as she said tears, that’s all I was able to focus on, distraught that she may be experiencing sadness or discomfort. “Tears? What’s the matter, my love?”

It felt like she heaved a sigh, as my teardrop undulated with her every movement, “I knew I should have waited before I said the part about tears.” She proceeded, “Did you follow your trajectory? You went from a cosmically incalculably gargantuan dimension to one that is miniature. So infinitesimal that scientists and doctors are still trying to resolutely confirm the theory that babies – or rather fetuses in utero like myself – cry. Which of course this conversation is proof that we do. Anyways, you just flowed through dimensions in the same pattern that water swirls down a drain, from large to small. Do you get it?”

It was sinking in now. I was beginning to realize I had journeyed along a sort of cosmic swirl – apparently in the mathematical curvature of the Golden Spiral – and one bending arc to the next had left me feeling the power of infinite individuality to a collective connectedness to now immersed in the experience of my yet to be born daughter’s sadness. It was impossible. Inconceivable. And yet, I knew it was happening, so I gathered myself and replied, “Numi really outdid themselves this time! Pretty
amazing the space I covered when forced to follow the way the water goes. So can you
tell me more about what has upset you?”

Seemingly satisfied with my acknowledgement of all the interstitial space
traversed to be in this conversation she offered with a twinge of melancholy, “It’s home.”

The words landed like the full force of gravity, words that carried more meaning
now that I had recently traveled to the moon and back and experienced the transition
from zero gravity back to Earth. What did she mean by that? Was she talking about our
home? Before I could ask for more clarification she expounded, “I’m talking about
Illusion. Or Water as it’s known in the Sea of Belonging, because it is majority water.
But you know it as Earth, also home.”

I must have looked as confused as I felt. My mouth agape. Body gently swaying.
Eyes blinking slowly. My daughter must have sensed I still needed to listen a bit more in
order to gather myself so she proceeded, “The tail is wagging the dog, Mem. The whole
planet, our entire natural order, is crying out for help. My tear is just one drop of that
eventual deluge. You are inside my tear to know that it’s all one in the same. Everything
is connected from the very small, where home equates to your body, yourselves, and you
(Clare, 1999). To the very large, where home is comprised of our universe, our planet,
our home (Singer, 2002). And we each have to be our part to help it heal.”

As soon as she used one of my favorite idioms, I was completely with her. I knew
what she was trying to convey. Earth was in trouble, we were teetering on the brink of
climate collapse and a technological capacity that promised transformation and
connection, but instead had been destroying democracy and community. Humans had
taken charge and were despoiling the planet for two reasons: predilection and
proprietorship. We had forgotten no one can own the water, the land, or the air. That we belong here, only because of those resources. For without water to drink, air to breathe, or land to grow food or rest upon, we would cease to exist in the cosmos. Nothing else that we currently preoccupy ourselves with would even matter. It was only our ability to invent fiction and to tell stories that allowed us to create all these other facets that consume and divide us now: religion, currency, science, industry, hierarchy, and personal data (Harari, 2015).

What she was saying resonated deeply within me. She was speaking truth. It was something I had already known on some level, but now my words flowed freely like an admission of guilt, “You’re completely right lovey. Our planet does need help. We see it every day in the news coverage whether it’s another unusual storm or wildfires blazing or ice caps melting or entire species dying off; while we continue to worry more about the stock market highs and lows instead of the extreme temperature highs and lows that have already started causing migration, famine, and extinction. And we also know the results of our inaction will disproportionately impact smaller nations (e.g. islands, coasts, etc.), the poor, people of color, and all non-human species first before it eventually includes everyone and everything.

Our lives are so busy and our focus so narrowed that we fixate on things like reusable grocery bags, going strawless, and meatless Mondays to feel a sense of order. And while those efforts can be valuable, they are simply one drop in an enormous ocean of needed change, and none of it ever feels like enough. Even decisions that seem to contribute to protecting the environment and our planet are often counteracted by a darker side—the reusable sandwich bags we buy are ordered from Amazon and delivered
in a gas-guzzling truck; the new wind turbines cause the deaths of local flocks of birds; the app downloaded to identify green businesses is used on an iPhone with materials mined by child labor.

And that’s just when you are trying to do good for the planet. There are so many more times when I don’t even realize that I’m helping to perpetuate this embodiment that defines the Anthropocene – being Anthropocentric. But perhaps that is exactly what I’m inevitably teaching my nephew when he points enthusiastically at an ant crawling across our kitchen floor, and exclaims, ‘Bees!’ – since all moving insects are bees to him – with his adorably gruff breathy pronunciation, and instead of joining him in his excitement at this life wandering across his path I quickly move to clean it up with a Lysol wipe. Perhaps in this exact moment he’s learned from my adult actions that humans are entitled to extinguish life, particularly bees – really ants – at the marginal cost of adding another wipe to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.”

I looked upwards at the enormous but youthful face above me, “And then there’s you.”

“Me!?” she said with surprise.

“Yes, lovey. As Mommy and I have been making decisions about whether or not to start a family, we talked about how having children is the act that most contributes to an individual’s carbon footprint, creating another person that for decades will consume and discard, even with the best of intentions.”

As I said it, I remembered floating next to dirty diapers in the Bali surf, and my gag reflex began involuntarily, thinking about how diapers, whether cloth or disposable, were just one more small thing inevitably contributing to the degradation of the planet. I
maintained my composure and continued what now felt like a rant, “Anyways, what I’m trying to say is that we thought long and hard about how children contribute to climate change and what that means to us. Which is to say, you obviously won out because otherwise how would we be having this conversation right now. But that also doesn’t mean that our decision to create you was necessarily in the best interest for the planet to recover. Although meeting you here, and in this way, is giving me hope. That you’re a sibyl come to tell us how we can fix it?”

“Well that all depends” she countered, “But I did want to let you know to be on the lookout.”


“For the future,” she paused. “The future that includes the entirety of our expanding Universe. It will utilize innovation and technological advancements to accompany ancient and sacred ways of knowing to better understand the air, the land, and the water so you, your kids – me – and seven generations into the future can have healthy bodies, interspecies reciprocity, digital humanity, natural conservation, and a Universe for us all to belong to. This will require us all to do the things both big and small, individual and systemic that will heal ourselves, our society, and our planet.”

As my daughter spoke, tears were welling up in my own eyes, and as my vision grew cloudy I half-smiled at how meta this moment had become: crying while listening to my future unborn baby share her wisdom, as I was simultaneously inhabiting one of her own in utero tears. I reached one hand up to wipe my eyes, and then the other to wipe the condensation off the thin wall of the teardrop before resting it flattened against the
surface. I desperately wanted to touch her, smell her, comfort her, love her. She must have sensed my primal yearning, and gently opened her fist to allow her tear – and me – to enter into her embrace.

As I was soaking in this loving gesture, feeling the warmth of her hand cupped all around me, and the rhythmic beat of her heart thumping in the background I heard her whisper softly, “Remember. Remember. The children are coming, and they will be the most open, inclusive, and distinct generation ever born on Illusion. We are the ones you’ve been waiting for.”

I felt chills spread all throughout my body. Instantaneously I was covered in goosebumps. It was happening again. I must be on the move. I thought I heard something. And then I was warm. I blinked my eyes open slowly. There was Morgan tucking in another warming blanket around me. She whispered, “You looked cold, so I got you another blanket.”

Tears started streaming down my face and I could barely make out the words, “I love you” (hooks, 2000).

She smiled gently, wiping away my tears with a corner of the warming blanket still in her hand, and said lovingly, “You look like you’ve had quite a day.”

I smiled back, as memories of the water journey I had just experienced flashed through my head, and I recalled my conversation with our baby and said pleadingly, “Help me always remember that we live in a Universe that is far more inventive than we could ever imagine, where the children are our future, and the earth is our mother where we all belong.”
Morgan turned her head slightly, looking at me quizzically, while I contemplated the enormous responsibility that comes with creation.
Transmittal Memo

To: Queen Mother, The Hive
From: Numi. Illusion
Embodyed Dimension: Spiritual
Re: Intentional Encounter #5 with the childs and the Universe

Purpose
This encounter with the childs aimed to provide her with a new perspective larger than previously possible. She is able to gain a glimpse into the entire Universe and her place in it amongst so many others, all of whom share equal value, wisdom, and connectedness regardless of species, age, or state of being.

Process
The breadth of this encounter required reinforcements from the Hive to achieve the level of energy necessary for such travel. The childs was transported through a water spiral beginning in a rainstorm, moving downward into the sea, and ending at the most micro level as a tear drop on the cheek of her future daughter. Over the course of earlier encounters, the childs came to understand her own infinite significance through an outward progression beginning with her own identity, followed by her role in human society, across species, and on the planet (Purdy, 2015). This final encounter pairs that with her contrastingly infinitesimal insignificance in the universe at large (Harari, 2015).

Paradigm
The child’s encounters have followed an outwardly spiraling path, expanding from micro to macro; this encounter mirrors that pattern while also suggesting that our human efforts to sustain a future must similarly include both the small and large; individual and systemic; technological and spiritual to have the desired impact.

In practice this reflects that Illusion is precariously imbalanced; the childs (un)learned that any hope to regain their balance resides in allowing each story to be heard, known and unknown, powerful and oppressed. Particularly the stories of those entities who have not been prioritized or privileged. The stories of all species, of all abilities, of all ethnicities, of all languages, of all sexualities, of all beliefs, from all localities, ad infinitum need to be included in order to repair our world so that we all may belong here. It is through sharing these stories that we can connect the spaces between us and find our way forward together.
EPILOGUE

Connection created by way of an ancient, infinite, and universal frequency, taking place in the wombshadow\textsuperscript{10} located somewhere between dimensions including the real, the dreamed, and the imagined.

Numinous: My childs, the time has come for me to return to the Hive and receive my next pairing assignment.

The childs: How can that be? I’ve only just begun to understand myselves, and my relationship with you and the Universe.

Numinous: Then you have all you need to continue your education with all your relations.

The childs: How can you say that? I feel like all I know is that I know nothing at all.

Numinous: That’s a good beginning, but that’s not all you know. Remember what you (un)learned about love.

The childs: Love? You mean about (un)learning to love myselves? Or (un)learning to love another? Or loving you – putting aside my old fears and habits – and trying to (un)learn new ways to live in better harmony with our Universe?

Numinous: Yes, and remembering that loving is a purpose and a practice. It is life’s sustaining source. It has the power to repair and replenish, and connect us all in a good way. In the way that the Hive intended.

\textsuperscript{10} A place as Barad (2007) would describe where, “the void not being nothing (while not being something), but it may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence” (p. 9).
The childs: But no one can be love all the time. There’s no way I’ll ever achieve that, especially without you here to teach me.

Numinous: My childs, have you really (un)learned so little from me? There is no achieving – no arriving – in the most important matters of living and (un)learning, and yet you can always try to become love. Becoming love in all the ways and spaces you find yourself is the eternal assignment of the Hive. And when you mess up or make mistakes, and you will, you make reparations and try becoming love again and again and again in perpetuity.

The childs: You make it sound so simple Numi.

Numinous: [Numi laughs an ephemeral laugh of ancient knowing.] My childs you must know by now that there is very little that is simple in this Universe. And often those things that are mistaken for as “simple” are merely misunderstood, which love so often is (hooks, 2000).

The childs: Then I must still be misunderstanding something. I get practicing self-love, and loving other people, species, and the planet. And while it is easier said than done, I can envision its transformative power in my relationships and my habits. But what’s love got to do with my work?

Numinous: Love, my childs, has everything to do with everything. It is the only pure shaper of change, particularly those changes that you care so much about and are so desperately needed on Illusion. Remember what bell hooks (2000) said, “if all public policy was created in a spirit of love,
we would not have to worry” (p. 98). Really it all comes down to choice.

_The childs:_ And I get to choose how I shape the story we’re a part of?

_Numinous:_ Now you’ve got it!

_The childs:_ Then I choose to practice the habits that will help shape this story into a love story to remember.

_Numinous:_ That is all the Hive could hope for.
REFERENCES


McLuhan, M. (1967). This is Marshall McLuhan: The medium is the message. New York, NY: NBC.


APPENDIX

1. As scholars Adams and Jones (2011) purport each individual reading of a text has the potential to become a text in itself. After reading *Being Myself To Belonging Together*, if you were assigned to write your own autoethnography what would you title it? And why? Remember that autoethnographies utilize self-reflection and writing to understand broader cultural, political, and social meaning.

2. What, if any, embodied responses (e.g. physical, emotional, etc.) were evoked in you as you read this text? If they occurred, during which sections did they occur and why do you think that was?

3. What have been some of the schools – formal and informal – that have educated you? And what schemas, values, and beliefs do you continue to uphold from those teachings? Conversely, what are the things you have determined – if any – you need to (un)learn?

4. Is it possible to collectively (un)learn in a world where “truth appears fleetingly and at once begins to decay?” (St. Pierre, 2010, p. 175). What is the role of educators and policymakers at a time when news and fake news, fact and fiction, become increasingly indistinguishable to the general populace?

5. As scholar Haraway (2003) says, “one cannot know the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationship” (p. 50). Considering this, what value – if any – does scholarship like *Being Myself To Belonging Together* contribute to the canon, particularly as this text stays frozen in 2019, while life continues?