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Embodied Environmental Justice: An analysis of the Work That Reconnects to be used as a valuable resource for embodied social and environmental justice

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Embodied Environmental Justice: An analysis of the Work That Reconnects to be used as a  
valuable resource for embodied social and environmental justice

By

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Work That Reconnects is a composition of theories and embodied practices designed to support ecological and social healing through in-person and online workshops, retreats, and events. Joanna Macy and her colleagues created the Work That Reconnects in the 1970s in response to increasing concerns about nuclear war. Since its inception, the Work That Reconnects teachings and practices continue to evolve to help people worldwide address the current injustices of our time. The purpose of this study is to analyze the potential of the Work That Reconnects as a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice, defined as an anti-oppression approach to restoring a balanced relationship with ourselves, our community, and the Earth through connection of the mind, body, and spirit to the more-than-human realm. Centered around social and ecological justice and healing, this study on the Work That Reconnects also contributes to the growing research on an anti-oppression approach to support people through planetary crisis. Eleven interviews were conducted online with people connected to the Work That Reconnects to understand how it impacts their lives and engagement in embodied environmental and social justice. These interviews helped answer the following questions: What attracts people to the Work That Reconnects? What contributes to feeling connected to the Work That Reconnects?, What contributes to feeling disconnected to the Work That Reconnects?, How can the Work That Reconnects be helpful for Embodied Environmental Justice?, and How can the Work That Reconnects be more inclusive?. Findings confirm that Work That Reconnects is a transformative tool for restoring balance with self and Earth. However, it still lacks the centering of social justice to support healing at the community level. Recommendations include increased skillful facilitation and deeper commitments to anti-oppression, restorative justice, and amplification of people of the global majority in WTR.

## **i. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

At a time of unprecedented social and environmental destruction, there is an increasing need to prioritize the reduction of harm to people of color and the environment and a commitment to the social healing of individual and collective trauma. Movements such as Flint Water Crisis, #NODAPL, the Central Valley, and Black Lives Matter highlight the ongoing destruction caused by corporate capitalism and patriarchy and means of resistance through political, social, and emotional actions (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Sze, 2020; Marya & Patel, 2021). It can be unsettling, nearly impossible, for people to process the emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma caused by centuries of continued social and environmental injustices. People of color, hereinafter referred to as people of the global majority, are often the first to experience oppression, whether police brutality, pollution, destruction of natural resources, or systemic racism (Sze, 2020). Furthermore, a recent study reported that over 50% of surveyed youth (aged 16-25) experience significant eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, and eco-anger, leading to severe depression, trauma, and suicidal ideation due to the current planetary crisis (Hickman et al., 2021). Today's planetary crisis calls for increased commitment to justice and healing at the individual and communal levels.

Over the past decade, decolonization has become a critical component of justice movements (Dhillon, 2018; Gordon, 2021; Temper, 2019). Decolonization encourages scholars and activists alike to broaden their approach from primarily resisting the distributive, binary-based, capitalist, settler-colonial system that leads to environmental and social injustices towards a decolonized approach where both the colonized and the colonizer restore relationships that are out of balance (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). This approach includes decolonizing the Western

perspective of “environment” and “justice” (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020) and pulling from indigenous feminist theory, “which asks us to reconsider moves toward justice that do not reaffirm settler-colonial hierarchies that rely on normative gender, sex, and racial hierarchies” (Goeman, 2017, p. 192).

In an effort to integrate a decolonized approach, this study focuses on embodiment as a valuable theory for engaging with environmental and social justice, hereinafter called embodied environmental justice, as it holistically captures the mind, body, and spirit connection to justice, which requires introspection of a person's positionality. Embodied environmental justice is a theoretical weaving of *ecological consciousness*, based on the intuitive psycho-spiritual human connection with the natural environment (Keefe, 2018) and Freire's *critical consciousness*, based on the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems (1973). For this study, I define embodied environmental justice as an anti-oppression approach to restoring balanced relationship with ourselves, our community, and the earth through the conscious connection of mind, body, and spirit to the human and more than human realm<sup>12</sup>. Embodied environmental justice serves as a reminder that “environmental justice movements have always been about cultures of freedom through imagining and enacting solidarity, radical hope, anti-consumerism and anticapitalism” (Sze, 2020, p. 43) and calls us to “envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling” (Kelley, 2002, p. 11).

As a potentially valuable resource for embodied environmental justice, the Work That Reconnects (WTR) is a web of theories and practices designed by Joanna Macy and her

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<sup>1</sup> An anti-oppression approach requires deep reflection and analysis of one's positionality and awareness of how an individual may be complicit in injustices and therefore uses this reflection to inform appropriate actions to reduce oppression and promote justice and healing.

<sup>2</sup> More than human realm is a term often used within Work That Reconnects spaces to describe non-human sentient and non-sentient beings, including but not limited to, flora and fauna, the elements, ancestors, and future beings.

colleagues in the 1970s to help people transform their despair and overwhelm for the current state of the world into active hope and reconnection to themselves, their community, and the earth. The WTR has grown from a small group of facilitators and community members primarily based in the United States to an extensive network of facilitators and community members worldwide, with over 15,000 people associated with the Work That Reconnects Network (WTRN). WTRN is a non-profit organization that provides an online hub for Work That Reconnects members to connect, share resources, and promote in-person and online events. The WTR attracts people across the globe to honor the web of life through embodiment practices that begin with gratitude and spiral out to honoring our pain, seeing with ancient and new eyes, and going forth. These practices pull from theories, such as, but are not limited to, Buddhism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, ecopsychology, embodied social justice, indigenous studies, and systems thinking with particular emphasis on environmental and social activism to help people create a Life Sustaining Society.<sup>3</sup> Behind all of these theories is a non-linear view of reality and that despite the limitations of our life, we have the power to choose our values to inform our actions to create the world we want to live in (Macy, n.d). WTR is the focus of this research due to its relevance over the past five decades and profound ability to transform people from deep despair to empowerment and love for life and re-engagement in taking action to promote a Life-Sustaining Society. Further, WTR is of particular interest for this study because of the open-source format and wide-spread global use, which increases the potential for the findings to broaden their impact, as it will help inform best practices for networks worldwide.

Intended to be inclusive and welcoming to people of all backgrounds, the WTR is not exempt from entanglement in systems of oppression, including US-centric racism, white

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<sup>3</sup> Life Sustaining Society is defined as a culture in which the interlocking economic and social systems function to maintain the health of the natural world and the vibrancy of human communities.



supremacy, patriarchy, corporate capitalism, and (settler) colonialism. While WTR attracts a global audience, a significant portion of members are white women, with less representation from people of the global majority and other social groups like men and children. In response to the lack of diversity and centering of social justice, the Anti-Oppression Resource Group (AORG) was founded in 2017 by a few Work That Reconnects facilitators from the United States to focus on the critical integration of anti-racism work and decolonization within WTR spaces. The AORG provides resources and training to de-escalate harm caused to people of the global majority. AORG meets regularly to provide in-person and online training, consultations, and resources to support decolonization of the WTR by making direct recommendations and creating educational and conversational opportunities to reduce harm in white dominant spaces.

This research aims to learn more about the WTR's potential to be a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice by restoring a balanced relationship with ourselves, our communities, and the Earth. Interviews with WTR members focus on how the WTR impacts people's lives, including how the WTR shapes their relationship with the Earth and the adoption of an anti-oppression approach to ecological and social justice and healing. The findings from this analysis apply to other organizations interested in embodied environmental justice or would benefit from learning the strengths and challenges of an organization's efforts to decentralize and adapt teachings from the founder and original teachings. In summary, this research seeks to answer the question of how Work That can Reconnects be used as a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice, as told by the experiences of Work That Reconnects members, and what themes these stories suggest for Work That Reconnects to help restore balanced relationship with ourselves, our communities, and the Earth.

## **ii. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A. Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, and Embodied Environmental Justice**

Conceived following the Civil Rights Movement between the 1950s and 1960s, Environmental justice (EJ) is rooted in social change, grassroots activism, and environmental protection. While this research goes beyond the historical and modern EJ movement, it is essential to understand the roots of environmental justice and what led this research to focus on an embodied approach. According to Cole and Foster, the foundations of the environmental justice movement stem from the Civil Rights movement, Anti-Toxic movement, academia, Native American struggles, Labor movement, and traditional environmentalism (2001, pp. 20-30). These separate movements would not convene together until 1991 at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which grew out of opposition to the white male-dominated racist environmental movement. This Summit led to the creation of 17 Environmental Justice Principles, still widely used by academics and activists today. Most notably, these principles highlight the sacredness and interconnectedness of sentient and non-sentient beings to co-exist with Mother Earth without destruction or harm to one another (The Principles of Environmental Justice, 1991).

During the 1990s, EJ movements primarily focused on the impact of race, class, and environment without much attention to gender, sexuality, and species. The lack of an intersectional approach brought ecofeminism in convergence with the EJ movement. The ecofeminism movement focused on how environmental injustices disproportionately impact women due to unequal privileges in the white male-dominated society, with emphasis on how the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are inextricably linked. For nearly fifteen years, ecofeminist scholars would not address the critical role of gender and

sexuality, which led to a significant backlash in the Global North for being “essentialist, ethnocentric, anti-intellectual, elitist, goddess-worshippers” (Gaard, 2015). Critiques within environmental and feminist movements charged ecofeminism with homogenizing and essentializing women, conflating sex and gender while erasing critical differences like race and class (Gaard, 2011, p. 36). This critique led to the Global North’s mainstream demise of the ecofeminism movement, despite the ongoing contributions to current EJ research, such as understanding the body as an inner ecosystem; the womb as a life-giving environment, and breast milk as a food source, both at risk of toxic accumulation (Gaard, 2018, p. 82). Despite experiencing a period of downfall in the Global North, ecofeminism continued to grow in the Global South with significant contributions by Wangari Maathai and the Kenyan Green Belt Movement in 1977, Vandana Shiva and the Chipko Movement in India in 1989, and Farida Akhtar’s book *Women and Trees* published in Bangladesh in 1990 (Salman & Iqbal, 2007).

The horizontal and vertical expansion of the environmental justice movement has led to a more pluralistic understanding of EJ, incorporating new fields, perspectives, theories, and praxis at the local, national, and international levels (Scholsberg, 2013). The expansiveness and plurality of environmental justice make it difficult to box into one definition. However, most commonly used is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) definition:

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which

to live, learn, and work. (EPA, 2020)

The EJ movement soon evolved into several different expressions of the initial focus on the distribution of environmental hazards in marginalized communities, such as addressing environmental inequalities “in areas such as transportation, health, housing, and smart growth/land use, water, energy development, brownfields, and militarization,” and in the late 2000s reached a crossroad to include gender, sexuality, and age, similar to ecofeminism (Sze & London, 2008). EJ has made significant strides in data, theories, policy, and action toward justice, still with limitations. Anguelovski argues that EJ scholars “tended to have a limited view on what constitutes “the environment” of places and people and predefined what environmental justice literature” is (2013). Anguelovski challenges people to rethink the environment and include “proactive and holistic environmental revitalization rather than reactive conflicts” (2013, p. 163). EJ scholars and activists must unpack the settler-imposed beliefs carried in people’s minds and bodies that perpetuate the hierarchical binary structures such as class and race, brown and green EJ, dirty and clean, nature and culture, soil and spirit, black and white, earth and sky, masculine and feminine, and thoughts and feelings (Anguelovski, 2013; Caputi, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. These dualisms lead to “rationalizing the manipulation of non-valued ‘others’ through domestic labor, colonial slavery, or natural resource extraction” (Camilleri & Guess, 2020). As such dualistic thinking does not encourage discussions of how environmental injustices disproportionately affect people of multiple subaltern groups (Sturgeon, 1997).

Over the past 40 years, EJ strengthened the praxis between academics, activists, and agencies and is now at a new crossroads against record high temperatures, global inequality, and “intensifying social, political, economic, and environmental injustices” resulting from a global

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<sup>4</sup> Unpack is used to speak to the importance of analyses to understand the root cause or core belief behind a belief, theory, positionality, etc.

corporate capital society (Sze, 2020). As inflammation rises within countries, communities, and bodies (Mayra & Patel, 2021), the emergence of theories such as embodied environmental justice blends ancient and new frameworks that prioritizes balanced relationships with all beings (Shiva, 2005). Embodied environmental justice also argues that while humans and nature are interconnected, there is no Mother Earth to save us “consequently, it is only us [humans] who are responsible for our fate and the fate of life on the planet.” (Keefe, 2018).

Embodied environmental justice emerges as an extension of the environmental justice movement as it affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, and cultural liberation, along with the self-determination of all beings, including future generations and the more than human realm. Embodied environmental justice utilizes an “intuitive, ineffable, or empathic experience with Mother Earth” (Keefe, 2018, p. 13) and a mature, non-anthropocentric reciprocity with nature (Dobson, 1998). In addition, it centers on a commitment to take action through personal and collective emotional awareness of the web of life, defined as the interconnectedness of all sentient and non-sentient beings. Embodied environmental justice may help widen the impact of social and environmental justice movements worldwide as it requires introspection and awareness of our interconnectedness to the web of life in support of a more just and balanced world.

### **B. Embodied Social Justice and Healing Individual and Collective Trauma**

Embodied social justice is a growing body of somatic anti-oppression theories and methods focused on how people nonverbally embody oppression, how oppression affects our relationship with the body, and frameworks to (un)learn oppression and release individual and collective trauma in the body (Johnson, 2018). While this study focuses on embodied social justice, it is essential to acknowledge the meaningful work within social justice spaces to

dismantle systems of oppression through activism, community action, and policy change for the liberation of people of the global majority and other marginalized social groups such as, but not limited to, LGBTQIA+, womxn, (dis)/abled and neurodivergent people. Social justice depends on utilizing the body as a place for “advocating, protesting, marching, chanting, and participating in public discourse...where we intentionally replace physical enactments of dominance and oppression with ones of liberation and self-expression” (Sapon-Shevin & Soohoo, 2020, p. 676). Embodied social justice understands the body as a tool for harm and an equal tool for healing; without an embodied approach, oppression replicates, and policy reform continues to fail (Mensinga & Pyles, 2021).

Within embodied social justice and somatic therapy is the understanding that the body stores racialized intergenerational trauma, perpetuating injustices, and white-body supremacy in black, white, and blue bodies (Menekam, 2017)<sup>5,6</sup>. Menekam’s *My Grandmother’s Hands* provides embodied practices to help release trauma from the body and support the nervous system to minimize our fight, flight, freeze, and fawn response to oppression and harm<sup>7</sup>. Menekam’s practices include, but are not limited to, ancestral humming, tapping of the body, physical orientation of the body, and being in direct relationship with the Earth. These examples of embodied social justice practices reframe a person’s identity to the self into an expanded consciousness of relatedness, noting that “healing involves justice, reparations, and forgiveness; to truly heal, we must recognize our inseparability” (Rooks, 2017). However, healing individual

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<sup>5</sup> Somatic therapy is defined as a form of body-centered therapy that looks at the connection of mind and body for holistic healing.

<sup>6</sup> Blue bodies is a term used in Resmaa Menekam’s *My Grandmother’s Hands* to speak about the specific type of trauma found in police bodies.

<sup>7</sup> Fawn response is the fourth term added to the widely recognized flight, fight, and freeze response to trauma. Fawn response is the often-unconscious response to immediately try to please a person to avoid conflict.

trauma must not contribute to neoliberal development or assimilation into the hegemonic state (Nadeau, 2020). Embracing embodied social justice and healing must lead to embodied liberation for all people on the individual and collective level.

### **C. Resistance to Dominant Society through an Indigenous Approach**

While this research focuses on restoring balanced relationships to self, community, and Earth in white-dominant spaces, it is also important to acknowledge that many of the practices used by the Work That Reconnects pull from Indigenous and anti-colonial teachings. Both Indigenous and anti-colonial teachings are often developed in resistance to (settler) colonialism and hegemonic society. The exploitation of human and non-human beings must occur to support the patriarchal corporate capitalist system; Whether it is through the acquisition of resources on indigenous occupied land or the settler colonial annihilation of the original indigenous people for the acquisition of land to gain control of resources (Glenn, 2015). An indigenous approach to environmental justice shifts the focus from “equity and the objectified ‘resource’ to which one has ‘rights’ to utilize” towards “language about caretaking responsibilities and being recognized as an animate and treasured relative” (Norgaard & Reeds, 2017, 488-490).

Without the knowledge of Indigenous elders, activists, and scholars alike, the world would be unable to liberate itself from the corporate capital, hegemonic, racist, patriarchal state, which requires an indigenous-based reconciliation and healing. An integral part of indigenous practices is to engage in body-based healing, noting that “body sovereignty is land sovereignty” (Nadeau, 2020, p. 253), and how indigenous healing is not an intellectual process, as it is a merging of heart and head (Beaulieu-Banks et al., 2018). Furthermore, restoring balanced relationship to self, community, and the Earth requires a radical shift for non-native people to not give in to the myth of whiteness and remember:

“Every single person in the world has an ethnicity. Ethnic does not mean colored or being a person of color. Ethnicity is your culture, and it’s your culture as it relates to a particular place on earth, a particular bioregion, and a particular land. Everyone can trace those roots back for themselves. The most radical thing you can do is to start thinking of yourself as having come from someplace in this land. That thought alone is going to be a huge contradiction to the prevailing models.” (Gray, 2006, p. 18)

Restoring a balanced relationship to self, community, and Earth requires some people to wake up from their cultural amnesia to explore their ancestor’s primal pre-colonial earth-centered Indigenous Knowledge, including European Indigenous Knowledge, to heal our relationship with each other and the Earth to enable a new way of seeing and being (Eyers, 2017).

Decolonization is often used in environmental and social justice spaces to distinguish the commitment to an anti-colonial and anti-corporate capital framework to contribute to justice and healing. Mitchell, a Penawahpskek Indigenous rights activist and spiritual teacher, describes decolonization as overcoming the impacts of colonization by embracing the wisdom of our cultural traditions and aligning with the values that guide those traditions. “We must seek out and eliminate the imprints that colonization has left on our hearts and minds so that we may summarily reject those imprints and replace them with a renewed commitment toward unity, harmony, and honest self-awareness.” (Mitchell, 2018, p 209).

Mitchell's definition runs counter to other indigenous scholars' understanding of decolonization as the dismantling of settler-colonial and corporate-colonial society through the repatriation of land. This difference stems from how the land has always been understood differently across cultures, and that decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p.7). Prominent indigenous research on decolonization also often focuses on



indigenous autonomy, sovereignty, and rights to self-determination (Corntassel & Bryce, 2010; LaDuke, 1994; Tauli-Corpuz, 2010). At this moment, decolonization is increasingly becoming a buzzword without meaningful action. It is at risk of being co-opted by settler society as another form of oppression from the settler colonial system. To prevent decolonization from becoming a merely metaphor, Tuck urges scholars to learn that "decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is another form of settler appropriation" (Tuck, 2012, p. 14). For decolonization to occur, it must include the unsettling process of returning land to indigenous communities and the resurgence of indigenous sovereignty, including the freedom to power, place, religion, culture, and environment; this challenges how the term is used in WTR spaces, and invites scholars and activist to consider the plurality of how decolonization is defined.

My analysis of the Work That Reconnects is informed by indigenous research, as any efforts to restore a balanced relationship to self, community, and the earth must include justice and healing for indigenous peoples. In addition, as many of the practices used in Work That Reconnects stem from various indigenous communities, this literature helps support the recommendations for increased inclusion and amplification of Indigenous elders and acknowledgment of the lineages who inform many of the practices in the Work That Reconnects.

### **iii. CHAPTER THREE: WORK THAT RECONNECTS**

#### **A. Brief History of the Work That Reconnects**

Work That Reconnects (WTR) is a collection of theories and practices designed to support people in metabolizing their pain for the social and environmental injustices in the world

through processes that help reconnect one to themselves, their communities, and the Earth (Macy & Brown, 2014; Macy & Johnstone, 2012). The Work That Reconnects, originally called Despair and Empowerment work, was developed by root teacher Joanna Macy, in the late 1970s, in collaboration with Interhelp members Fran Peavey and Chellis Glendinning along with several others (Decitre, 2022; The Interhelp Network, n.d.)<sup>89</sup>. At the time of the Cold War, the threat and fear of nuclear war was palpable worldwide. Macy and collaborators created practices to help people, primarily pacifists and peace activists, transform their pain for the world into positive action, as many people felt stuck in fear and disempowered by the immediate threat of planetary crisis. Through in-person gatherings, including lectures, workshops, and retreats, the Work That Reconnects developed using “counseling methods, spiritual principles, ritual and myth, laughter and tears, reverence and irreverence to help individuals break out of the numbness of despair and denial.” (Work That Reconnects, n.d.). The widespread love for the work stemmed from Macy’s 1979 article “How to Deal with Despair” and her 1983 book, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, along with workshops that attracted thousands of people in and out of activist spaces (History of the Work That Reconnects, n.d.). Despair and Empowerment Work evolved into deep ecology work due to the increased public appreciation of deep ecology theories and Macy’s 1988 book, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings*, co-authored with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess. The work soon spread to Europe, Australia, South Asia, Japan, and the Soviet Union. (History of the Work That Reconnects, n.d.). In 1998, Joanna Macy co-authored *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World*, with Molly Brown as a comprehensive guide of the work, including the core teaching and over sixty

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<sup>8</sup> Root teacher is a term used in Work That Reconnects to distinguish and honor Joanna Macy for being the founder and public figure of Work That Reconnects.

<sup>9</sup> Interhelp Network is a Work That Reconnects hub in the Northeast of the colonial United States.

practices to support personal and collective transformation in alignment with the Earth and a life sustaining society. This book represents the shift when Despair and Empowerment Work became known as the Work That Reconnects. In 2012, Joanna Macy co-authored *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* with Chris Johnstone to provide an individual handbook to support individual and community transformation. In 2014, Joanna Macy and Molly Brown updated *Coming Back to Life*, which captures the evolution of the work from responding to nuclear threat to the broader impact of climate change and social and environmental injustices.

Joanna Macy continues to be considered a respected voice in peace, justice, and deep ecology movements due to her worldwide contributions to social and ecological healing. In the past decade, Joanna Macy slowed down her involvement with in-person and online lectures, workshops, and retreats, but the work is available to everyone as open source<sup>10</sup>. In 2015, a group of long-term facilitators and supporters of the WTR developed the Work That Reconnects Network to encourage global participation and collaboration of the work, addressing the needs of facilitators, aspiring facilitators, and the general public. The core team connected to the Work That Reconnects Network, includes Network Weavers, who meet monthly, make decisions by consensus, and provide leadership to one or more of the Network projects. The core team is supported by other volunteers and by a small team of dedicated paid staff (Work That Reconnects Network, n.d.).

Lastly, because of the large and dedicated following for Joanna Macy as what could be described as a guru, it is important to note that Macy does not use this term. It is also important to distinguish Macy and the Work That Reconnects from the rise of cults that began in the

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Macy gifted the Work That Reconnects to the world. As an open-source material, also known as creative commons, anyone can facilitate the work with recommended guidelines on how to honor the lineage of these teachings and free resources on the WTR Network's website.

United States in the late 60s and early 70s. The term “cult” is applied to “groups involved in beliefs and practices just off the beat of traditional religions; groups making exploratory excursions into non-Western philosophical practices; and groups involving intense relationships between followers and a powerful idea or leader.” (Singer, 1979, p. 1). Despite Joanna Macy and Work That Reconnects accumulating a sizable global following and incorporating non-Western practices, the open-source design allows participants to use the materials how they see fit. With hundreds of facilitators adapting the work worldwide, it provides a structural buffer from becoming a cult or creating a cult following.

## **B. Key Teaching of the Work That Reconnects**

Joanna Macy, collaborating with other vital teachers, pulled inspiration from teachings found in Buddhism, deep ecology, ecofeminism, ecopsychology, Indigenous cultures, and living systems thinking to develop many core teachings and practices used in Work That Reconnects. Within all these theories is a non-linear view of reality that despite the injustices in our lives, we still have the power to consciously align our values and actions with the world we want to live in. In addition, all these theories share the awareness of how our humanness inextricably connects to the natural world. The key teachings of the WTR include: 1. The Core Assumptions of The Work That Reconnects, 2. Three Stories of Our Time, 3. The Three Dimensions of the Great Turning and 4. The Spiral, all outlined below.

### **1. Core Assumptions of The Work That Reconnects**

The Core Assumptions of the Work That Reconnects sets the foundation for understanding the premises of the theories and practices found within the work:

- The world, in which we are born and take our being, is alive.

- Our true nature is far more ancient and encompassing than the separate self, defined by habit and Western society.
- Our experience of the pain for the world springs from our connectivity with all beings, from which also arise our powers to act on their behalf.
- Unblocking occurs when our pain for the world is not only acknowledged, but experienced.
- When we reconnect with life by choosing to bear our pain for it, the mind retrieves its natural clarity.
- The experience of reconnection with the Earth community arouses the urge to act on its behalf (Macy & Brown, 2014, pp. 65-67)

## 2. **Three Stories of Our Time**

The Three Stories of Our Time speaks directly to the pain and suffering witnessed in our world today and provides an example of a story that supports a Life Sustaining Society.

- Business As Usual is the story of the Industrial Growth Society, and the European-based colonial empires from which it emerged. The dominant enforcing mechanism of a predatory capitalist, imperialist economic system (in other words, the corporate, financial, military industrial complex) perpetuates patriarchy and white supremacy for the profit and power of a few.
- The Great Unraveling is the story told by scientists, journalists, and activists who are not bought off or intimidated by the forces of the Industrial Growth Society. Drawing attention to the disasters caused by Business As Usual, their accounts give evidence of the ongoing derangement and collapse of biological, ecological, economic, and social systems.

- The Great Turning is a story told by some who see the Great Unraveling and do not want it to have the last word. This story transitions from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life Sustaining Society. Attitudes shift from exploitation to respect, extraction to regeneration, competition to cooperation. More and more people come to see how interwoven we are as people and recognize that solidarity with one another is a way through these crises. So, we join together to act for the sake of life on earth.
- The story of the Great Turning involves the emergence of new and creative human responses and a reawakening of sustainable indigenous traditions. We gratefully acknowledge the wisdom of indigenous traditions that came before us and are re-emerging today, bearing strong witness to the interconnectedness of all life. Let us also borrow the perspective of future generations and, in that larger context of time, look at how this Great Turning is gaining momentum, accelerated by the choices of countless individuals as they band together in networks and campaigns worldwide. (Three Stories of The Work That Reconnects, n.d.)

### **3. Three Dimensions of the Great Turning**

Three Dimensions of the Great Turning provide a clear framework of the requirements for a Life Sustaining Society. The dimensions are mutually reinforcing, including 1) Holding Actions: actions to slow the damage to the earth and its beings; 2) Gaian Structures: analysis and transformation of the foundations of our common life; and 3) Shift in Consciousness: a fundamental shift in worldview and values.

### **4. Spiral**

The Spiral of the work is essential to the facilitation of the Work That Reconnects, as it is a journey of four successive stages to support individual and collective transformation: Gratitude, Honoring Our Pain, Seeing with Ancient and New Eyes, and Going Forth. Despite the Spiral beginning with Gratitude, facilitators can begin at any stage most relevant to the practicing group. Anecdotal data from this research project suggests that groups who experience oppression often begin with Honoring Our Pain and circle back to gratitude.

### **C. Anti-Oppression work in the Work That Reconnects**

Despite over fifty years of contributing to social and ecological healing of individuals and communities, the Work That Reconnects is not absolved from the need to unpack how the industrial growth society and layers of privilege operate in the shadows of the work. Within the past decade, WTR began the unsettling process of unpacking how an organization founded predominantly by white people has contributed to situations of harm, particularly for people of the global majority, which leads to not feeling welcomed or valued in WTR spaces and out of alignment with core teachings. The WTR's deepening commitment to anti-oppression stems not only from isolated individual experiences but also from specific events where groups of people experienced racial harm during in-person retreats. Examples of harm include, but are not limited to, not noticing patterns or ignoring how systems of oppression all replicate when not consciously interrupted and transformed, not responding to toxic/harmful/racist speech, disrespecting requested pronouns, engaging in practices that are physically impossible without mindful modifications, not respecting the need for silence or expressing big emotions, letting men or white culture/comfort sit center stage, using examples specific to the U.S or one's culture, inability to respectfully receive feedback without shutting down. These experiences highlight the

inherited challenges of a model designed by a predominately white majority group of people using practices inspired by Indigenous or other non-white cultures.

In 2017, the Anti-Oppression Resource Group was created, initially by a group of U.S. based facilitators, which has now expanded to many international facilitators, to explore undoing oppression in the facilitation of the Work That Reconnects by providing resources, webinars, and regular meetings focused on anti-oppression, anti-racism, and decolonization. The Anti-Oppression Resource Group's evolution began in 2016 when a group of facilitators met to explore the harm occurring in Work That Reconnects spaces, followed by another meeting in 2018 to test new and adapted practices with an anti-oppression approach. Mutima Imani and Aravinda Ananda facilitated a gathering at Canticle Farm in Oakland, California, on Ohlone territory to explore and address patterns of harm in WTR spaces<sup>11</sup>. These meetings continued with Belinda Griswold, Sarah Nahar, and Aravinda Ananda, as they prepared for their respective programs with Joanna Macy, and an immersion for young people. These weekly calls focused on an anti-oppression approach continued for a year and evolved into the Anti-Oppression Resource Group. (Anti-Oppression Resource Group, n.d.)

The webinars and resources developed through the AORG demonstrate the growing commitment of facilitators worldwide to engage in the unsettling process of decolonizing WTR practices with an anti-oppression approach. While AORG remains separate from the Work That Reconnects Network and Joanna Macy, they are a well-respected and growing group of WTR members committed to justice and equipping facilitators with the resources to reduce harm in white-dominant spaces. In 2017, some members of the AORG encouraged Joanna to write a public letter to white facilitators, *Recommendations on Anti-Oppression Work within the Work*

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<sup>11</sup> Canticle Farm is an intentional living community based on the Work That Reconnects teachings in Oakland, California.



*That Reconnects*, to address the harm caused by the layers of privilege and biases of the white facilitator community. In this letter, Macy shared, “I myself acknowledge that my privilege has impacted the formation and facilitation of the WTR. I deeply regret any harm that has ensued. I apologize to each person who has been hurt by my facilitation and/or from the practices I created,” along with a call for primarily white American facilitators to commit to actively being anti-racist and anti-oppressive, which includes personal reflection, behavioral changes, and greater inclusion of people of the global majority and anti-oppressive approach to facilitation (Macy, 2018). In the past five years, the emphasis and commitment to anti-oppression continued to grow with increased collaboration with people of the global majority and creating spaces commonly known for an embodied commitment to justice, anti-oppression, and decolonization. In 2022, the Work That Reconnects Network created a Social Justice group to further the work of AORG and address other layers of oppression in the Global South.

#### **D. Embodied Practices found in the Work That Reconnects**

This research project focuses on embodied environmental justice, an anti-oppression approach to restoring a balanced relationship with ourselves, our community, and the Earth through the connection of mind, body, and spirit to the more than human realm. The Work That Reconnects includes dozens of embodied-based practices to strengthen a person’s relationship with themselves, their community, and the Earth. I provide two examples from the Work That Reconnects Network website to help demonstrate the perceived alignment between the Work That Reconnects and embodied environmental justice, demonstrating why the Work That Reconnects was selected as a case study for this research (Work That Reconnects Network, n.d.).

1. *Mirror Walk* invites participants to a multi-sensory awareness of their surroundings and a fresh sense of gratitude for life. This is considered an excellent training for the ecological

self, it helps people experience the world as their larger body—imagining when they open their eyes, at specified moments, they are looking in a mirror. This process is designed to develop trust among participants and moves beyond words to immediacy of contact with the natural world. Forming pairs, people take turns being guided with eyes closed, in silence. Without vision, they use their other senses with more curiosity than usual, and practice relying on another person for their safety. Their partners, guiding them by the hand or arm, offer them various sensory experiences – a flower or leaf to smell, the texture of grass or tree trunk, the sound of birds or children playing – all the while without words. The tempo is relaxed, allowing time to fully register each sensory encounter. Every so often, the guide adjusts his partner’s head, as if aiming a camera, and says, “Open your eyes and look in the mirror.” The ones being guided open their eyes for a moment or two and take in the sight. After a predetermined length of time, roles are changed. When participants return at the end of the second shift, each pair forms a foursome with another pair to speak of the experience, followed by a group share (Work That Reconnects Network, n.d.).

2. *Despair Ritual* is “one of the oldest practices originated by Chellis Glendinning after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, the ritual’s structure was prefigured in a dream, and its function was inspired by the practice of “speaking bitterness,” which was used in China to alleviate apathy and paralysis from the suffering incurred in the revolution.” (Work That Reconnects, n.d.) The practice is based around three concentric circles. The outer circle is everyone standing and moving in the outer ring, which is the Circle of Reporting. The next is the Circle of Anger and Fear (with two cushions to pound on), and the innermost, a pile of pillows at the center, is the Circle of Sorrow. Elsewhere in the room, a corner space is marked off with plants or branches to create the Sanctuary.

After initial explanations by the guide, the ritual begins with a vow of intention— “May the work we are about to do serve the healing of our world”—and a long sonorous sounding of “AH” which symbolizes all that has been silenced or unsaid. People now move around the outer circle, counterclockwise, and at their own pace. Spontaneously they begin to make short comments about what is in their hearts and minds about the condition of the world. They report both facts and feelings— simply, briefly, without explanation.

“In my city the homeless are being arrested now, and the shelters are closing.”

“The air pollution is giving my daughter asthma.”

“I am terrified of getting cancer.”

After each statement the group responds, “Indeed it is so,” or “We hear you.”

When emotion wells up and people feel moved not only to report it, but express it, they enter one of the two inner circles. In the middle one they may stride, stomp, pound pillows, shout out their anger or fear. Or they may move directly to the Circle of Sorrow, kneel or sink down on the cushions to release their grief, crying and sometimes holding each other. People stay in any circle as long as they want and return as frequently as they want. At different moments, almost half the participants may find themselves in the inner rings; all the while the reporting continues. As emotions and noise escalate, individuals may want to take refuge from the turbulence— then they go sit a while in the Sanctuary. There they can be quiet, and a bit removed, while still following and supporting the process.

After painful facts and feelings have been expressed at length, and many have reached a crescendo, or repeated crescendos, the tone of the group usually shifts. The movement down into darkness and distress begins to turn off its own dynamic into a movement up toward affirmation, as people experience the profound commonality of their caring. Statements like

“my brother is dying of AIDS” are increasingly interspersed with “I’m planting a garden,” or “Folks in my neighborhood are organizing a cooperative.” This shift cannot be programmed, but it virtually always occurs. The prevailing mood begins to change, even though some still weep in the Circle of Sorrow. Often people start clustering there, touching arms and shoulders, meeting one another’s eyes in compassion and gratitude. A humming or song may arise, with the rest soon joining in (Work That Reconnects Network, n.d.).

#### **iv. CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH**

##### **A. Positionality**

As a white, cis-gender woman with primarily Irish, Scottish, and English ancestral lineage, living in Nisenan territory, colonially referred to as Sacramento, California, my positionality must be named and claimed. I will never be able, nor is it my right to fully speak to the injustices experienced by people of the global majority and other marginalized communities. I am committed to unpacking what it means to be a non-indigenous person living on unceded land in a white patriarchal, racist society, and who is in the process of reconnecting to my European Indigenous knowledge and navigating my ethnic ancestry, split between the world’s largest colonizers, British Empire, and one of its first colonies, Ireland. My interest in learning about my European indigenous ancestry fuels my interest in the Work That Reconnects and how it has the potential to help people disengage from cultural appropriation, and adopt practices aligned with their specific ancestral practices.

My research interests also stem from observing how the cultural separation from nature imposed by the corporate capital society has led to increased burnout, cynicism, and depression across all sectors, including corporations and social movements. For over a decade, I worked in the nonprofit sector, engaging in environmental activism, anti-trafficking and female

empowerment programs, and humanitarian aid. While profoundly impactful, it also comes with a heavy amount of compassion fatigue, burnout, and loss of meaning. These experiences led me to seek out alternative forms of activism and organizing that prioritize restoring human connection to the land and Mother Earth, in a way that honors lineages rather than appropriates. My desire to move from burnout to reconnection is what led me to the Work That Reconnects, and therefore, contributed to my interest in analyzing how the Work That Reconnects contributes to embodied environmental justice.

My relationship with the Work That Reconnects Network significantly impacted how I interacted with the participants and analyzed my data to answer my research questions. When I first learned about Work That Reconnects, I immediately read all of Macy's core literature and reached out to the Work That Reconnects Network to volunteer as an Intern, primarily providing support with their communication and marketing efforts. During this time, I attended regular meetings and thus developed working relationships with Work That Reconnects Network staff and Weavers. I continued to feel passionate about the Work That Reconnects I applied for and accepted into the six-month-long facilitator development program, *Spiral Journey*, with Reverend Mutima Imani, Constance Washburn, and Molly Brown. My regular involvement in the Work That Reconnects Network and connection to the materials significantly contribute to my positionality. While I intend to remain objective in my research, there is an underlying belief that the Work That Reconnects has the potential to transform our relationship with ourselves, our communities, and the earth, and most importantly, that justice is at the core of the Work That Reconnects and the Great Turning. Furthermore, as I continue to stay involved in Work That Reconnects, I noticed that there are instances where my analysis and recommendations were initially colored by how these findings may impact future relationships with community

members of Work That Reconnects. Therefore, it was vital that I consciously remove my experience from the findings and focus my recommendations on what is most beneficial for the Work That Reconnects and the future generations who will benefit from it.

While I cannot speak for all environmental and social justice practitioners and movements, I believe the Great Turning calls many people beyond current environmental justice theories and systems of resistance by bringing forth a higher and ancient vision that prioritizes an embodied practice and way of life that honors the sacredness of our planet, people, and all sentient and non-sentient beings. Lastly, this study proceeds with the reminder that while I intend to critically engage with the literature and analyze the Work That Reconnects, unconscious biases or gaps in the analysis may be present as I continue to unpack my positionality; noting how settler colonialism is designed to function in the background and remain invisible to the dominant society and may show up unexpectedly (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Corntassel, 2014).

### **B. Assumptions and My Approach**

I discovered the Work That Reconnects through my research on environmental justice education programs known for weaving ecopsychology and embodied social justice together as an alternative way to engage in community development and healing. After six months of researching environmental justice initiatives with an eco-spiritual and embodied approach, I felt encouraged, surprised, and excited to know that Work That Reconnects offerings have been around since the 1970s with great efforts to support people holistically in the Great Turning. I began to read the core Work That Reconnects books, like *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Coming Back to Life* by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, and *World as Lover, World as Self* by Joanna Macy. At the time, I felt deeply moved to reconnect to Macy's work, as her translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem, *Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower*, carried me

through the past decade of my life, which felt like a serendipitous moment of returning to her work.

In the Summer of 2021, I reached out to Work That Reconnects Network to introduce myself and express interest in interning with the Network and, if interested, researching the WTR, and have been a volunteer intern since that summer. Noting that an ethnographic approach to community development includes building meaningful relationships with community partners with free, prior, and informed consent to engage in research. In the Winter of 2021, I met with Work That Reconnects Network Weavers and staff to discuss potential research topics and learn more about what justice-based research would be most meaningful for the organization. Over three months, I collaboratively crafted interview questions with Weavers Mutima Imani and Molly Brown, and WTR staff, Jo DelAmor. I also worked closely with another independent researcher, Marc Decitre, and received helpful feedback from Aravinda Ananda and Sarah Nahar.

My research follows Creswell and Creswell (2018) narrative research, which includes interviewing Work That Reconnects (WTR) members to learn about their embodied experiences with WTR teachings, events, and communities. The interviews provided a confidential space for participants to speak freely about the profound impacts of the work and share loving criticism on the areas for growth. Informed by Creswell and Creswell's (2018) thematic approach, I identified 20 themes in the interviews to answer five key questions: 1. What attracts people to the Work That Reconnects?, 2. What contributes to feeling connected to the Work That Reconnects?, 3. What contributes to feeling disconnected to the Work That Reconnects, 4. How can the Work That Reconnects be helpful for Embodied Environmental Justice?, and 5. How can the Work That Reconnects be more inclusive?. Organizing the data under these questions helps clearly

identify key themes of what brings people to engage in the work and how it fulfills them personally and collectively through the lens of embodied environmental justice. It will also help inform what detracts people from this work, identify growth areas to reduce harm, increase engagement with underrepresented groups, and contribute to a Great Turning rooted in justice.

### **C. Research Approval by UC Davis Institutional Review Board**

In April 2022, I applied to the University of California (UC) Davis, Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval of my research project, which was approved and designated as exempt, filed under IRB ID 1870333-1 on June 2, 2022. In the application, I furnished the following forms and supplemental information: HRP-502-Consent-for-Survey-Interview-Research, HRP-503 for Surveys, Questionnaires, Focus Groups, and Observations, Data Collection Tools: Interview Questions, Email Screening Script, Notice and Informed Consent Language for EU, and WTR Research Advertisement Email Template. My IRB package included background information on how the Work That Reconnects is a theory, body of knowledge, and practices to help people reconnect to themselves, their community, and Mother Earth, highlighting the objective of my research to better understand how it can be utilized as a tool for embodied environmental justice.

### **D. Interview Design**

I used a semi-structured interview with selected community members to understand the impact and accessibility of the Work That Reconnects. I developed the interview questions through a collaborative model between myself and various people connected to the Work That Reconnects. The interview questions underwent several revisions to ensure a diverse group of people contributed to the research design. The initial interview questions were developed with Molly Brown and Marc Dectire. The second round was revised with Mutima Imani and Marc Dectire, the third round revised with Jo DelAmor, the fourth round with Mutima Imani, and finally, the



fifth and final round of revisions with Aravinda Ananda and Sarah Nahar. The interview question design process lasted over three months to ensure questions captured the importance of embodied environmental justice and the Work That Reconnects (Appendix A: Interview Questions).

**E. Participant Background**

I identified participants through an email sent out to the Work That Reconnects Network email list of over 15,000 members and 30 people applied to participate in this study. The email included a summary of the research project and a link to complete a short survey, providing their demographic information, involvement with Work That Reconnects, and an opportunity to share any other information related to their involvement with the Work That Reconnects. Participants were selected using non-probabilistic purposive sampling to select participants who will provide different perspectives on their experiences within Work That Reconnects spaces, ensuring diversity amongst racial, gender, region, time involved with the Work That Reconnects, and affiliation (Creswell, 2012; Guest et al., 2006). Creswell recommends between five and twenty-five interviews, and I was prepared to conduct 30 interviews to support this study (1998). However, only 11 were selected as the remaining 19 participants identified as white. The sample size also aligns with research on how a sample size for thematic analysis can be based on the frequency and prevalence of the desired themes (Fugard & Potts, 2015). Before selecting participants, all interested participants received a notice stating that the interview would be recorded, all results would remain anonymous, and participants would receive the equivalent of \$50 USD in compensation for one hour of their time. Without providing identifiable information, the following participant backgrounds are displayed in Table 1 below:

Countries	Genders	Race	WTR	Affiliation
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			<b>Duration</b>	
Canada (2)	Female (5)	Asian (2)	0-5 years (3)	Community Member (3)
France (1)	Male (4)	Black (1)	5- 10 years (3)	Facilitator (5)
India (1)	Non-Binary (2)	Latinx (1)	10-15 years (3)	No-longer affiliated (1)
United States (7)		Mixed (1)	20< years (2)	Weaver (2)
		White (6)		Anti-Oppression Resource Group (6)

**Table 1:** Social identities of the 11 participants interviewed for this research project.

**F. Data Collection: Setting and Procedures**

All eleven interviews were conducted online in a password-protected Zoom room in the privacy of our respective homes. Each interview was scheduled for one hour with a five-minute introduction, 45 minutes to conduct the semi-structured interview, and five minutes to close the interview. At the beginning of each interview, participants provided permission to record. They were encouraged to skip any question they did not feel comfortable with and invited to interject to ask clarifying questions. Interviews were recorded on my personal computer, and video files were deleted from my computer drive within 24 hours of completing the interview. The interview audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim on a Google Document, saved in a private and locked folder associated with my ucdavis.edu g-mail account. No identifiable information was included in the transcriptions, and participants were assigned a number to distinguish themselves from other participants.

Out of the 30 people who applied to participate in this study, ten people were initially selected to participate, and one more participant joined who is of the global majority and wanted to share a particular perspective on embodiment within the WTR. After completing the seventh interview, the data approached saturation as I identified the common themes throughout all interviews concerning what attracts people to the Work, what detracts people to the Work, participants' understanding of embodied environmental justice, and recommendations on how to increase inclusivity. I completed the remaining three interviews to confirm that my data reached saturation. The final eleventh participant joined due to their perspective as a person of the global majority and interests in embodied environmental justice. Findings from Guest et al. confirm the validity of a small-sample size, such as this one, as the interviews still provide sufficient data to describe the shared belief and perception of Work That Reconnects as all participants share a relationship to the Work That Reconnects materials (2006). The sample size and achieved saturation also aligns with Hennick & Kaiser's data stating 9-17 interviews are typically required to reach saturation (2022).

### **G. Interview Data analysis**

Interview transcripts were analyzed by reading through the printed, written transcripts several times to identify common themes found throughout the interviews. Initially, I noted key phrases, feelings, and perceptions about Work That Reconnects and then clustered similar topics together, which led to the identification of several themes found within all eleven transcripts. These themes were then sorted together under specific questions that would help answer the central question of this research: How can the Work That Reconnects be used as a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice, as told by the experiences of current and past WTR members, and what themes do these stories suggest for restoring balanced relationship with ourselves, our

communities, and Mother Earth. These questions and themes are supported by direct quotes from the participants, as well as observations identified across all transcripts.

## **v. CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS**

### **A. What attracts people to the Work That Reconnects?**

At the start of each interview, I asked each participant to share what brought them to the Work That Reconnects. While each story varied in the fine details, there is a common thread of feeling that their introduction to the work was divinely guided, sparked by conversations with friends, family members, lovers, or mentors. Three themes related to what attracts people to the work emerged from the interviews. Participants shared that they were attracted to the work due to their deep resonance and connection to the Spiral and Work That Reconnects literature and practices, the ability of the work to save and completely transform their lives, and the potency of the Spiral to support cultural and community transformation.

#### **1. Deep Resonance with the Spiral, Practices, and Literature**

Nine of the eleven participants commented on how the framework found within the Work That Reconnects and related literature by Joanna Macy was the first time someone could clearly articulate the feelings they have carried with them throughout their life. Feelings related to their deep love for the world and pain for global social and ecological suffering. One participant shared, “I really loved the framework and the way the three stories were not opposing one to the other. It was really trying to encompass the complexity and everything. And I love that.” Another participant shared, “I really felt a calling for the merging of ecological awareness and spiritual practice. That straight on was hitting the sweet spot... It really felt like homecoming. I wasn't

aware yet back then that this feeling of homecoming is like a part of my inner compass, so to speak. But it definitely felt like homecoming in a way. And I remember in one of the first sessions we came to a point where I was encountering and was confronting the concept of not knowing, not really having an answer for every question. For me that was really groundbreaking.” These participants speak to what many participants shared as divine guidance, as they had been engaging in a wide range of materials, from science to spirituality, and Joanna Macy’s work has an ability to truly touch on the emotions that people feel in a logical, yet profound way. In addition, it shows how digestible the materials are in their ability to meet people in all places of life and demographics.

## 2. Life Saving and Life Changing Experience

Four of the eleven participants shared that the Work That Reconnects saved their life, and five more participants commented that the Work That Reconnects completely changed their lives. Those who attributed the work to saving their lives, talked about being in intense periods of depression and extreme loss of self-and/or loved ones; often described as a dark night of the soul. One participant shared, “I was able to grieve for the first time and not take care of everybody in the room, and just do my own grieving; that was life-changing for me. I got my energy back and was very grateful to have a space to just really move into the grief.” Two participants described the work as an exemplary model for letting people grieve in community. These findings suggest that perhaps many people come to the Work during an intense period of life and have exhausted all other forms of grieving and moving through pain, which speaks to the profound impact of the Work That Reconnects to help process trauma and potentially support intergenerational healing.

### 3. Framework for cultural and community transformation

In addition to attributing the work to soul resonance and life-altering experience, ten participants commented on how practical the spiral is for cultural and community transformation. Cultural and community transformation is defined as practices that help people transform how they relate to others, deepen their understanding of social inequities, and inspire them to make positive changes in their lives and communities. Many participants felt called to the work as it helped them, and others focus on what needs to shift on a societal level. They also valued that this work merges spirituality, science, systems theory, and environmental and social justice. Several participants shared overwhelming love for how the Work That Reconnects synthesizes a wide range of topics that they love in life. Again, similarly to the first theme shared above, these interviews demonstrate how the Work That Reconnects can be used to help people come together to spiritually and emotionally engage in meaningful action that supports the Great Turning through an anti-colonial and anti-oppression lens.

#### **B. What contributes to feeling connected to the Work That Reconnects?**

The interviewees expressed feeling connected to the Work That Reconnects through their stories of continued commitment to showing up in Work That Reconnects spaces due to specific connections with the material and Joanna Macy. Across all eleven interviews, I identified the following themes that people attribute to their ongoing connection and involvement in the Work That Reconnects. Four themes related to what contributes to people feeling connected to the work emerged from the interviews. Participants expressed feeling connected to the work due to the clear framework to help skillfully hold people during challenging times, the open-source format as it provides room for adaptability, creative agency, and evolution, people's appreciation,

love, and gratitude for Joanna Macy's contributions, and the practical and effective pathway to earth-based conscious living.

1. Clear framework to skillfully help hold people during challenging times

Ten of the eleven participants commented on how impactful the framework is, specifically noting its ability to hold space for people during challenging times and to support shadow work, a concept of Carl Jung. One participant shared, "I love how connective, effective, and fun the exercises are, just like really dropping into the heart and letting people drop all the taboo of talking about what's happening in our world, and just getting real right away. It is refreshing to me." Another participant shared, "these are tools that are useful for the 21st century to get some momentum and activate people around issues that are important to them particular around environmental injustices" Three participants shared that if they could only use one protocol to help build community, relationships, and address environmental and social inequality, it would be the Work That Reconnects, due to its ability to help people connect to themselves, community, and Earth through awareness of the web of life and how inequalities are tied together.

2. Open source provides adaptability, creative agency, and evolution

Ten of the eleven participants spoke directly about the benefits of the open-source structure of Work That Reconnects materials, meaning that anyone can engage with the Work That Reconnects material and facilitate the work in group and community settings. One participant commented that the open-source structure provides a permission slip for the Work That Reconnects to evolve into new spaces, noting that people can take what resonates and leave the rest. On one hand this can lead to creative freedom for people to write music about the work,

paint pictures capturing the essence of the work, and start eco-villages centered around the work. On the other hand, it has the potential for people to side-step engaging in meaningful conversations focused on anti-oppression or use this as an income-generating resource. Despite the challenges of open source, no one spoke negatively about this model and praised it for allowing them to adapt the work to specific settings.

### 3. Appreciation, love, and gratitude for Joanna Macy's contributions

Six of the eleven participants directly commented on their love and appreciation for Joanna Macy and that their relationship with Joanna, whether in-person or through her books, continues to be a source of inspiration to share the work with their communities. Of these six participants, four have a personal relationship with Joanna, and two feel connected to her through engagement in online spaces, practices, and her books. All six of these participants also spoke about their awareness of the limitations that stemmed from the work being created by predominantly white women as it leads to unconscious biases surfacing in the materials and in-person events. Two participants acknowledged that Joanna has a profound love of humanity and deep awareness of life, and only in the past decade did she begin to integrate racial justice into her teachings. Some participants felt that Joanna skillfully acknowledges her shortcomings and apologizes when harm is caused, while others feel that there is not enough acknowledgement, nor sincere apology, of how past harm continues to impact people of the global majority. These same six participants spoke of how they specifically interrogate this whiteness by supporting the natural evolution of the Work that centers justice. One participant shared, "I'm aware of the practices that are a little edgy around that and don't work anymore, like the three stories, things like the great unraveling are happening now, so I'm evolving my storytelling and understanding of the work to just shift with the decolonizing mindset, as I'm learning and undoing my own inner stories." These



participants spoke about how they center justice through increased collaborations with facilitators of the global majority, (un)learning from anti-racist and indigenous activist and scholars, participating in events led by people of the global majority and the Anti-Oppression Resource Group, which all 11 participants agreed to be helpful and widely accepted by the core WTR Weaver team.

#### 4. Practical and effective outside of Work That Reconnects spaces

All eleven participants commented on how the Spiral is helpful as a framework for life, sharing that they use it in their relationships with family and friends, activism, and making major life decisions. When following the Spiral, people naturally gravitate towards a more conscious awareness of how they are in alignment or out of alignment with Gaia and the more-than-human realm. One participant shared that this work “helped groups of privileged people become more aware of their privilege, and rather than abusing it for their benefit or numbing out, it [WTR] diverts people into places where it would be more useful for social and ecological justice.” This adaptability of the Work That Reconnects demonstrates how the Spiral operates in and outside of Work That Reconnects spaces, making it useful for embodied environmental justice, as it is not only a way to connect with community in support of the Great Turning, but also supports the growth of interpersonal relationships and restoring balanced relationships to self.

#### **C. What contributes to feeling disconnected from the Work That Reconnect?**

Despite participants vocalizing the challenges that need urgent attention, there remained a deep commitment to the Work That Reconnects, with only one respondent commenting that they would step away if structural changes do not occur in the future. While the exact structural changes were not shared by this participant, they alluded to the need for reconciliation of past harm caused by Joanna Macy. The general themes related to what contributes to people feeling

disconnected are all correlated to patterns of harm surrounding systems of oppression<sup>12</sup> through interactions with people involved in the Work That Reconnects, whether it is Weavers (similar to a board of directors), Facilitators, Staff, Community Members, or Workshop/Webinar attendees.

Despite these critiques, it is worth noting that ten of the eleven participants are deeply committed to social justice within Work That Reconnects. The other participant is not currently involved in the Work That Reconnects but is a proponent of social justice and amplifying people of the global majority. All participants feel strongly that environmental and social justice is core to the Great Turning and a natural outcome of the work. However, it is often disembodied due to an individual inability to respond when harm occurs. In other words, while many people intellectually support social and environmental justice, there remains an inability to disrupt harm when it occurs in white-dominant spaces. Four themes related to what contributes to people feeling disconnected from the work emerged from the interviews. Participants expressed feeling disconnected from the work due to a lack of vulnerability and awareness, not enough attribution to the indigenous communities who contributed to the practices, how guruism and unaddressed harm impacts disconnection and not feeling seen or safe in WTR spaces, and surface-level commitment to anti-oppression and social justice.

1. Transformation is dependent on individual vulnerability and awareness

All eleven participants commented that the harm they experienced or witnessed in the WTR was due to an individual's inability to read the room, whether it is a facilitator or participant; two participants shared, "where there are layers of privileges means there are layers of blind spots."

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<sup>12</sup> Systems of Oppression is defined as the systematic and historical disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity – while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.)

Several participants commented that it dulls the ability for real transformation to occur without the willingness to crack yourself open and be vulnerable. In addition, this leads to people sharing surface-level vulnerability and pain, often perceived as a lack of awareness or care for social injustices. All interviewees of the global majority shared that this lack of vulnerability and awareness by some white people is off-putting and feels out of touch with reality. A typical example shared throughout the Work That Reconnects, which also came up in these interviews, is white people crying about the polar bear on the melting ice, not realizing that people of the global majority are figuratively the polar bear.

## 2. Indigenous lineages are not acknowledged in the practices

When asked what does not align with them, nine participants directly shared that there must be a direct and clear acknowledgment of the Indigenous cultures that inspired many practices of the Work That Reconnects. One participant shared that rather than people stating that Joanna created these practices, she would like to see “recognition that cultures around the world have for centuries have similar practices... but not in a white savior solution way.” When asked how the Work That Reconnects can better honor these indigenous-based practices, another participant who is in close relationship with an Indigenous community shared, “Don’t do them. Bring in elders. Bring in knowledge keepers and not only from indigenous North American communities... the more we develop relationships with people who are knowledge keepers of all kinds, the more we come into balanced alignment, and we can talk about those things.” Without continuous conversations and building relationships with Indigenous elders, the Work That Reconnects will fall short on their commitment to decolonizing. These interviews highlight the need for greater accountability and acknowledgement of the lineages that inspire the Work.

### 3. Guruism, unaddressed harm, and not feeling seen or safe

Four conversations brought up guruism and the ongoing conflict between those who treat Joanna Macy like a guru and those who feel she needs to be held accountable and not placed on a pedestal. One participant shared that it is challenging to resonate with the work if the root teacher is not embodying the theories and methods. In addition, people have often felt dismissed, not seen, or heard when expressing a thought that contradicts the teachings of a root teacher. Due to guruism, these people are often targeted by other participants or become socially isolated from an experience due to speaking up about harm caused by Joanna. It is worth noting, despite these experiences, these participants continue to engage with Work That Reconnects due to the overwhelming positive impact the Spiral has had on their life. One participant shared, “Given everything that's happening in the world, people need a space to deal with what some people call the negative emotions. And I think that not having the ability to express those emotions actually causes illness in the body. So, I committed to it because it worked for me, and I think that it's a gift that I could keep on giving to other communities.” These same participants also expressed how they have harnessed these experiences as fuel to deepen their commitment to bringing social justice and anti-oppression to the forefront of the Work That Reconnects since they believe it is central to the Great Turning and the Work That Reconnects.

### 4. Surface level commitment to Anti-Oppression and Social Justice

All eleven participants agree that a natural outcome of the Great Turning is a deep commitment to anti-oppression and social justice and yet there is a perceived surface-level commitment to anti-oppression and social justice in some Work That Reconnects spaces. While this does not represent the majority, people highlighted that the surface level commitment often leads to harmful interactions and triggering experiences that significantly contribute to some people of

the global majority not actively participating in Work That Reconnects experiences. Participants described surface level commitments as those who praise their commitment to justice, but do not disrupt incidents of harm. The surface level commitments are compounded by some older white women expressing their surprise about the current planetary crisis, and surprise that it has gotten so bad in their lifetime. One participant expanded upon this by sharing, “Like really? What did you think the work that reconnects is all about? How can you have not seen this coming for decades, decades, and decades? Or if they bristle when we use a term like white supremacy or we talk about social justice. It's just like, oh, please just get over yourselves. This is about transformation. And you need to be deeply willing to transform.” This same participant later shared, “the Spiral can take you deeper... but sometimes people choose not to go there. Instead, they get stuck, stay in the spiral, and have a difficult time changing their mind... and so we can use the Work That Reconnects to reinforce them [beliefs], or we can use it to break through the other side.” The surface level commitments to justice can take away from the profound impact of a group of people coming together to move through a Spiral that is centered around justice. In addition, this may contribute to the increase in microaggressions or the lack of disruption when harm occurs in these spaces. This participant’s experience speaks to the importance for additional training on anti-oppressive facilitation, and perhaps vetting of participants before attending interactive events, workshops, or retreats.

These participants speak to the challenges of the Work That Reconnects, attracting large audiences with people at various stages of transformation and commitments to justice. One participant shared that part of the problem is that “People don’t know how to listen to people who live outside of their own realm... privilege has really isolated people.” While the Work That Reconnects is welcoming to everyone, participants are not vetted, so there are instances

where the varying level of commitment to justice leads to friction in spaces supposedly designed to hold a wide range of emotions and help people process pain. “Whether these things [decolonization and anti-oppression] are incorporated more individually, it’s up to them completely with how they want to speak about the planet.” Meaning that while the Work That Reconnects can contribute to embodied environmental justice, it is dependent on an individual's commitment and interests to engage in a way that centers justice.

#### **D. Is the Work That Reconnects helpful for Embodied Environmental Justice?**

Questions related to the significance of justice, environmentalism, and an intuitive relationship to the Earth, contributed to a better understanding of whether the Work That Reconnects contributes to Embodied Environmental Justice, meaning that a person's mental, physical, and spiritual relationship to the natural world fuels one's awareness of and action against systems of inequality. Participants felt this is a natural evolution of engaging in the Work, but that embodiment can be challenging from person to person. Through these conversations, four themes emerged related to embodied environmental justice. Participants shared how the WTR is helpful for embodied environmental justice due to the ability to help people connect to their moral compass to develop healthy and honest relationships to self, community, and Gaia, by providing an immersive framework to recognize self as Gaia, creating space to transform pain to deeper engagement in the Great Turning. In addition, participants highlighted that while embodiment practices are central to the work, there must be increased intentionality on the psychological and physical impact of the selected practices.

1. Connects people to moral compass to develop healthy and honest relationships to self, community, and Gaia.

Many interviewees described the Work That Reconnects as an opportunity to meet parts of themselves that otherwise would have remained hidden. One participant shared how the Work helps people distinguish themselves from the dialogues imposed on them when they were a child, which leads to people, for the first time being clear on their values and choosing to take a stand for what they believe in. As people continue to be honest and work through the spiral, “[the pain and suffering in the world] all that becomes so obvious and entangled that the awareness of that just, just happens, as an aspect, as an outcome of the work, almost like the emergent property.” This awareness has helped all interviewees continue a deep commitment to self, community, and social causes that align with their values and stage in life.

2. Profound immersive framework to recognize self as Gaia

While many participants spoke about a relationship with Gaia that stems from their childhood, two participants spoke directly about how the Work That Reconnects was the first time they felt a part of Gaia and understood their role as a part of a living system. One participant shared, “When you feel yourself as Earth, the point is to experience Earth's pain as our bodies' pain and we're already like living in a nihilistic culture, so to become aware of that actually what's happening is that our pain is Earth's pain. So, if you sincerely are experiencing yourself as nature, why would you want to kill yourself” In addition, three participants specifically noted that the word “nature” is political and alludes to something outside themselves, which they do not resonate with and find it challenging to describe this relationship, as Gaia is deeply woven into their understanding of who they are as living organisms.

### 3. Embodiment practices to deeper engagement in the Great Turning

Ten of the eleven interviewees shared similar feelings that the embodiment practices found within the Work That Reconnects have been pivotal towards their engagement in practices in support of the Great Turning. Four of these participants, who identify as artists, dancers, or bodyworkers, initially found the Work That Reconnects to be heady or academic, but later discovered through workshops that practices such as Council of All Beings, Elm Dance, Milling, Mirror Walk to be particularly transformative. One participant described how the embodiment practices help her “learn how to not numb out to suffering in the world but to, but also not to like just fall over in a pile of guilt and shame, but how to be conscious and move that grief and that pain through that's like a transformational practice for me and showing up for environmental and social justice.” The embodiment practices could be considered a catalyst to deeply engaging in environmental and social justice, as it helps both the mind and body process what's happening, rather than being caught up in the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

### 4. Desire to slow down and understand psychological impact of practices

Within the Work That Reconnects, movement practices are encouraged and often expected, which often means people with "invisible" forms of body trauma are left out and not considered. Three participants spoke about the need to slow down and acknowledge how embodiment practices can harm people with body or psychological trauma. These participants all shared a strong belief that facilitators must get to know their participants beforehand so they are prepared to help people process what may arise in a session. Because embodiment practices are woven in several of the practices, one participant shared that they feel ignored, and like they don't exist when a workshop or spiral focuses heavily on embodiment practices like dancing or connecting with their body. In addition, those who shared experiences of a negative psychological impact



were primarily due to a facilitator's inability to interrupt harm or create space and time for people to receive support, especially during shorter activities or with large groups of people.

#### **E. How can the Work That Reconnects be more inclusive?**

Participants were asked how Work That Reconnects could be more inclusive to people of the global majority to support an embodied approach to environmental justice. All eleven participants affirmed that the Work That Reconnects is at the beginning of this work. While eight participants felt that social justice is a natural outcome of the Work That Reconnects, three participants felt that it is not, and yet all agreed that significant work is needed. Recent efforts in the past decade include the development of the Anti-Oppression Resource Group (AORG) and increased resources focused on anti-oppression, decolonization, and justice. Six of the eleven participants interviewed are active members of the AORG group. While our conversations did not directly focus on their experience in AORG, these participants spoke highly about how the AORG has helped increase the focus on anti-racism and anti-oppression with the Work That Reconnects. To build upon the efforts of AORG, the Work That Reconnects Network launched the Social Justice Committee in 2022 to further center justice in WTR spaces and increase the frequency of justice-centered events, workshops, and retreats.

Through these conversations, five themes emerged about how the WTR can be more inclusive. Participants shared the importance of centering justice in the WTR with an anti-oppression and decolonial lens, increased awareness and analysis of injustices, a call for increased embodied awareness, restorative justice, and greater inclusion of people of the global majority. In addition, participants acknowledged the challenge the planetary crisis is right now and expressed the desire to build resilience amongst all social groups.

### 1. Rooted framing in justice through an anti-oppression and decolonial lens

Participants who reside outside of the United States expressed critiques that often anti-oppression and decolonial work heavily focus on the context found within the United States with an increased prioritization of racial justice. These participants expressed that it feels colonizing to expect people from other cultures to ignore their embodied experiences of oppression by focusing primarily on the U.S. context, and not recognizing that racism may not be the most urgent form of oppression in other countries. Their recommendations included increasing awareness and frameworks that support the acknowledgment of multiple forms of oppression to ensure harm is not replicated. These participants are proponents of regional experiences so people can meet with people connected to their lived experiences and share their anti-oppression approach.

### 2. Increased awareness and analysis of injustices

Two participants expressed the importance of moving beyond processing our emotions and engaging in a discussion related to analyzing how patriarchal white supremacy is impacting our lives, such as convening around particular topics like police brutality, illegal dumping and toxic accumulation, or food insecurity to help go forth together with focused direct action. One participant shared how the Work is not currently designed to engage in these conversations, so “for somebody who is inside of this trouble, not a witness, you know, somebody who suffers with, but somebody who is actually struggling is both important to express the emotions, but also to understand and analyze and do something about it. And it is important that others also understand and do something about it.” The other participant similarly expressed the importance of discussing current events, so people can hear other perspectives and feel a sense of community that deeply cares, grieves, adapts, and goes forth together. He shared how transformative and

profound the Work can go when a group collectively sits with each other through the pain and validates those present who are experiencing oppression.

### 3. A call for honesty, increased embodied awareness, and restorative justice

All participants shared personal or observed experiences of when someone discredited the embodied experience of a participant or when someone experienced a form of discrimination. These experiences occurred not only to people of the global majority but also to white participants. One participant shared the various forms of harm caused to white men in WTR spaces since they have the closest access to power in the patriarchal white culture. Examples of harm include non-male participants refusing to be partnered with men, verbally discounting a man sharing his embodied experience, and accusing men of harm without explanation, which leads to group bullying. Three participants shared stories involving experiencing harm caused by the unconscious biases of elders in the Work That Reconnects community and did not feel comfortable speaking up. In addition to Work That Reconnects becoming more inclusive to people of the global majority, participants expressed that there must be a deeper commitment to honesty, owning when mistakes/harm occurs, and a commitment to restorative justice regardless of one's role in the Work or social identity.

### 4. Increased collaboration and amplification of People of Global Majority

All eleven participants strongly believe there must be an increased collaboration with the people of the global majority. Recommendations include increasing collaborations, providing scholarships for people to attend workshops, and participating in the Facilitator Development Training. Several participants shared that they will only participate in events, workshops, and retreats where at least one facilitator is of the global majority and will always offer a sliding-

scale to increase accessibility to people of the global majority. Several participants shared how they are excited about the increasing collaborations with other activists like Bayo Akomolafe and adrienne marie brown and hope to see collaborations with Indigenous activists.

#### 5. World is chaotic; imperative to build resilience amongst all social groups

Four participants expressed strong concern about whether or not the world will be “alive” in thirty years due to the ongoing impacts of climate change and political unrest. These participants also expressed a great need for people of different backgrounds and social groups to increase their ability to work together. The Work That Reconnects practices naturally uncover biases, and microaggressions are most likely to occur when people are at various levels of their personal decolonization and anti-oppression work. One participant expressed, "We're going to be arguing over these things while the Earth collapses around us. So, we have to get beyond that. We must include it, be aware of it, work with it, learn from each other, and try to get to the bigger issues." These participants shared the importance of trusting that if someone shows up to engage in the Work That Reconnects it is because they are committed to personal, social, and ecological transformation and expressed the importance of meeting people where they are at.

## **vi. CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION**

### **A. Strengths and Weaknesses of this Study**

The findings in this research suggest great potential to utilize the Work That Reconnects as a resource for embodied environmental justice. Still, significant work needs to occur on raising awareness and dismantling systemic oppression for these spaces to embody environmental justice. This study successfully captured participants' perspectives about the significance of the work as it relates to environmental and social justice. Data confirms that

participants' spiritual connection to the natural world is one aspect they love about the work and contributes to their life-long commitment to social and environmental justice. However, many participants shared that they have always engaged in social and ecological justice initiatives. Therefore, it was challenging to distinguish whether the Work That Reconnects leads to embodied environmental justice, as all participants' also have a strong commitment to justice and healing outside of the Work That Reconnects. On a positive note, the two participants who did not previously think of themselves as being in intimate relationship with the Earth attribute the work to completely changing their level of involvement in environmental and social justice initiatives, which may suggest it is helpful for people who were previously not involved with embodied environmental and social justice movements. These two participants shared that it was a combination of Macy's literature and the embodied practices that helped awaken them to their connection with the natural world. I would like to have heard from more participants who were not previous activists or did not have a spiritual connection to the natural world prior to engaging in the work. These perspectives would deepen understanding of the work's potential to transform a person's commitment to social and environmental justice through an embodied approach.

Unsurprisingly, most interested interviewees identified as white, middle-aged women who resided in Western countries, primarily the United States. Only four participants were from the global majority, and one identified as multiracial; these were all of the people of the global majority who applied to participate in this interview. This demographic distribution in my sample size is representative of the demographic distribution in the Work That Reconnects community, which speaks to the ongoing systemic issues of the lack of representation of people from the global majority within Work That Reconnects spaces. The lack of representation from people of the global majority may be due to several factors, such as previous unaddressed harm,

new participants not seeing diversity and therefore not staying, or the increase in similar organizations that are more diverse and regularly provide offerings that are solely for people of the global majority. Another weakness of the pool of participants is that this research project interviewed people over 18 years old; the youngest participant is 24. This echoes the question expressed by several participants, "Where are the youth?" While I am aware of many youth cohorts in WTR spaces, I am curious about what may have hindered young adults from participating in this interview; perhaps email is not a preferred form of communication, and future research requests should be promoted more on social media. However, despite these challenges, the strength of this research project is the rich diversity amongst the eleven participants across gender, age, region, years of involvement, and role within the Work That Reconnects.

While the interview questions provided an in-depth understanding of the limitations of the work to be used as a tool for social justice in group work, they did not set up the conversation to discuss specific examples of the work's strengths as a specific tool for embodied environmental justice. While all participants shared how they embody the Great Turning and their level of involvement in environmental and social justice movements, again, it was challenging to distinguish what impact the Work That Reconnects has on their level of engagement compared to other modalities or values. I would have liked to ask more questions about what specific practices have helped them in their relationship to self, community, and the Earth. Future research may benefit from asking for specific examples of the practices most meaningful in their embodied experience with environmental justice and WTR.

At the end of each interview, participants shared their responses to what they wished I had asked. One participant raised a critical point that it would be helpful to understand each

participant's relationship to decolonization, embodiment work, environmental and social justice, and patriarchal white supremacy. It would be beneficial for participants to define their relationship to these movements and how they define some of the terms used in this study, such as their definition of decolonization and how they embody social and environmental justice.

## **B. Conclusion**

All eleven participants spoke of the profound ability of the Work That Reconnects to transform people's relationships with themselves, their communities, and the Earth. However, each person shared a story of harm caused by unconscious biases, microaggressions, and/or lack of awareness of intersectionality and the various forms of oppression, which was not dependent on race. The lingering harmful impacts stemming from the lack of accountability and/or skill set of the facilitators contradict the teachings of the Work That Reconnects and are counter to the reflexivity found in the anti-oppressive approach within embodied environmental justice. When some embodied experiences are out of alignment with the written theories and methods, participants no longer feel safe in these spaces and question whether these practices can help carry them through the planetary crisis. At the same time, as the Work That Reconnects continues to expand and calls in thousands of participants across the globe, some participants alluded to the varying degrees of experience people have with anti-oppression work, which inevitably leads to an increase in the potential for harm to occur when people come together with a wide range of experiences. One recommendation is exploring how organizing around a specific cause may help reduce the frequency that microaggressions occur, as participants may be more interested in identifying what unifies people together, rather than what sets them apart.

These findings suggest that the work is a transformative tool for restoring a balanced relationship to self, community, and the Earth. However, there remains a gap in truly embodying

a community of care. Resiliency is critical for human beings to come together to address the social and environmental destruction caused by an exploitative culture stemming from the widespread patriarchal white supremacist corporate capitalist society. There is an urgent need for facilitators of the work to deepen their skills in successfully holding space for a diverse group of people and skillfully interpreting non-verbal and verbal cues when unconscious biases arise, and harm occurs. As the Work That Reconnects is actively in the unsettling phase of decolonization, this data also suggests the importance of allowing grace to meet people where they are in their anti-oppression work. There needs to be increased acknowledgment that one will most likely be triggered in these spaces and may interact with people unaware of their biases. Therefore, there must be an increased commitment to restorative justice with clear steps to interrupt harm shared at the beginning of every event. It may also be beneficial to provide participants access to free training about increasing their awareness of their biases and how the Work That Reconnects uses an anti-oppression and restorative justice approach to reduce harm. It begs the question of the benefit of vetting participants to attend certain events.

One of the core strengths identified through this study is the overwhelming appreciation and love for how the WTR supports people in developing an ecological consciousness and commitment to adopting behaviors that support caring for the Earth. The teachings and practices help people reflect on their role in the web of life and inevitably support a deeper understanding and love for the environment and all beings. This appreciation is foundational to critical consciousness and prioritizing justice. It also helps people highlight unconscious biases if they do not see the clear connection that environmental justice is social justice.

In summary, these findings recommend that the Work That Reconnects deepens its commitment to restorative justice, providing facilitators opportunities to increase their skillset to



support the healing of trauma in group spaces, and greater collaborations and amplification of people of the global majority. Greater inclusion of a restorative justice model and increased transparency may positively impact the Work That Reconnects to help restore balance at the community level and serve as a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice.

Based on the data on what attracts people to work, we can trust that no matter where a person is at in their commitment to environmental and social justice, they would not be in these spaces without a desire to transform themselves in support of the Great Turning, which undoubtedly centers environmental and social justice and healing.

It is apropos to end this study by moving through the Spiral. I begin by expressing my gratitude to the eleven participants who showed up with love and vulnerability to speak their truth about the Work That Reconnects. I am also grateful that this study confirmed the incredible ability of the Spiral and Work That Reconnects to help people move through grief and awaken a part of themselves that had previously been dormant or shut down by corporate capitalism and (settler) colonialism. Moreover, I am grateful for how the Spiral can metabolize pain into active hope and catalyze personal transformation and connection with the more-than-human realm. At the same time, my heart aches for the surface-level apologies given to those who have experienced harm and all the shared stories of harm unnamed. I grieve for how painful it is to live in a world filled with so many injustices and at a time when there are so many resources to help heal, but many continue to disengage or disembodify what they preach. This study deepens my understanding of how inextricably connected we all are in our pain and joys, described in the participants' stories of what attracted them to the work and what fuels their continued commitment. This research also validates the importance of people coming together to engage in social and ecological justice and healing, as the impacts of colonialism will continue so long as

we remain divided, as demonstrated by the struggles and victories of all our ancestors. It also widens awareness of the nuances of the Work That Reconnects and how important it is to increase skillful facilitation, restorative justice, and healing trauma, along with increasing collaborations and amplification of people of the global majority. Going forth, I commit to sharing these findings with members of the Work That Reconnects community by synthesizing this data into an article to be shared on the Work That Reconnects website, presenting findings in a free webinar, and sending my recommendations to WTR Weavers for possible implementation. These people's stories can help shape WTR to continue evolving into a practice centered around justice with specific guidance on utilizing the work for embodied environmental justice.

### **C. Implications, Practical Applications, and Future Directions**

As the threat of a planetary crisis continues, a growing group of people feels called to engage in practices that help build community and deepen our commitment to a Life-Sustaining Society, as demonstrated through the analysis of the Work That Reconnects used as a tool for embodied environmental justice. To further facilitate this growth, the immediate application of these findings primarily focuses on leveraging the Work That Reconnects Network to foster additional opportunities for facilitators and community members to increase their skill set to navigate spaces with diverse groups of people and establish a norm for restorative justice that becomes known throughout the global Work That Reconnects community. In addition, it would be beneficial for the WTRN to create a committee specifically focused on developing a free and online database of the WTR practices and theories with correct attribution to Indigenous lineages, a description of how to use the tool from the lens of embodied environmental justice, and internal/external opportunities to support the root communities that developed the practice

used in WTR spaces. These findings lead me to believe that WTR is genuinely at its evolving edge to become a resource and practice centered on environmental and social justice.

This study primarily focused on a macro-level analysis of the Work That Reconnects as a *whole* and people's relationship to embodied environmental justice. It would be beneficial for future research to focus on the *specific* practices that lead to embodied environmental justice from the perspective of those with no previous relationship with environmental and social justice or those with no prior spiritual connection to the natural world. Future research should also focus on youth's understanding of Work That Reconnects, as all participants aged 35 and under spoke to the apparent correlation between Work That Reconnects and embodied environmental justice. Any of these recommendations would help Work That Reconnects clarify what specific practices are most needed in the Great Turning and are most applicable to supporting the broader community's increased commitment to justice.

All participants spoke about the critical integration of people of the global majority in Work That Reconnects spaces and the importance of collaborating with elders and teachers outside of Work That Reconnects spaces. This research strongly recommends that Facilitators continue to incorporate elders, indigenous peoples, and people of the global majority in their Work That Reconnects spaces and to seek out spaces that embody the theories and practices of the Work That Reconnects, such as Lydia Violet Harutoonian's "School for the Great Turning." Participants who are relatively new to the work and have only attended workshops held by those who prioritize environmental and social justice do not share the beliefs that the work is not inherently set up to achieve justice and restore relationships with self, community, and the Earth. It would be interesting to focus future research on the WTR justice-centered spaces, which may

identify specific characteristics of how the Work That Reconnects can evolve to be more inclusive in spaces that are new to justice.

In addition, this research highlights the need for opportunities for people to learn about decolonization outside of how to transform the inner emotional world and way of living. While there is a significant emphasis on an anti-oppression lens and inclusion of people of the global majority in Work That Reconnects spaces, there must also be increased acknowledgment and support to indigenous communities who unknowingly contributed to the development of the practices commonly used in the work. Amplification of indigenous communities can go far beyond a Land Acknowledgement or lineage attribution by responding directly to the needs of indigenous communities, such as mobilizing around land back movements, redirecting resources to indigenous communities, and supporting indigenous sovereignty. Bioneers is a non-profit organization that may provide examples of how to successfully integrate indigenous voices and people into the organization and provide resources on allyship. In addition, it is beneficial for the Work That Reconnects to distinguish itself from the growing trend of New Age Shamanism, which also supports indigenous communities by rejecting the growing trend of cultural appropriation of indigenous rituals and practices.

Many participants shared a vision of using the Work That Reconnects to create regional life-sustaining community centers, which would need to go beyond the primary focus on processing emotions. The community centers would not only facilitate the Spiral but also use regenerative finance strategies to provide rental assistance, education opportunities, food sovereignty, and traditional forms of healing, similar to Canticle Farms. It would be beneficial for further research to work with Canticle Farms to learn the strengths and weaknesses of this

model to form meaningful recommendations that would critically expand the impact of the Work That Reconnects in communities worldwide.

Extending beyond the Work That Reconnects recommendations, the data collected in this study is beneficial for other organizations adopting a more critical anti-oppressive approach. These findings show the strengths and weaknesses of how a founder, or root teacher, can positively and negatively impact community participation and the importance of directly engaging with restorative justice with increasing transparency and apology when issues arise. At the same time, the Work That Reconnects also demonstrates how despite past harm, people will continue to show up in support of sharing these teachings with the broader community, and therefore there is an increased need for organizational staff and leadership to commit to justice. All participants also spoke to the desire for increased inclusion of elders and people of the global majority, which could be helpful information for white-dominant organizations to see that the community wants to see increased inclusion in organizational programming.

With regards to movements such as deep ecology, environmental justice, and social justice, this research may be helpful as it confirms the capability of the Work That Reconnects Spiral and materials to help people successfully metabolize their emotional despair for the world into active hope and re-engagement in life, as the practices help people to contemplate about their relationship with the natural world and build a relationship with her and others. Work That Reconnects is an exemplary model for building ecological consciousness, which is greatly needed during a planetary crisis. I believe there is an urgent need for this kind of framework, which perhaps could help people who would otherwise feel indifferent to the planetary crisis wake up to their innate relationship to Earth and care for justice. These teachings may not only be beneficial to increase support for deep ecology and environmental and social justice

movements but could also help people address other issues such as, but most certainly not limited to, the housing crisis, police brutality, food insecurity, and disaster response. Due to the increased focus on social justice within the Work That Reconnects, it is moving towards building critical consciousness as more people deepen their understanding of the world and take action against oppressive systems. These characteristics found within the Work That Reconnects is critical for embodied environmental justice and, therefore, for creating a Life-Sustaining Society where all beings are safe, healthy, and free.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Note: These questions capture the general theme of the interview and not all questions will be asked. This interview will prioritize the emergence of topics based on the conversation, rather than the order of the questions outlined below.

1. Can you tell me the story of how and when you learned about The Work that Reconnects?
2. Thinking back to when you first joined WTR, what was exciting and what was challenging?
  - a. Why did you decide to join WTR?
3. Can you tell me about how your experiences and perspectives have changed since you have been in WTR?
4. Can you share what keeps you engaged in the Work?
  - a. Or Can you share what led you to step away from the Work?
5. In what ways do you feel your own identity or opinions align with The Work that Reconnects? In what ways do you feel you don't align? How does dominant culture impact how you identify with Work That Reconnects?
6. Can you tell me about the ways in which social justice has or has not been embedded as central to the Great Turning and the Work That Reconnects? To environmental activism? To intuitive psycho-social connection to nature?
7. Can you describe your experience with decolonization and anti-racism work within WTR?
8. If you feel comfortable sharing, tell me a story about if and when you experienced spiritual bypassing. Or another form of discrediting the embodied experiences of another participant?
  - a. How was it handled, and how do you wish it was handled?
9. In what ways and to what extent do the Work That Reconnects, and the embodiment practices found within the Work That Reconnects impact your engagement in social justice?
10. In what ways and to what extent do the Work That Reconnects, and the embodiment practices found within the Work That Reconnects impact your engagement in environmental activism?
11. From your experience, how can the Work That Reconnects be more inclusive and relevant to serve as a valuable resource for embodied environmental justice?
12. What are your hopes and visions?
13. Is there a question you wish I would have asked or any more detail on an existing question you'd like to offer?

