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REVIEWING THE WORKS OF GLENN SANKATSING

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REVIEWING THE WORKS OF GLENN SANKATSING

Caribbean Ecological Ethics: A Review of Glenn Sankatsing's Quest to Rescue our Future Paget Henry

Glenn Sankatsing's Quest to Rescue our Future is a powerful and moving work of ecological and philosophical analysis, which confronts head-on the meaning of our growing global ecological crisis from a very Caribbean perspective. It is also a brilliantly argued text and a major work of impressive scholarship. The author's reflections are profound and comprehensive as they are in direct response to the planetary dimensions of this crisis with which Antigua and Barbuda, the Caribbean and the rest of humanity are confronted. In responding so courageously to the global nature and scope of this threatening environmental crisis, Sankatsing has emerged as one of the Caribbean's major ethicists. His ethical voice speaks eloquently and fluently on behalf of a dominated but now resisting nature. It is from the perspective of what we have done and are still doing to "Mother Nature" and the major debts of recognition, care, and respect that we now owe her that Sankatsing's ethical voice soars. As a contemporary ethical philosopher, he must be read right alongside Nelson Maldonado-Torres, whose book, Against War, established him as one of the founders of the field of decolonial ethics. In a similar way, Quest to Rescue our Future, will establish Sankatsing as one of our major ecological ethicists.

Our author opens his text on a note of major urgency. The tone of this note comes from reading the "unmistakable omens" by which our oppressed planet has been warning us that it has already entered phase of resistance that could be very threatening to human survival. From a presence that had been generous and supportive, because it felt no major threat to its existence coming from us, our Earth is now locked in a deadly struggle with us for its own existence. Without fully realizing it, we have grown into a major threat to the life of the planet on which our lives depend. The growing realities of global warming, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, more violent storms and hurricanes, ozone depletion, and ocean acidification are some of the major omens by which our planet has been warning us of the growing threat that we pose to its very existence. This threat of ecological rebellion, Sankatsing links to three other dangerous contemporary trends, making the source of urgency in his voice a fourfold one. These additional trends are: (1) imperial envelopment, which we will explore later; (2) the rise of fundamentalism across the globe; and (3) increases in mental slavery.

In the last two weeks of the month of May 2019, the American Midwest was the scene of 500 tornadoes along with massive flooding that breeched the levies on the Arkansas river. For Sankatsing, the messages encoded

in these omens are quite clear. As he puts it, "the time that will tell has already told" (13). He is quite certain of major trespassing on our part, and that we have now entered a danger zone. He goes on to suggest that "beyond the differing assessments of the magnitude of our crisis, there is a general feeling that we have lost grip on our destiny and that we may be heading for some sort of unspeakable disaster" (17).

Given this view of our predicament, Sankatsing's goal is that of finding out how humanity got itself into this destructive war with the originating and supporting sources of its existence. In other words, a major part of his quest is to "find out how and when our species took the wrong turn that has been accountable for the derailment into today's frightening circumstances" (107). For Sankatsing, our phase of peaceful and cooperative relations with Mother Nature was that period during which our social life was governed by the basic principles and creative actions of our Earth's ongoing evolution. In his view, evolution is the ongoing, life-enhancing process, which is mediated by the creative powers of an organism that enables it to adapt to its surrounding environment. This affirmative and life-increasing evolutionary process is governed by the rule of "life seeking more life". This ability of a particular species to mobilize its creative powers in efforts to adapt to its environment is so important for our author that he gives it a special name, "the social response capacity" of that species (344). The wrong turn of humanity has been the sharp break it made with nature's evolutionary control over the course of human development and the substituting of our own discursively based rules.

In understanding the nature of this historic and fateful wrong turn on our evolutionary path, Sankatsing singles out the urge to dominate. He notes that "humanity has known times of relative serenity and happiness of people in the company of each other in the spirit of evolution, until domination and the usurpation of power by tyrants and selfish elites marred the voyage of humans across time" (111). This desire to dominate is the driving force behind our wrong turn, our separation from nature, and now our deadly war with her. Further, these "vices of selfishness and vanity, the urge of some to subordinate others and kidnap their fate became a plague that took dramatic form in megalomaniac imperial projects. Sankatsing concludes this crucial section of his text with the observation that this "journey into the deep past has located humanity's wrong turn at the point where selfishness prevailed over solidarity and envelopment could overwhelm development." We will return to what he means by envelopment.

In particular it has been the European imperial projects of global colonization that has consolidated and institutionalized this historic break with nature's evolutionary guidance. Sankatsing then goes on to outline in brilliant detail the many discursive strategies that Europeans, and

later Americans, have used to justify these practices of domination and enslavement. At the core of these discourses used to legitimate Western imperial projects was a very sharp contradiction: In spite of being very specifically European, these discourses were at the same time seen as being of universal significance. No one has stated this more clearly than the German sociologist, Max Weber in the opening of his classic text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "a product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance"(2002:xxviii; emphasis in original).

Along with this core contradiction, Sankatsing sees these legitimating discourses as resting on certain key notions such as individualism, competition, profit motive, modernity, science and technology, the hegemony of Reason, and Eurocentrism. These notions he finds in the works of the major Western scholars such as Darwin, Hegel, Marx, Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. In chapters six and seven, Sankatsing subjects these legitimating discourses of Western imperial projects to a series of trenchant critiques that leaves the modern Western world without much legitimacy. What is important for our author from all of this is that the practices of Western imperial domination arrested and destroyed the social response capacities of colonized societies, robbing them of their independent capabilities for creative responses to changes in their surrounding environment. This disabling of the social response capacities of colonized societies had the effect of reducing them to what Sankatsing has called "trailer" societies.

The Development-Envelopment Dynamic

The meaning and significance of this subordinate incorporating of the adaptive evolutionary capabilities of these societies is analyzed by Sankatsing in great detail and constitutes one of the major theoretical contributions of this important work. This imperial arresting of the social response capacities of colonized societies Sankatsing calls "envelopment". This he distinguishes very carefully from development. The latter he defines as "the mobilization of inherent potentialities in interactive response to challenges posed by nature, habitat and history to realize a sustainable project with an internal locus of command" (35). In other words, development must include the continuing increase in a society's social response capacity. Yet, there are complex dialectical relations between envelopment and development. Indeed, another of the crucial

theoretical contributions of this work is what its author calls "development-envelopment dynamics" (43). In terms of theory from the Global South, this is an important contribution.

Sankatsing described these dynamics in the following way: "what powerful colonial, imperial and modern countries have widely acclaimed as development as in numerous variants and tastes, in the last half millennium was its exact opposite, namely envelopment, a process of enclosing, wrapping up, of molding from the outside through transfer and mimicry" (38). Put differently, envelopment is a form of imperial encapsulation that takes control of the commanding heights of the state, economy and culture of the invaded society. Particularly in the case of Western imperialism, envelopment imposed on its colonies the wrong turn that Europe had made when it rebelled against and broke with nature's evolutionary guidance.

In many cases this Western imperial envelopment produced changes in the colonized economy such as new modes of agricultural production such as the plantation, repressive labor regimes such as slavery and indenture, the mining of new minerals, and new trading practices. These changes have often also increased measures such as annual Gross Domestic Product, which have been taken as indices of development. This is precisely where Sankatsing breaks with the development literature. For him, such economic indices in colonial societies measure envelopment and not development. From the point of view of the latter, envelopment is an intrusive process that brings major disruptions in a society's relation with its surrounding context, which had been established by its social response capacity. With this vital organic connection to the ongoing evolutionary process broken, the result is distorted, externally driven underdevelopment.

After establishing the nature of the development-envelopment dynamic, Sankatsing turns his attention to a sustained and comprehensive critique of the "development" literature. This he does under the heading of "envelopment tale in development attire" (147). He begins with the following bold declaration: "the development theories and models of the last sixty years, and even before, have all failed. The reason for this is now clear. They were envelopment models, the exact opposite of what they claimed" (147). These failed envelopment models parading as development include ones such as Christianization, civilizing missions, modernization, Non-governmental organizations, informal sectors, and neoliberal globalization. The repeated failures of these "development" strategies have led to "a widespread disillusionment with developmentalism", which has now engulfed institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO.

We cannot here go through all of the theories examined by our author, so I will only mention, very briefly, his examination of the Lewisian, center-periphery and world systems models as these were among

the major Caribbean contributions to this literature. However, rest assured that Sankatsing's critique of this literature, as in the case of the literature justifying Western imperialism, is thorough, comprehensive, and leaves it without much legitimacy as development. Locating Lewis within the modernization tradition rather than the democratic socialist one in which Lewis situated himself, Sankatsing sees Lewis' model as essentially adapting Caribbean economies to the Western system of global envelopment. He therefore concluded that "the contemporary face of Arthur Lewis' economic growth paradigm is today's prevalent neoliberal global envelopment" (161).

With regard to the center-periphery and world systems models, Sankatsing suggests that their valuable contribution was "to reveal the anatomy of global envelopment as it had evolved historically from colonial and neocolonial domination" (162). However, for our author they had definite problems. The most important of these was an excessive focus on "the binary global opposition of the exterior and the interior" (162), which prevented them from adopting an extra-systemic point of view. Particularly in the case of dependency theory, "its inability to progress to an extra-systemic holistic framework was the reason for its stagnation and failure, after a period of terminal decline" (163).

Given his interest in ecology, Sankatsing also reviewed the literature on "sustainable development". He finds it very unsatisfactory on account of its many compromises with Western envelopment. The first major problem he sees is that sustainable development "did not find its origins in the care for the planet, love for nature, or fascination with natural beauty, but in anthropocentric environmentalism" (168). That is, the environment only became an issue when economic elites realized that the omens of nature's oppositional eruptions were negatively affecting their profit making. In short, "economy, not ecology, has been the driving force behind the sustainable development discourse" (169).

From this brief account of the major arguments and critiques that fill the first seven chapters of this book, I hope that it is clear exactly where its author has positioned himself in order to make his ethical response to both our worsening ecological crisis and to the failures of our major scholars to address it in an adequate fashion that is also genuinely developmental. First, we saw that the nature of this crisis was a fourfold one, an important root of which has been our human drive to subdue nature of which we are a dependent part. For Sankatsing, this is a self-defeating act that reminds us of the parasite that kills its host. Second, we saw that the major counterresponses from the Caribbean and the rest of the Global South has not enabled us to extricate ourselves from the grip of Western envelopment, which has been the major driving force behind our growing ecological crisis. To escape from this fateful entrapment, Sankatsing suggests

throughout his book that we need an extra-systemic, holistic perspective that is grounded in a global ethics. This must be the basis for our response to the crisis that is engulfing us. Let us now turn to this ethical alterative that Sankatsing develops in the last two chapters of his book.

The Ethical Alternative

The first step in the making of this global ethical turn is a fuller and more sobering recognition of the damage that we have been doing to our host planet. This we can do by listening to the omens it has been sending us. From the perspective of this needed ethical turn, "humanity needs to listen carefully to the omens of nature which demands a shift to an ethical worldview to recreate ourselves into a new humanity" (367). Assuming that we are able to listen deeply and hear what they are saying about our possible extinction, then the first task that we must undertake is to stop engaging in this destructive behavior, to end our war against nature, and to refuse to pass on to our children such a wounded and angry planet. To desist from this destructive behavior, we will have to stop seeing nature primarily through our survival needs, which intense competition has turned into predatory greed, and begin to see her as a living organism with a life of her own that demands our respect and thanks for her generosity. Seen through our survival and accumulative needs nature becomes just food and dead resources to be consumed and instrumentally exploited. These are the set of perceptions and habits that we must be prepared to surrender if we are going to make the ethical turn needed to rescue our future.

More specifically, among the perceptions and habits that we will have to surrender in order to make this needed ethical turn are our current levels of violence, individualism, greed, competition, egoism, scientism, nationalism, imperialism, and anthropocentrism. Our author engages in detailed critiques of these perceptions and practices and how they clash with the desired ethical behavior. For example in the case of science, he writes: the transition from a scientific to an ethical worldview is critical to rescuing our future" (368). He further suggests that the world of science and the realm of ethics diverge in their responses to reality. When science is at odds with reality, the way to proceed is to change theory, when ethics is at odds with reality, the way to proceed is to change reality" (369). For Sankatsing, science is instrumental and hence deadening and objectifying, ethics is moral and subjectifying. Hence we get the need to end the current epistemic dominance of science if we are to make the needed ethical turn. After this detailed critique of the dominance of science, Sankatsing goes on to make equally strong arguments against our current levels of violence, egoism, nationalism, etc., as they too must go if we are going to make the ethical turn to rescue our future.

The next major step in Sankatsing's outlining of his ethical alternative to ecological collapse is the specifying of the "social forces that are capable of rehabilitating ethics in an envelopment-based environment" (369-70). These forces include the cultivating of practices of cosmocentrism, freedom, concerted diversity, democracy, non-violence, communitarianism, and cosmopolitanism. The ethical dimensions of these social forces are all discussed in relation to their potential to assist in the restoration of social response capacities in a post-envelopment period, and thus to "reconnect humanity to the algorithm of evolution" (439).

Finally in the construction of his project of ethical transformation, Sankatsing takes up the organizing that will be necessary to give it the minds, bodies, hands and feet that it will need to get off the ground. For this gathering of concerned lovers of Mother Nature, he reserves the term "fellowship". This fellowship is "the mobilization of social agents that can jumpstart a species-wide movement and, next mobilize and strengthen the creative forces that can shape a new humanity" (437). He also sees the membership of this fellowship as "the moral reserves of humanity", which must be further cultivated and truly developed so they can be the living foundation of this project of ethical transformation and ecological revolution on behalf of Mother Earth.

As in the case of the arguments and critiques of the earlier chapters, the above is a brief overview of the key elements in Sankatsing's proposed ethical response to our threatening ecological crisis. I hope that together these two summaries have made clear the scope, vision and scholarship that inform this major work. It is indeed a very significant contribution to Caribbean and ecological scholarship and we owe its author a great debt of gratitude and many thanks for bringing it to us. It is the patient work of a lifetime of scholarship. Engaging with *Quest to Rescue Our Future*, has definitely made me more ecologically aware, and has also made me think more deeply and compassionately about the threats we have been posing to the life of our Mother Earth.

However, as the pointed critiques that arise from the pages of this work make clear, no book is without its contradictions, omissions, excesses, understatements, and other flaws. In other words, it time now for a short critique and for leaving behind the expository mode of writing and thinking.

Towards a Short Critique

As much as I enjoyed and recommend the theoretical and critical sections of this book, there are some definite points of disagreement and divergence. Most importantly, these are over the manner in which the binary oppositions employed in the composition of the text are allowed

to influence the methods of argumentation and critique developed throughout the work. This deployment of binary oppositions can be seen very clearly in the establishing of the development-envelopment dynamics. Within this key theoretical construct there also a number of other binaries that help to crystalize the opposition between development and envelopment. In most of these cases, the separations produced by these binary structures are pushed a little too far, producing levels of polarization that rob many of the author's arguments of subtle nuances and synergies with other traditions of scholarship.

For example, the binary between nature on the one hand, and civilization and envelopment on the other is definitely pushed to far, and negatively impacts the important concept of envelopment. This binary has a similar level of polarization as that of the good/evil binary. The two sides are mutually exclusive. Nature is all good – peaceful, harmonious, generous and wise, while at the same time being our life-affirming evolutionary guide. On the other hand, the history of civilization is marked by war, violence selfishness and counter-evolutionary envelopment of other societies and of nature by imperial ones. The two halves of this binary are polar opposites and are thus unable to touch each other constructively and learn from the others mistakes. Indeed, it is not clear if nature and development can make mistakes or wrong turns. More specifically, a major problem with this polar construction of this binary is that it block the recognition of the violence of nature and the possibility that the violence in humans is precisely because they are a part of nature.

Beautiful as nature is and that evolution is motivated by "life seeking more life", we cannot overlook the fact that in nature life feeds on other life in order to survive. All creatures are equipped to kill some other set of creatures as a basic condition of survival. This is the element of predatory violence that is embedded in nature's way of life. The moral question that Sankatsing's work raises is whether our human capacity to kill not only other species for our survival, but also fellow humans because they have different beliefs or look different is a natural inheritance. The complete attribution of this self-centered violence to civilizations seems to me the work of the underlying binary structure rather than the evidence, and is not necessary for the concept of envelopment to work the way in which our author wants it to work. The polarizing effects of this binary between nature and civilization reached their extreme when their author wrote: "the wrong turn that humanity took in evolution was civilization" (336). This bars any possibility that nature could be active in and supportive of civilizing processes.

Another example of this type of excessive polarization between constitutive binaries of this text is that between the broader and more encompassing opposition between development and envelopment. Here,

the construction evoked associations with the perfect/imperfect binary. Too often envelopment became the category into which Sankatsing would put all of the problems and failures of earlier attempts at development. Once located there, too often these past cases became simply what the formal definition of envelopment specified. On the other hand, development remains this perfect category that contains very little of these past failures and their problems with violence and straying from nature, and is populated primarily the future projects, which are more ethically inscribes and thus more in harmony with natures evolutionary guidance. The polarizing problems of this development/envelopment binary are further complicated when Sankatsing extends it to include practices such as sexism, ego-centrism, and anthropocentrism. This I think reduces the concepts precision and thus weakens its epistemic power.

Yet another example of this tendency toward excessive polarization is the binary established between ethics and other disciplinary discourses. This binary comes too close to that of the absolute/relative binary, particularly after rejecting so sharply the absolutist tendencies in Western discourses. In contrast to other disciplinary discourses, ethics has the potential to be global, extra-disciplinary and holistic. The other discourses such as philosophy or sociology are partial and fragmented precisely because they are part of a disciplinary division of intellectual labor. In this attempts to define ethics as distinct from other disciplinary discourses, Sankansing attempts to further specify the differences between extra-disciplinary practices and inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary ones. However, the concept of extra-disciplinarity remained very unclear to me as it was defined primarily in terms of not being the other forms of disciplinarity rather than in its own terms.

Much the same was true of the notion of holism. Philosophy and religion have consistently been the discourses for supplying humans with their comprehensive pictures of the world. They have been the locations of holistic thinking within the intellectual division of labor of many different cultures. Ethics has consistently been integral parts of both philosophy and religion, thus I found it unconvincing and unclear the attempted separation of ethics from its disciplinary locations within intellectual divisions of labor. By itself, I don't see how ethics can be more holistic, comprehensive or global than the work of other restricted disciplines. Further, it was not clear how the call for a global ethics would not be another case of cultural homogenization or universalism that Sankatsing earlier rejected.

These over-polarized relations between ethics on the one hand, and science, philosophy, sociology, etc., on the other, brings me now to a more direct engagement Sankatsings treatment of ethics and his project of ethical transformation. As we have seen, at the core of this project we

do not find the golden rule or Kant's categorical imperative. Rather, we meet the very different and nature oriented principle of our responsibility to pass on to the next generation a planet that is not in revolt because of how we have exploited and attempted to dominate it. Upon this foundation he built his key socio-ethical concepts such as cosmocentrism, communitarianism and cosmopolitanism. In this regard, Sankatsing sees himself in a tradition of ethicists, which includes philosophers like Albert Schweitzer and Hans Jonas.

While clearly linked to these scholars, Sankatsing's ethical project also draws on other ethical traditions. These additional influences derive from the projects of ethical transformation that many of our religions have undertaken over the millennia. Thus, the idea that we have "gone astray", turned away from nature's ways and have chosen those of our own making, are foundational themes of many of our religions. Further, when the gods have not been happy, they have communicated to us through omens. The major difference in cases of these religions is that the break has been with a creator conceived as a spiritual God and not material nature. In spite of this key difference, the classic religious themes of conflict between a guiding Divine will and an errant human will, parallels the tragic conflict outlined by Sankatsing between our human will and nature's evolutionary "will". In both of these cases of willful conflict, the problem has been identified as the human tendency to imaginatively locate ourselves at the center of creation, convince ourselves that we are in charge, and thus to openly challenge and break with the rules of the established order, whether of nature or of God. Human self-centered hubris is at the heart of Sankatsing's "wrong turn" as much as it is at the heart of religious notions such as the fall or human trespassing. Although very brief, I hope that these parallels are enough to demonstrate the similarities between our author's ethical project and those of our religions.

In dealing with problems of human selfishness and self-centered hubris, our religions – Egyptian, Akan, Yoruba, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic or Rastafarian, have consistently assumed that they have been inheritances from our embeddedness in nature. Thus included in their projects of ethical transformation have been spiritual measures specifically designed to reduce self-centeredness, and thus the tendency to transgress against the Divine and to usurp its place at the center of our lives and of all creation. Ethical salvational projects were seen as failing without the aid of these special practices. Without them, the task of changing human self-centeredness would be impossible. Peace, love and harmony were seen as gifts from the spiritual kingdom. Without assistance from this higher realm to disable the nature-based codes of human self-centeredness, these themes of peace, love, and harmony were seen as being too high for mortal hearts and tongues.

The spiritual measures that have been employed by our religions include practices such as meditation, prayer, spiritual possession, yoga, fasting and confession. The goal of these practices was to bring to a more central position in the inner life of an individual, the presence of an indwelling spiritual center that has allowed itself to be eclipsed (Christians would say crucified) by the inflated survival needs of the ego-centered self. Thus for someone like Schweitzer, it was the emergence of this indwelling spiritual center within the boundaries of our everyday consciousness that is able to reduces levels of self-centeredness, and thus make possible the recognition of the sacredness of all life. In other words, the vision here is of us humans as transitional beings en route from our embeddedness in nature to an unfolding of an inner spirituality that will complete this transition by overriding the codes of self-centeredness and thus enabling us to reach the ethical ideals that have so far eluded us.

I think that Sankatsing's ethical project is subject to these challenges that the earlier ones had to confront. Even the best of the latter all ran aground on the reefs and rocks of self-centeredness, hubris and anthropocentrism, in spite of having the aid of these spiritual practices. These practices have all had the shortcoming of only being able to increase the spiritual openness, literacy, and consciousness of a few. They have not been able to effect a species-wide transformation in our spiritual capacities to consciously read, and respond constructively to the urgings of the spiritual center within. Hence the incompleteness of these earlier attempts at ethical transformation and the increases in self-centeredness that we can observe in periods following the passing of the awakened ones.

Sankatsing's ethical project is a distinct one. It is distinct from the classic religious one with which I have been comparing it, as its focus is Mother Earth. However, because of the central role he attributes to human selfishness and desire to dominate in the making of our wrong turn away from nature, there are many lessons to be learned from the successes and failures of these earlier undertakings. Is it possible to imagine reconciliation with nature without a spiritual disabling of the codes that auto-institute human self-centeredness? Can we really envision a postenvelopment era without a similar process of inner spiritual growth? There can be no doubt that the Western imperial project has been the ultimate in hubristic egoism and anthropocentrism, thus generating an ethical challenge that earlier ethical projects did not have to confront. Consequently the originality of Sankatsing's work derives in part from his addressing of the uniqueness and the ecological specificity of this challenge. However, as in the cases of the binary relationships established between nature and civilization or between ethics and science, the opposition between his own ethical project and earlier ones has blocked a clear recognition of the help that these can offer, particularly with the reef of self-centeredness, which his project is sure to encounter. Yes, it is

definitely worse among the hereditary economic and political elites but it is not confined there. It is also there among the moral reserves of the fellowship, who will be the carriers of his movement for a restoration with nature.

In sum, I am suggesting a relaxing of the binary oppositions that operate through this work as they have a tendency to create walls of separation where bridges to potential allies could be built. Thus, I think constructive alliances could be built with oppositional groups and thinkers working from within the system, such as center-periphery groups and thinkers like Dussel. But, most importantly, recognizing and embracing the similarities and challenges that our author's project shares with other projects of ethical transformation will be vital. The proposed restoration of peaceful relations with nature raises more explicitly than Sankatsing addresses the age-old issue of the nature of human self-centeredness and the possibilities of its transformation. This is a vexingly difficult problem. If it were just its presence among predatory elites, then the Marxist revolutionary strategy would seem a more than adequate response, and thus we should be speaking about eco-socalism. The ethical projects of the past suggest that the problem is more widespread and deeply rooted. As a result, they have pointed to the possibility that we are transitional beings suspended between our current degree of embeddedness in nature and a spiritual core that is still to emerge as the organizing center of our everyday consciousness. Bringing his ecological ethics into an engagement with these ideas and experiences would in my view further enrich Sankatsing's major moral undertaking on behalf of both us and Mother Earth.

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