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Richard Kearney's itineraries: *Salvage, Hosting Earth*, and *Anacarnation*

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Abstract
Richard Kearney's work on embodiment, narrative, the roles of host and guest, and his philosophy of the earth come together in his latest novel, *Salvage*, the story of a young woman inheriting ancient wisdom and confronting the modern world in 1940s Ireland. The movement of thought between the novel and Kearney's recently published philosophical dialogues (*Anacarnation*, *Hosting Earth*) is seamless, but themes of migration, the global, and the local that were part of earlier conversations surface here too. *Salvage* is a moving reflection on a time and place shaped by global histories of colonization and settlement but remains a time and place like no other.

Keywords Embodiment · Environment · Earth · Hosting · Ireland · Island · Colonialism

In the final moments of *Salvage*, Richard Kearney's novel of change and loss, the central character, Maeve, plunges into the nighttime waters of the sound that separates her island from the mainland. She begins to swim across toward home for one last time but finds herself drawn to the depths, swimming down into the water, "sinking fathom by fathom into the black, through spumes of surf to the currents beneath, to the weeds and the whelks where her father once lay." (Kearney 2023b, p. 285) Everything is at stake: her life, the life of her family, the local rituals of healing inherited from her father, the secrets inherited from her mother, the absence of her emigrant brothers, the fate of her animal familiar, and the language and memories of a community now on the edge of oblivion.

Kearney has been described as a thinker of depth, his work informed in each of its phases by the metaphor of depth. The early interest in moral imagination produces a

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depth ethics; carnal hermeneutics becomes a depth ontology; and the theopoetics of creation suggests a depth metaphysics. (O'Dea Bradley 2023, p. 86) The description is persuasive and one could add more: a phenomenological phase linked to the deep sight of being seen by what one sees and an emergent deep ecology that lodges us in geological time. (Kearney 2023a, p. 236) But I hesitate to take on depth as the single organizing metaphor of the work. After all, we can't live in the deeps, and depth can't tell the whole story. We need to think in terms of surface too, and the interplay between the two. Indeed, the three recent works that concern me here—*Anacarnation and Returning to the Lived Body with Richard Kearney* (2022), *Hosting Earth: Facing the Climate Emergency* (2024) and *Salvage* (2023)—take up this interplay and also ask us to think about our *place* on the surface of the earth. They bring thinking into place by bringing it down to earth and up to the surface; they ask us to think *at sea level*, at the middle place where familiarity and strangeness overlap, making the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign. (Jones 2023, p. 223) Kearney writes: "my task is to let the self walk at sea level with its other, avoiding the inhospitable extremities of vertiginous heights and abyssal depths. My aim, in short, is to open up itineraries between elation and dejection—itineraries both multiple and traversable." (Kearney 2003, p. 231) Those itineraries also run back and forth across the earth.

Walking at Sea Level is the title of Kearney's second novel, published in 1997, the story of a family whose struggle to find each other is mapped across countries and continents. A man, a woman, and their daughter once made a life together in the mountains of Switzerland but their connection has been thrown off by the aftermath of a drowning off Ireland's Atlantic coast and of a hidden abandonment that happened in the east, on the Black Sea. They almost lose one another entirely in a near drowning, this time off the French Atlantic coast; they follow each other into the mountains and fail to meet in the old monastic site of Saint Gallen. High and low, innocent outings come to feel like journeys to meet one's fate; a father and child boarding a train becomes an ancient pilgrimage; an academic research trip turns out to also be a search for a different sort of truth. All three eventually come together in Paris and, after all their peregrinations, the adults are desperate to share the true stories of their lives. But their curious 11 year-old is more interested in the place they find themselves in and its history. "What was the Templar Order? Emilie wanted to know. And why was there a smell of the sea in the middle of the city in the middle of a country? Was it true the river was at sea level?" (Kearney 1997, p. 231) As her parents sit down to work out the denouement, she wanders off to sit nearby looking over the Seine. The book ends there, but with a promise of redemption. Just beyond the final pages, the three of them will walk along the river to the Piscine Deligny and there, in a human-made pool floating on the surface of the river, they will take a swim together.[1]

Though three quite different books, *Anacarnation*, *Hosting Earth* and *Salvage* together develop what it means to think and move about the earth at sea level. *Anacarnation* and *Hosting Earth* are conversations with and around Kearney's work, each one involving several interlocutors. The former began as a plan for a conference on the island of Vis, Croatia, an event that was then postponed and dispersed into

[1] *Walking at Sea Level* is set in 1989. Piscine Deligny sank in 1993.

cyberspace by COVID-19; the latter began as a gathering of the Guestbook project at Boston College in 2022 and grew to involve a large multi-disciplinary group scattered across North America and Europe. *Salvage*, in contrast, is Kearney's novel of two years in the life Maeve, a daughter of Brigit's Island off West Cork. Her home place there at sea-level emerges as a metaphor for a way of thinking between high altitude abstraction and immersion in the body, a way of knowing that engages both the abstractions of school learning and the intimate familiarity of rocks and plants, and a way of existing between hope and despair. I would add that it points to a way of being between the point of view of history and the immediacy of the moment. Maeve lives in that place; will we see her survive it? Will it survive her? As the book closes, has she met her fate or is she preparing to embark on her own as yet unknown itineraries?

1 Going deep

For decades, the ana-structure has appeared regularly in Kearney's work. *Ana-* is Greek for back, up, after, again in time and space and, in his work, it concerns the repetitions and returns that will produce an intensification of experience and a multiplication of ways of thinking. (Kearney 2023a, p. 235) *Ana-theism* signals a process of "retrieving the divine in a world ostensibly estranged from God, recovering the sacred in a time of disenchantment" and specifically returning to the everyday as a site of epiphany. (Kearney 2010, p. 11) As *ana-pathos*, it allows for a sort of touching that goes beyond the tangible, "a new way of saying, seeing, and feeling over again—of sensing otherwise, anew, for a second time." (Treanor and Taylor, 2) As *ana-carnation*, it responds to two distractions, one old and one new. On the one hand, philosophy and religion have long claimed depth as their domain, treating embodiment and the flesh as a trap from which we have to extricate ourselves in pursuit of timeless truths; our bodies and their desires hold us back from the deep philosophical love of wisdom, the rationalist love of truth, and the spiritual love of God. Despite the provocative paradoxes of the incarnation of Christ, and despite the glorious history of Christian painting as the struggle to respond to those provocations, Christian doctrine leads us away from the body. On the other hand, our newest technologies tug us away from embodied, face to face communication towards social media and video calls that replace the person with the image. These are *ex*carnations and, in response, Kearney proposes anacarnation via carnal hermeneutics as a reaffirmation of the flesh as our most vital way of being. (Kearney 2023a, p. 234) He writes: "There is no escaping embodiment. We cannot get enough of incarnate existence. We want more. Savoir vivre as *sur-vivre*, living more by living well. Anacarnation is a way of living deeply in time (anachronology) and space (anamorphology)." (Kearney 2023a, p. 237).

Maeve lives deeply, but it would be a mistake to see her frugal life close to the land as primitive. She has a complex relation to her own 1930s Ireland version of modern distractions. She is devoted to the ancient cult of St. Brigid, tending the holy well on the island, leading the annual pilgrimage, cultivating the cures associated with the goddess/saint/spirit of the place, but she must fight for it against the domination of the Church. She dutifully attends mass on the mainland but has little time for the preach-

ing of Father Kehoe. Shedismantles the barriers he has set up over the well. Besides, she is a young woman and Catholic mores bear down in the form of surveillance and gossip—"Nora McCarthy saw you at it in the shed!" Maeve resists, choosing to have sex with her lover without benefit of clergy. That same lover, son of a doctor and soon to be a medical student, also presents the excarnation of abstract, rationalist thinking. They debate, gently:

> 'It's all in the mind.' He tapped his skull.
>
> 'Aren't bodies minds too?' She patted her heart. 'Mine is.'
>
> 'Well, my mind cares about things that exist. Magic wells are all very well.' [...]
>
> 'You sound like Father Kehoe.'
>
> 'Father Kehoe believes in Mass. I believe in medicine.'
>
> 'And I believe in plants.' […]
>
> Maeve wanted to tell Seamus that healing was something she *had* to do even if she didn't want to. It was stronger than her, like a river inside her waiting to surface, a tide of blood she couldn't resist. But something that only really worked if other bodies responded.

Side by side, body to body, she doesn't have to contend with the constant stream of disembodied communication we live with now. In her world, a letter occasionally arrives from Cork; a newspaper comes from Skibbereen; news of the war is delivered by BBC voices on the radio; there is excitement about new trains on the West Cork line. From our point of view, decades into the 21st century, this might strike us as freedom to be in place, to know our locales, to inhabit our bodies, to be in the presence of others. But, as Maeve knows, staying in place can also mean isolation and sorrow. A hoped-for trunk call from America never comes. Yes, she loves her island; she knows its plants, birds and topology intimately; she has heard the names and stories of generations of women back to her great-great-grandmother. She knows it all deeply but has to live with the fact that when people leave they may be gone forever, without a word. If anything, deep knowledge intensifies the pain of that loss—*diadhánach*, which she can name only in Irish—and makes the slow collapse of her community all the more devastating.

Kearney is certainly right that "those who renounce the flesh pay an existential price." (Kearney 2023a, p. 235) The contributors to *Anacarnation* in their various, beautiful ways work on redeeming that loss, getting back to the body and to touch, recovering old ways and discovering new ones. They show us ways to think like a jaguar, or like Augustine. We could tell more stories, walk in the mountains or by the sea, read more Melville or watch more Terence Malick. The cumulative effect is sometimes a sense that everything would be all right if we could just anacarnate more, or enough, or figure out how to do it in the right way. All the contributors

acknowledge that we live in excarnate times and many share a normative sense that things will be better if we can find our way back. But Maeve's story should give us pause. *Better* might not mean happier or more actualized, integrated or fulfilled. Turning *back* might be impossible in the way that the search for the time and place of childhood is universally and tragically impossible or it might be historically impossible in the way that a return to her ruined community and pre-colonialland is impossible. Her excarnations did not involve instant messaging, but her Ireland was the scene of the ex-carnation of emigration as ex-traction. Like the other young people of the island, her brothers moved as soon as they could, taking the labor of their bodies and the possibilities of their culture to jobs and communities in Boston and Dayton.

In "Anaskesis: Retrieving the Flesh in an Age of Excarnation," James L. Taylor adds a needed layer of analysis by acknowledging the place of power. (Taylor 2023) Here, Kearney's anachronology and anamorphology run up against the Foucauldian insight into the production of bodies as incarcerated bodies, sick bodies, disciplined bodies. The docile, manipulable body, Foucault argues, was created in the 18th century through the application of the "arts of time and space." (Taylor 2023, p. 183) Does the ana- structure provide an escape from the operation of power, or is power always ready to recalibrate and co-opt our gestures of resistance and our attempts to dive deep? I don't think any space is entirely free of power, but philosophy helps us criticize and cope. Foucault points to the Stoics and Sceptics who turn us to contemplation while also showing how to identify the manipulations of power. Taylor argues that Kearney follows a similar trajectory and then takes it a step further. Taylor writes:

> [The] three-fold approach of *ana-* then allows us to respond effectively to disciplinary strategies by recognizing the life-giving, flesh-oriented aspects of our existence, by exerting a counter-pressure to power through the negative, critical moment, and finally by calling us to inhabit our interconnectedness with others through our carnal, sensing bodies. (Taylor 2023, p. 191).

Salvage is the story of Maeve's three moments of anacarnation, with Kearney taking care to set each development in its place and time. She does feel life and sense its meaning; she finds her own ways to resist the pressure to acquiesce to distorted versions of her own experience; she builds connection with others. Yet, for the moment of resistance to be fully realized,Maeve would have to place herself in a history of colonialism that's signaled in the story's details without ever quite becoming a theme. She knows the names of island plants in Irish but English is the language of school. The new railroad is said to "put the Raj Rail of India in the halfpenny place!" (143) The snobbish solicitor is a placeholder for the social remnants of the British Ascendency and a middle class of converts and native informants. There's acknowledgment of the famine of a century before;now Maeve dreams of helping the poor and the sick as a medical missionary to Madras or China.

The historical forces she contends with have their specific beginnings further back than Foucault's 18th century; her negative and critical moment requires confronting the invention of colonial subjectivities as well as the politics of settlement (known

as *plantation* in Ireland) that began to shape the world in the 16th century and that continue to shape us now—all of us on earth.[2]

2 Hosting the colonized earth

In *Hosting Earth*, Olúfémi Táíwò states the case:

> We have a global social structure now, and that global social structure was built, was constructed, by trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism. And because the world was constructed when it was and in the way it was, the world that we have now largely has some unjust features. (Kearney et al. 2024, 146).

The vignette he offers to get us thinking about responses to these injustices is the story of a Japanese soy sauce maker. Yasuo Yamamoto dreams of making soy sauce in the traditional way. He cannot make this a reality on his own, but years ago his grandfather had planted cedars that would yield the wood for the barrels; the weather and the specific microorganisms of the soil let the trees thrive; he finds Takeshi Ueshiba who knows how to make barrels the old way; Ueshiba gathers people to produce the barrels. In a world built around maximizing profit and shareholder value, all Yamamoto's contributors work on a far longer timescale, acting like ancestors to each other, rooting themselves in the history of the place, and realizing his dream. (Kearney et al. 2024, 148).

In the same volume, Leah Kalmanson describes her encounter with this commitment to locale and inheritance, this time in Hawai'i. The kalo plant, which is treated by researchers at the University of Hawai'i as an agricultural commodity and an object of scientific study, is understood in traditional culture as Hāloa, the older brother of all Hawaiian people. When researchers tried in 2002 to patent genetically modified versions of the plant, there was a legal challenge and, at a deeper level, a clash of worldviews. Eventually, the university agreed to make an exception to its standard policies. Importantly, Kalmanson draws attention to her own place in the telling of the story. These are events she saw happen after moving from where she grew up in the U.S. South to study philosophy at the University of Hawai'i Manoa. As a scholar of comparative philosophy and religion, she is wary of placing Hāloa —in all his specificity—in a "happy, prearranged harmony where he's but one avatar of the greater cosmic self." (Kearney et al. 2024, 167) She writes:

> Hāloa has a specific family and it's not my family […] When I lived in Hawai'i, I was at best a guest in Hāloa's house. I could claim no kinship by any spiritual approach. My relationship with Hāloa was political […] If we're seeking a re-enchanted worldview that takes Hāloa seriously as a local God, then it has to retain the capacity to address these political dynamics. (Kearney et al. 2024, 167).

[2] See (Rao and Pierce 2010, 165).

A third vignette plays out in the final pages of *Hosting Earth*, where hosting is enacted in the text, which is the transcript of a video conversation on the website of The Guestbook Project. (*Listening to the Earth*) The conversation includes Michael Kearney—physician, author—who grew up in Cork (he is the brother of Richard), studied in London and later moved to Santa Barbara, California. He interviews Lisa and Wolf Wahpepah, Native American elders who run an Inter-Tribal Spirit Camp in the high desert of Central California. He tells them:

> I really feel very strongly that we non-Natives need to listen deeply to the wisdom of teachers like yourselves […] Obviously you'd encourage anybody that could do so to find Native teachers in their part of the world. (Kearney et al. 2024, 227).

The Wahpepahs speak of living according to the Native precept of honoring the generations and treating all forms of life as "all my relations." They describe the care with which they watered the pines when they first came to the place where their spirit camp is established. Seamlessly, they move from speaking of 21st century problems to how the elders who were alive at the time of the Europeans' arrival in the 17th century regarded the newcomers and their ways, and what it means to think of the seventh unborn generation from here. Turtle Island is their native place, but it is a great continent in no way comparable to the tiny Brigid's Island. Yet migration has been part of their history too. Lisa and Wolf set up their camp in one part of Los Padres National Forest in California but were forced to move to another after the land was sold. The elder who taught them was born in Oklahoma. Wolf mentions his Iroquois tribal background, calling up ties to a culture embedded in Ontario and upstate New York and an inheritance marked by a history of journeys, wars, expulsions, massacres, settlements and resettlements that led him to the part of the world where he grounds himself now. This is a place with its own history to become a part of and with its own inheritances to share. We should certainly find native teachers: people, animals, trees, who can help us see what is in front of us and show us how it came to be that way. Then, as we stay in place or move from place to place, we can make friends with the Earth. (Kearney et al. 2024, 228–229)

Autochthony and cosmopolitanism are devices we use to tell stories about ourselves, the earth and the cosmos. If we treat them as abstractions and tools for argumentation we get only part of the story and risk drifting into the thin air of high-level thinking. If we give them privilege as expressions of deeply felt emotion, we risk drowning in particularity. At sea-level, drawing from above and below, we are in a position to feel and witness the flows of arrival and departure, staying and leaving. Which movements attract our attention will depend on us and on our historical moment. Earlier in his career, while still living in Ireland and working at University College Dublin, Kearney edited two volumes of conversations among economists, policy-makers, poets, and others about an Ireland in flux. In *Migrants* (1990), the migrants in question were a wave of young Irish people leaving Ireland. The contributors told their story with statistics (in 1988, 54,000 babies were born in the Republic of Ireland and 45,000 people emigrated), and explained the phenomenon of their leaving with reference to capitalism, or the stranglehold of tradition. They set the pat-

tern in the context of histories dating to the famine of the 1840s, or the failed harvests of the 18th century, or a pattern of toing and froing across the sea that goes back to the oldest stories in Irish culture. In *Across the Frontiers* (1988), the frontiers of interest were the border that divided Ireland into North and South, the fading borders between the countries of the European Union, the frontiers of communication, the frontiers of the mind, and the dividing line that fell between those looking toward a nationalist past and those turned towards a global future. (This last ran between generations and communities and through individual hearts). As it turned out, the 1990s brought changes to Ireland on a scale and at a speed that few could have anticipated and the conversations in those volumes now read like missives from a world unaware that it was about to be overtaken by events. Yet the words of poets and artists address us from those volumes still: Patrick Kavanagh telling us in a quotation that it takes a lifetime to know the corner of a field; Neil Jordan finding peace in transience; Seamus Heaney showing how poetic language allows the local idiom to extend beyond the locale; and Kearney asking us to remember Joyce taking ship for Europe where he would write and write about the place he left, conjugating Irish "particulars" and Greek "universals." (Kearney 1988, p. 22).

As Táíwò said, we do have a global structure now; we have had it for some time.

3 Conclusion

By the time Maeve begins her last swim toward the island, she knows that she must leave. She has already left–twice. First, she went to the school on the mainland and it hardly seemed like leaving at all. Every evening she was ferried home by her father or a neighbor fisherman, shuttling between the modest sophistication of school and mainland life on one shore, and the simple existence of the island on the other. Books and a charismatic schoolteacher opened up possibilities, but learning can push us either way. It can give us expectations of a different life elsewhere, or providing the skills and knowledge we need to persist where we are. Maeve learned reading and mathematics but also a way of thinking that validated the traditions and rituals of island life: there was a moment when everything seemed possible. When she left again, it was not because of her father's drowning or her mother's descent into depression and dementia. Losing one's parents is painful and losing them in these ways felt like tragedy, but it is part of the course of things. The decisive tragedy was her brothers' emigration, fleeing "the misery and the solitude, the squalor and the damp." (Kearney 2023b, p. 212) Emigrants from other island families sent back letters and money orders; Seán and Connie Sullivan disappeared into America, leaving their sister and mother to struggle in the hardship they had escaped.

Each migrant leaves in her own time. In the moment, we think of our reasons as immediate and personal, wholly our own. Maeve comes of age, makes decisions, and falls in love in a world she knows in intimate detail but inevitably understands only in parts. She visits her schoolmate in Union Hall but does she think about the odd name of the village? It was named after a big house (that is, a planter's mansion) built by an English officer of the Madras Army of the East India Company and named in honor of the 1800 Act of Union of Britain and Ireland. When her brother leaves for Boston

he may have known something about a certain Winthrop family of Suffolk which occupied the land of the O'Driscoll family of Aughadown, not far from Brigid's Island, around 1610. But would he have known that around 1630 another branch of the same Winthrops led a large group of English Puritans to colonize Massachusetts and found the city of Boston? (Casey 2010) Maeve eagerly prepares to study nursing in Dublin, embracing it as a way to continue the education in healing that began with the herbs and potions of her homeplace. Will she go on to learn the history of nursing as it developed along the medieval pilgrimage routes of Europe and in the hospitals of the Crimean War? If she works abroad, will she become a functionary of what Seamus Deane later calls "Ireland's little empire of missions" or, in the spirit of guest and host, will she seek out native teachers wherever she finds herself? Will she do both? (Callaghan and Deane 1994, 42)

We left Maeve in the water of the sound "sinking fathom by fathom." The decision for life, when it comes, does not appear to come from her. "A surge was pushing her upwards now, urging her, coaxing her, pulling her, guiding her, until she breached and gulped air." (Kearney 2023b, p. 286) She looked ahead to the island, to St. Brigid's well, then up at the stars, and in that moment experienced her own epiphany,She did not need to go to the island one last time since she would carry it inside her always, and she would find the well wherever she went. The novel ends with a statement both simple and multiple: "The water is everywhere."

Water is one and it *is* everywhere, covering the planet, making life possible. St. Brigid's holy water spills out of the earth in this place, at this well, but all waters are the water of the world and Maeve will encounter them—encounter it—in specific ways everyplace she goes. Sacred rivers, holy springs, and healing pools are surrounded by their own rituals, systems, and stories, whole cultures of life, death, healing, and sorrow that a traveler or a missionary may or may not be invited to know, that a migrant may carry as a gift or a burden, that a colony of settlers might cherish or destroy, or destroy by cherishing. Moreover, all those waters find their way to the sea. The great movements that created the modern world included, above all, the Atlantic migrations that transformedthe western sea from a frontier into a place of passage.For some it was the disaster of the Middle Passage. For others it was a path to freedom. For most it brought struggle. For the hosts on Turtle Island it brought inconceivable destruction For all, it was the opening to unanticipateable encounters.

17-year-old Maeve, swimming to shore on an autumn night in 1942, is not going to be able to fix the world. We can't expect her to know the world historical forces that shaped even her own life, never mind the distribution of wealth across the globe and the redistributions of wealth, resources and capacities that might possibly set things right. (Kearney et al. 2024, 147) But what sets her apart is a sensitivity to the connections between things, between the land, water, animals, birds, weather, languages, people and beliefs of a place. She has seen the rain come in from the sea, the seasonal migrations of birds, the toing and froing of seals, the movement of people, and she has shown herself to be open to learning. Healing is her vocation and it is already calling her to think in different ways and acknowledge the plurality of cures and ways of caring. We don't know where this vocation will take her but we do know that the first stop on her journey will be Dublin, the long since faded second city of an empire now facing collapse, a city that is itself a place of passage and encounter on

the banks of Joyce's Anna Livia, a city built at that point where the river approaches the sea and prepares to open towards elsewhere: "Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the Bringer of Plurabilities."[3]

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Declarations

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[3] See (Kearney 1988, p. 22), quoting Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*.