

**Reintegrating Darkness:
An Exploration into Lived Experiences of Natural Darkness**

by

Sean Frey
BFA, University of Concordia, 2007

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Land Acknowledgment

This thesis was primarily written on the territory of the Songhees, Esquimalt and Lekwungen speaking people. I acknowledge these vibrant communities that live and have lived in reciprocity with this land for time immemorial, and the impacts that colonialism continues to have on relationships with life in this part of the world. May this project, in some way, resist the forces of continual colonialism, and may power be restored to rightful balance.

Abstract

Background: With current environmental issues of light pollution as a point of departure, this thesis draws a link between Western society's subjugation of darkness within personal and collective psyches, and the harmful impacts caused by the decline of Natural Darkness (ND) at night, via the use of artificial light. **Purpose of Research:** Global and societal issues related to light pollution, viewed through a Jungian ecopsychological framework, led to the exploration of reintegrating ND within the human psyche through outdoor, overnight therapeutic practices in wilderness settings. **Methods Used:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted via *Zoom* with eight participants who described their memories with ND during overnight therapeutic wilderness experiences. **Findings:** Participants assigned ND with characteristics including spaciousness, magical, enveloping, and being cocoon-like; and described experiences of reduced boundaries, increased fear, feelings of interconnection, as well as greater connection to the spiritual realm and to unprocessed psychological material. **Conclusion:** Findings suggest that, for this sample, ND provided conditions for rest, spiritual connection and the processing of psychological material.

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Appreciation

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Dedication

I dedicate this paper to the many people who are working towards restoring the planet from the impacts of colonialism, capitalism and industrialization; who dedicate their lives to healing others and the planet; and to those vision-makers who are working to rewrite a human narrative that contains more love, connection and peace.

As I peered into the abyss of darkness, I felt Night approach me. She arrived as a cool breeze, which awakened my senses to an unknowable presence. No longer was I protected by the distinctions imposed in daytime. Now, I was immersed in a conversation that I could not name.¹

¹ Personal Writing from a solo experience at Earth Springs Sanctuary in Saanich, BC, June, 2020.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Humans are becoming increasingly disconnected from darkness. Due to the rise of artificial light at night, most humans now live under light-polluted skies, creating an “extinction of experience” with the star-lit night sky and darkness (Davies & Smyth, 2018, p. 878). Light pollution not only significantly impacts human health and psychology, it also impacts our relationship to the cosmos (Bogard, 2013; Davies & Smyth, 2018; Gallaway, 2010). Light pollution further contributes to the global ecological crisis by causing devastating impacts on plant and animal life (Benfeld et al., 2018). The prevalence of light pollution is influenced by Western attitudes towards light and dark. Western culture, influenced in part by Christian imagery, has created a light/dark dichotomy, with heightened value assigned to the qualities of light (active, pure, conscious, white-skinned, male) over darkness (receptive, mysterious, unconscious, black-skinned, female) (Bogard, 2013; Koslofsky, 2011; Marlan, 2005). This hierarchical dichotomy, rooted in Western metaphysics (Burik, 2019; Derrida, 2001), is apparent in the social and political structures, which are considered to perpetuate white supremacy, patriarchy and dominance over earth’s natural resources (Hadfield, 2016; Marlan, 2005).

The Context and Rationale

Jungian ecopsychology attributes the global ecological predicament to a crisis of individual and collective psyches (Yunt, 2001). Global and societal issues related to light pollution and light-preference, viewed through a Jungian ecopsychological framework, led me to explore the possibilities of reintegrating Natural Darkness (ND) within the human psyche²

² My definition of psyche is inspired by ecopsychologist, Andy Fisher (2013), and includes the facets of soma, soul, anima/us and mind.

through therapeutic practices at night.³ I define ND as the quality or state that occurs with a partial or total absence of visible light. Therapeutic practice in modern industrial society primarily exists indoors, under artificial light, and lacks proximity to ND and the more-than-human world. Though ecotherapy, wilderness therapy and adventure therapy engage with ND in practices such as adventure trips, campfires and “vision quests”⁴ (Foster, 1987; Stephenson, 2003; Norris, 2011), I have not come upon research that investigates participants’ experiences of ND. This leads me towards my research question.

Research Question

What do individuals report as lived experiences of Natural Darkness?

Research Frameworks

My research question led me to investigate recollective practices (Fisher, 2013; 2019) that incorporate ND. Recollective practices aim to heal the Cartesian dualism⁵ of the nature/psyche divide prevalent in Western culture, through processes that reintegrate the human psyche with the natural world (Fisher, 2013). Practices include vision quests, night-hikes, incubation in caves⁶, star-gazing and rites of passage ceremonies (Fisher, 2019).⁷

³ This research is grounded in the context of Western Industrial society and does not pertain to societies who live in greater reciprocity with the natural world.

⁴ The term “vision quest” is quoted to acknowledge the difference between the non-Indigenous “vision quest” and the traditional, Indigenous *vision quest*. The non-Indigenous term represents an experience that is different from the context in which the term was sourced. This will be expanded upon in the literature review.

⁵ Cartesian dualism is born from Descarte’s separation and delineation of inside/outside, mind/body, human/nature. His theory, which is pervasive in Western society, positions the human being as separate from the natural world.

⁶ Incubation is the ancient practice self-isolating in a cave for a prolonged time for purposes of spiritual development or the acquisition of a vision (Hensey, 2016).

⁷ In the context of this research, vision quests allude to practices performed in non-Indigenous contexts, unless otherwise noted. These practices will be expanded on in the “Recollective Practices” section of the Literature Review.

I conducted my research through an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological lens and base my therapeutic conceptual frameworks on ecopsychological theory (Abram, 1996; Fisher, 2013; Hillman, 1995; Roszak, 1995). I justify my research through the frameworks of Jungian ecopsychological theory (Yunt, 2001) and Derrida's *deconstruction* (Burik, 2019; Derrida, 2001), which I will introduce and expand within the literature review and methodology section.

Situating Myself

My personal experience with ND encompassed the numinous – involving both fear and reverence. This study was inspired by my own desire to investigate a phenomenon that I found threatening and also magical. In my earlier career as an artist, I was fascinated by the aesthetic impacts of the interplay of light, dark and shadows, and I often created performance pieces that included guiding audience members into the dark. Now, as a nature-based therapist, I have noticed that *something different happens in the dark* for the people that I work with. My curiosity about the nature of ND has led me into caves in a Stoic's incubation practice, on rocky cliffsides at a vision quest, and through urban street-walks at night.

I approach this research through the lens of a psychotherapist and nature-based counsellor. I am also an uninvited white settler who was born and raised on the territories of the Snuneymuxw, Esquimalt, Songhees and Lekwungen speaking peoples. I acknowledge the complexities of engaging with land-based approaches that have been taken from or heavily influenced by traditional Indigenous knowledges, and on territory stolen from vibrant Indigenous communities. Further, I acknowledge that my education and experiences exist within a Western worldview which can, at times, perpetuate oppressive hierarchies like self/nature and light/dark. My intention of this research is to work towards increasing health for individuals, communities and the more-than-human world.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 provides relevant literature to contextualize my research question and shares a brief historical account of darkness. Chapter 2 also expands on the theoretical frameworks utilized in this research. Chapter 3 addresses the research methodology, including recruitment processes, data collection, analysis methods and ethics. Chapter 4 shares the organizing themes and subthemes derived from participant interviews. Chapter 5 includes discussion based on the research findings in relationship to relevant literature. Chapter 6 concludes the study with recommendations for practice and further research.

*When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.
When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.
It's time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.⁸*

⁸ From David Whyte's *Sweet Darkness* (1997, p. 23)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review is an exploration into academic literature that contextualizes my research questions. As noted earlier, I have not come across other literature that explores the lived experience of natural darkness (ND). Because of this, this review is predominantly exploring theory and perceptions of darkness, as well as providing more context to the theoretical frameworks in which I am using. I have organized the review into three sections: Western relationships to darkness, Derrida's deconstruction, and ecopsychology.

Western Relationships to Darkness

This section situates darkness within the context of this research. One's relationship with darkness is incredibly subjective and reflects the social sphere in which it is located. In this section, I present a brief historical context of illumination, impacts of light pollution, as well as some Western concepts of darkness. By Western, I am referring to cultures and ontologies, within the past five centuries, from countries whose population largely originated from Europe.

Brief Historical Context of Illumination

The world has never been so bright. We live in a time when the darkness of night is declining rapidly. From lighting oil lanterns to developing Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs), humans have created means to decrease darkness at night (Davies & Smyth, 2018). It wasn't until the seventeenth century that public light projects started in Europe, and in the nineteenth and twentieth century, with the introduction of gas and electric lighting, that urban spaces have attempted to turn "night into day," normalizing the presence of nighttime artificial illumination (Stone, 2018, p. 612).

Within the Western world, historian Roger Elkirch (2005) attributes the increase in nighttime light to humans' attempt to reduce the ancient fear of darkness: "man's first necessary evil, our oldest and most haunting terror" (p.152). Elkirch believes that this fear evolved from histories of injuries and death caused by crossing difficult terrain at night, and nighttime attacks from other humans and animals. Before light was used to offer protection, towns in Europe would employ alternative ways of keeping safe via town watchmen, protective city gates, and linkboys⁹, who helped navigate nocturnal terrain (Edensor, 2015). According to Edensor, nighttime illumination in the Western world has since been diligently used to reduce nocturnal fears.

Impacts of Artificial Light

About 80% of the human population now lives under light-polluted skies (Davies & Smyth, 2018). Artificial light is primarily used to enhance security- whether to increase visibility for motor vehicles, or to protect against perpetrators of violence and crime (Bogard, 2013; Davies & Smyth, 2018; Gallaway, 2010). Bogard (2013) notes that humans acclimate to increased light levels, and therefore constantly desire more light at night, which is reflected in the global increase of brightness of outdoor urban nights. Bogard writes, "Feeling safe with darkness is difficult when we have become so accustomed to high levels of light" (p. 72).

Infiltrating artificial light into the nighttime sphere can have significant and devastating ecological impact. According to Gallaway (2010), light pollution alters migration patterns of birds that use stellar navigation, and endangered baby sea turtles that depend on darkness for orientation. Artificial light also compromises numerous plant species and animals, including

⁹ In Europe, a linkboy was somebody who carried a flaming torch to light the way for pedestrians at night.

bats, marsupials, rodents, fish, moths and crustaceans, in regards to feeding, foraging, predatory behaviour, ability to camouflage, sexual communication, reproduction, and growth (Benfeld et al., 2018; Davies & Smyth, 2018).

There are numerous studies that draw a correlation between increase in artificial light at night (ALAN), including indoor electrical lights, computer screens and cell phones, with a rise in human health problems, such as sleeping disorders, obesity rates, depression symptoms and cancer (Davies & Smyth, 2018; Gallaway, 2010; Koo et al., 2016). Haim and Portnov (2013) noted an increase in stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, in voles who were exposed to fifteen minutes of florescent lighting every four hours. Additionally, Bumgarner et al. (2020) claim that dim light at night increases hyperalgesia and allodynia in humans, via testing dim light exposure to male mice. It is important to note that this research was conducted on non-humans, and so it's important to inquire whether the same impact would occur on our own species. These types of animals were chosen for their genetic similarities to humans.

Kloog et al., (2010) found a correlation between an increase in occurrence of breast cancer with exposure to ALAN. These researchers attribute the production of tumours to the suppression of melatonin by the pineal gland, caused by ALAN. This study included women who lived in urban environments, and so it is difficult to determine whether other stressors (e.g., air pollution, fast-paced environment, chemical exposure) contributed to the cancer formation. Haim and Portnov (2013) note that breast and prostate cancer are more pronounced in places of more extreme latitude and rely on increased ALAN during darker seasons. This rationale doesn't account for the fact that most affluent and "developed" countries exist in more extreme latitudes, and that cancer may be attributed to numerous other factors, including lack of exposure to the sun, or other stresses connected to societal expectations within developed countries. Countries in

less extreme latitudes may also have less cancer reports due to inaccessibility of cancer treatment centres and health systems that report cancer occurrence (Balogh et al., 2017).

Benfield et al. (2018) conducted a study to explore the relationship of light pollution on mood and arousal. Using virtual reality technology, one hundred-thirty-eight college-aged students (M=20.3 years old) were presented with images of three natural settings, of various degrees of light pollution. Students rated their mood and arousal rate as they evaluated the scene in terms of its positive qualities. Findings suggest that images of higher light pollution lowered both arousal and mood scores. Though humans primarily use sight to experience environments, I believe this study is short-sighted in perceiving that looking at an image can represent the other sensory experiences of *being* with ND or light pollution. That being said, this study does draw attention to the possibility that our sight does favour clear images of starscapes over light-polluted environments, suggesting that viewing star-lit skies is a valuable human experience.

ALAN has many incredibly helpful social, safety and security functions. Since the use of fire, nighttime illumination has been a tool to keep humans alive and has aided in extending daytime through dark winters. It is important to acknowledge that light at night has also aided in human survival against life-threatening predators. It is equally important to reflect on the possibility that ALAN has negative influences on the health of human and other species. Despite my efforts, I have not found studies that propose ALAN as having a health benefit. Further research on increased stress hormones due to fear of the dark (Davies & Farrington, 2020) may provide a counter argument.

The above studies consistently advocate for decreased use of ALAN. The ecological and health consequences of ND reveal that the current relationship of light and dark at night is out of balance. It is understandable that humans are driven towards self-preservation by using security

and transportation lighting. I also wonder what is lost in this effort, and what aspects of the human experience is the modern person missing in having a less intimate relationship with ND.

Concepts of Darkness

I now present different concepts of darkness to further the inquiry on possible influences on the light/dark imbalance. The subjective experience of darkness has led to the creation of diverse interpretations and definitions, and the following literature presents theories which may or may not be represented in the lived experiences of those in my study. In this section, I present Western theories of darkness as evil, feminine, alchemical, shadow and unifier.

Darkness as Evil. Connecting darkness to evil extends to pagan times when night was associated with demon-worship, deviancy and monstrosity (Galinier et al., 2010). These associations were further reinforced in early Christianity, which imposed upon night the qualities of evil, ungodliness, and unrighteous (Koslofsky, 2011). This is demonstrated in Thessalonians 5:5: “You are all children of the light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (quoted in Koslofsky, 2011, p. 6). Bogard (2013) asserts that Christian images further reinforced meaning in the dark/light dichotomy in describing Jesus as the Eternal Light, and Satan as the Prince of Darkness. Defining “dark as evil” continues today to the extent that it is embedded in our language. The Cambridge Dictionary includes the definition of dark as “the quality of being evil or threatening” (Darkness, n.d., para. 2).

Darkness as Feminine. In *The Great Mother*, Neumann (1972) connects darkness to the feminine, which he believed holds the power of transformation. Neumann asserts that all of life moves through a particular light to dark journey, but transformation is only possible when one

enters into the “feminine principal” (p. 291), which includes entering caves, the underworld realm, the darkness of night or sleep. Neumann describes the journey:

Not only does the night, leading through death and sleep, to healing and birth, renew the cycles of life; but, transcending earthly darkness, it sublimates the very essence of life through the eruption from the depths of those powers that... enable [humans] to achieve a new dimension of spirit and light (p. 291).

Neumann’s statement honors the transformational role of darkness, and simultaneously favors the qualities of light, placing darkness’ role in a position of servitude to increased light. This prioritizing reflects the very process of subjugation within Western metaphysics, in which Derrida’s deconstruction aims to dismantle. This will be explored in the deconstruction section.

Darkness as Alchemical. In *The Black Sun*, Marlan (2005) explores the role that darkness plays in personal transformation through interpreting Jung’s writing on alchemy. Marlan attributes darkness to *nigredo*, the initial black phase of alchemical process, often associated with putrefaction and decomposition. It is considered the most negative and difficult stage, but also considered the most numinous.¹⁰ Marlan proposes that darkness has healing and transformational value, including the power to destroy. This dangerous, and sometimes deadly phase is considered by Jung to be a necessary stage in individuation,¹¹ and believed that avoidance of individual and collective darkness prevents us from what Goethe describes as our

¹⁰ Rudolf Otto (1958) identifies the term *numinous*, which he defines as the non-rational core of all religious experiences. The numinous is the inexpressible encounter with divine mystery, which includes both terror (*mysterium tremendum*) and attraction/fascination (*mysterium fascinans*) simultaneously. This experience creates communion with a wholly other, shaping and transforming the individual before returning them back to regular life.

¹¹ Individuation is defined by Miller (2004) as the “process by which one is guided in a teleological way toward the person he or she is meant to be (xi).” The focus of the *individual* in individuation reflects Western society’s emphasis on the self. I want to advocate for the definition of individuation that incorporates one’s relationships of reciprocity with others and the more-than-human world.

“infinite nature” (as quoted in Marlan, 2015, p. 110). Associating darkness with death, Marlan claims that we must experience death within life to allow something new to germinate.

Darkness as Shadow. At night, as our planet turns away from the sun, we are bathed in earth’s shadow. From a Jungian psychological perspective, the shadow archetype is the unacknowledged, unconscious “dark half of the psyche” (Jung, 2014, p. 29) that is blocked from conscious awareness. Jung (1960) expands on this,

Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it... But if it is repressed or isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected, and is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of awareness. At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions. (p. 76)

Jung further proposes that unacknowledged shadow aspects become projected onto one’s environment, and asserts that one must integrate this unconscious material to become more whole.

Contrasting to negative connotations of darkness, Jung (2014) asserts value in the shadow archetype. He includes the shadow in his writing on *alchemy* as a metaphor for psychological transformation. Jung proposes that the integration of shadow with light, or in psychological terms, making the unconscious conscious, creates an alchemical wedding, where “supreme opposites... are melted into a unity purified of all opposition, and therefore incorruptible” (Jung, 2014, p. 29). Through this concept, Jung advocates for the integration of both light and dark qualities; of making the unconscious conscious for psychological growth and transformation.

Jungian theoretical perspectives on the shadow are synonymous with ecopsychological views on the inseparability of the human psyche with broader ecological environments. These perspectives highlight the importance of addressing potentially harmful unconscious elements. It should be noted that Jungian metapsychology does not lie within *evidence-based practice*. The links between integrating *shadow elements* and environmental impacts have not been studied through a Western scientific lens and thus stands as theory alone.

Darkness as Unifier. Writer Shaw (2015) proposes that darkness dissolves the sense of the separate self through shifting sensory perception of space and distance, resulting in more openness to the other and more vulnerability to the environment. Shaw illustrates his perspective by including the voice of phenomenologist and writer Merleau-Ponty: “Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity” (as cited in Shaw, 2015, p. 590). Shaw asserts that we become more permeable to the world and to the connections available when we lose the boundary distinctions revealed in light. Shaw notes that the experience of dissolved boundaries in darkness may enhance danger or closeness, depending on what is in one’s environment.

The above theories do not present darkness as a particularly comfortable phenomenon. Whether darkness is evil, connected to the unknown (Neumann’s female principal) (1972), the dissolver of boundaries or involved in processes of nigredo, these ideas don’t inspire engagement with ND. Neumann and Marlan (2015) view darkness as essential to psychological transformation, in which one must forfeit control and possibly engage with death. If these perspectives of darkness were represented by the general population, it would make sense that darkness would be avoided within any society that is death-phobic and weary of the unknown. And yet, it is worthwhile to explore whether there is benefit in being in these states of

discomfort. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to explore whether darkness lives up to its reputation as something entirely unpleasant.

Postmetaphysics and Deconstruction.

I now present Derrida's *deconstruction* as a philosophy to justify my inquiry into darkness. Note that deconstruction is not my method of analysis in my later research findings. Instead, Derrida's project informs and inspires my research in that it has opened up an ongoing ethical and political conversation about hierarchy and binaries in Western thought.

Derrida (2001) introduces deconstruction as a form of philosophical and literary analysis, which challenges conceptual distinctions, called "oppositions" embedded in Western philosophy. Rasche (2011) explains that Derrida's deconstruction is "about questioning the security which we usually attach to categories such as 'beginning' or 'origin'" (p. 245). According to Rasche, Derrida challenges how Western metaphysics is founded on the necessity to create conceptual oppositions (i.e., good/bad, light/dark, man/woman). In doing so, one pole of opposition will be considered the original and superior, which positions the opposite as secondary and inferior. Deconstruction, thus, aims to dismantle these hierarchies via acknowledging their mutual dependence, rather than attempting to destroy its opposite (Rasche, 2011).

In *Darkness and Night*, philosopher Burik (2019) attempts to "rehabilitate darkness" (p. 369) by challenging the predominant preference and hierarchy of the light/dark binary, as well as the metaphysical principles of darkness, through frameworks including those developed by Heidegger and Derrida. Burik addresses the inherent bind and dependence within the complex light/dark relationship and acknowledges the impossibility of dissolving the dualism of these

forces. Instead, he attempts to overcome the dominating hierarchy of light-preference. According to Burik, Heidegger views darkness as a constant state of concealment, unaffected by light. On the other hand, Heidegger considered light to be “dark light” which arrives within darkness (as cited in Burik, 2019, p. 354). Heidegger’s perspective challenges the metaphysical habit of creating distinction and separation, by proposing a dependency between light and dark: light requires dark to be seen, as the stars can only be revealed in dark night.

Derrida’s philosophical project is useful in identifying the relationship between binaries. In my reading, it elicits inquiry into whether the unequal relationship between opposing terms is oppressive or unhealthy to the self or society. One ethical aspect of Derrida’s work is about recognizing and attending to what has been devalued by Western Metaphysics, what lies in the margins and what is the privileged term in the binary. Binaries and hierarchies are challenging to avoid (primarily in the world of my language), but there are ethical stakes that make it worthwhile to identify the balances within hierarchies (e.g., light/dark), and to reflect on whether the current state of light-preference is beneficial to life and society. Through a Jungian ecopsychology lens, the current ecological and health issues caused by ALAN lead me to believe that the light/dark hierarchy is out of balance, and that there may be aspects of ND that can contribute to health and well-being.

It is important to note that there are differences between the philosophical project of deconstruction and Jungian metapsychology. That said, I want to address what I see to be an important link between their projects. Derrida insists that the subject is open to alterity - that is to say there is always something ‘other’ or outside the subject, which can never be fully integrated into a totality or a whole self (Derrida, 2002). Jung sees something similar in his concept of the shadow: while the shadow is to be integrated into the psyche, the work is never done (Jung,

2014). Both theories bring attention to the significance of darkness in a world flooded with light – whether the intention is to acknowledge the subjugated term, or to alchemically wed defined opposites. In that way, both theoretical frameworks justify the attention I want to bring to darkness.

Like Derrida, I am interested in drawing attention to a dualistic binary logic underlying Western metaphysics. While Derrida’s deconstruction looks for what might lie beyond the binary, my research does something different. I turn my attention toward one subjugated term of a traditional light-dark binary in order to ask: *what might a personal, embodied experience of darkness be?* In that sense, I am not doing deconstruction, but instead looking at the experiential aspects of a marginalized, and in many places, disappearing natural phenomenon. In this way, phenomenology is a more appropriate methodology for this study.

Ecopsychology

This section introduces key perspectives of ecopsychology, the theoretical lens in which I bring to this study. This section will include the concept of “nature as therapist,” introduce ecopsychological healing definitions, as well as background on recollective practices.

Psychological and Theoretical Perspectives

Ecopsychology is a psychological and theoretical framework that explores the relationship between humans and the natural world (Fisher, 2013). Fusing together the fields of ecology with psychology, ecopsychology views the earth and psyche as part of the same whole (Fisher, 2013). Theodore Roszak first coined the term in *Voice of the Earth* (1992), a book influenced by the work of environmentalists and psychologists Mary Gomes and Allan Kanner.

In ecopsychology, “ecopsychologists imagine the psyche not as an individual human interior but as a phenomenon arising within fields of interrelationships, both human and more than human” (Fisher, 2019, p. 146). Fisher states that ecological thinking is about perceiving interconnections between aspects (self/nature/society) which are normally considered separate. This perspective holds the possibility that the health of the planet is interdependent with the health of humankind, and also acknowledges the possibility that ND and the human psyche are impacting each other.

I interpret Fisher’s perspectives on the human psyche as being paradoxically both separate and inseparable from its environment. I argue that the self is the one who experiences its environment (separate) and is also composed of, crafted by and dependant on its environment (inseparable). This perspective makes the boundary between self and environment a tricky concept. The self can be delineated from its environment but is also of its environment. For example, as humans, our skin acts as a physical boundary to the external world, and yet this boundary is shifting and changing in its interaction with its environment; e.g., the skin can become wet, burned, cut or caressed from its environment, which would impact the internal experience of the one with such skin. This thinking highlights that the self exists but is dependent upon and created by other natural forces; thus, the health of one impacts the health of the other, and further, the health of one is the health of the other.

Jungian ecopsychologist Yunt (2001) proposes that Jung’s depth psychology is a useful hermeneutic approach for confronting the “psychic roots” of our current ecological problems (p. 96). Yunt asserts that ecological change must be approached internally by healing our collective and individual psyches. From this depth-oriented ecopsychological perspective, “the individual and collective psychic projections manifest in the world as ecological problems (and) can be rectified through a conscious attempt to assimilate and, therefore, depotentiate the effects of

these projections” (p. 110). For example, if we as humans are not able to integrate our destructive, murderous and dominating presence over the natural world, we may project the natural world as holding these oppressive qualities. If one held such a perspective, it could inspire a war-like relationship against the natural world, and encourage a cyclical impulse to continue to dominate for self-preservation. A second example is in how greed can lead to destructive interactions with environments through deforestation, extractive industries and so forth. According to Yunt (2001), Jung implied that the work of psychology was to reconnect the human psyche to repressed or subjugated archetypical realities. Considering the ecological impacts from nighttime light-preference, this ecopsychological framework asks to consider the ways that we deny, marginalize and protect ourselves from integrating and experiencing our innately dark qualities.

In *Radical Ecopsychology*, Fisher (2013) argues that ecopsychology is a form of decolonial praxis. He attributes the forces of capitalism and colonization as being responsible for creating disconnection and separation between once-unified Nature, Psyche and Society.¹² He states that ecopsychologists are responsible for re-integrating these currently disparate aspects within industrialized and modern society through recollective and critical ecopsychology practices. *Recollective Ecopsychology* aims to fuse Nature and Psyche, by reawakening the non-human world within the Western human psyche, and to support humans to more deeply relate to the intelligence, creativity and soul of the more-than-human world. *Critical Ecopsychology* focuses on re-integrating Society with Psyche, and Society with Nature, to address “the suffering

¹² Fisher (2019) chose to capitalize these three terms “as a sign that they are questionable abstractions, the products of a historical splitting off or alienation from the other two regions” (p. 146)

and destruction historically visited upon both human and non-human life under ruling systems such as the modern capitalist order” (Fisher, 2019, p.147).

This research focuses on Recollective Ecopsychotherapy, and addresses the critical dimensions of society only through acknowledging and proposing the integration of predominant discarded aspects in Western Society, which I believe, could have social ramifications. The subjugation of darkness needs to be further addressed on a racial and gender basis. Though I am acknowledging the importance of critical race and gender explorations, (and indeed, deconstruction has been mobilized politically to address these dimensions of subjugation), my research focuses more specifically on one’s relationship with ND within nature-based therapeutic practices.

Nature as Co-therapist.

The concept of *nature as co-therapist* suggests that the natural world can play a role in therapeutic process (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Harper et al., 2019). For example, the potential for therapeutic relationships between humans and the natural world is explored in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Abram, 1996). In this pivotal book, ecologist and philosopher, David Abram drew on the work of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty to propose that the human *body*, rather than human *thought*, is the singular critical structure that inhabits the phenomenological field. Abram suggested that the human body exists and relates within the *life-world*, which is the world of immediate experience: “the real world... is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through many different angles” (p. 39). Abram highlighted Merleau-Ponty’s theory that the earthly objects of our perception are entities, which animates our sensory world, and create inter-communication beyond thought or awareness. Abram (1996) wrote, “we can not avoid speaking of the phenomenon as an active, animate entity

with which we find ourselves engaged” (p. 56). Abram argued that we become open to engage in communication with the living vitality of the earth when we inhabit the role of the sensing, human animal. Viewing the human body as both *sensible* and *sensitive* opens up the possibilities that the natural world can have profound impact on human life, and that interaction with natural phenomena, like ND, may provide opportunity for therapeutic impact.

Ecopsychology Definitions of Healing.

Healing is a deeply subjective and personal experience. Healing is traditionally referred to as a process or processes that involve reclaiming wholeness, being in connection or transcending suffering (Egnew, 2005). In ecopsychology, such definitions extend beyond the self’s experience to encompass the broader, more-than-human environments. Processes of healing include acknowledging humanity’s place in the *web of life*,¹³ and attending to these relationships (Abram, 1996; Fisher, 2013; Hillman, 1995; Roszak, 1995). Fisher (2013) states that healing through recollective practices involves “recalling how our human psyches are embedded in and nurtured by the larger psyche of nature” (p. 13), and includes the “human art of revering, giving back to, and maintaining reciprocal relations with an animate natural world” (p. 14). For Hillman (1995), this is both “a journey to the interior, [and] a harmonizing with the environmental world” (p. xix), meaning one must tend both to their interiority as well as to their relationship with the more-than-human world. Some ecopsychologists view ecological issues as the result of unprocessed unconscious needs and desires projected onto the environment (Roszak, 1995; Yunt, 2001). As such, healing includes acknowledging and processing unconscious psychic material.

¹³ The *web of life* is defined as “a powerful representation encapsulating connectivity amongst elements” (Bascompte, 2019, p.417)

Recollective practices

In the following section, I explore literature pertaining to recollective practices, which aim to heal Western culture's Nature/Psyche split (Fisher, 2013; 2019). The intentions of these activities are to help us remember that the human psyche is part of, and nurtured by the larger psyche of nature, and to "recollect" our knowing of how to be in reciprocal relationship with the animate natural world (Fisher, 2013). According to Fisher (2013), these practices invite humans into unfamiliar "zones of reality" (p. 13) in which possibilities open for communicating and interacting with the more-than-human world. As earlier stated, this research focuses on the relationships with ND within the recollective practice of the non-Indigenous vision quest. The following paragraph describes its historical and cultural influences.

To give some historical context, the participants in my study were engaging in practices that are influenced by a tradition of vision questing. French ethnographer, van Gennep (1960) is credited within the Western academy for introducing the term *rites of passage* in his seminal work *Les rites de passage*. Through studying various Indigenous cultures around the world, van Gennep (1960) proposed that the transitory rites from adolescence to adulthood follows a consistent sequence of stages, (e.g., rites of passage, rites of transition, rites of incorporation and re-entry into society). In North America, Indigenous vision quests, though diverse, are considered a transitional rite of passage (Rumi, 2020). The Indigenous vision quest marks a time when an individual ventures solo into the natural world to seek guidance from the Creator to discover "who they are, their place in the circle of life, and what their role will be in their society" (Rumi, 2020, p .60). Van Gennep's work, and traditional Indigenous vision quests, have influenced the creation of many non-Indigenous programs in North America, many adopting the borrowed name *vision quest*. (Ferguson, 1999; Foster, 1987; Stephenson, 2003). Steven Foster

(1987), cofounder of School of Lost Borders, proposed that the vision quest introduces the initiate into the “intuitive, psychic and mysterious darkness of his inner being” for purposes of personal transformation (para. 9). These programs have additionally adopted frameworks drawn from the writings about non-Western ritual and ceremony by anthropologists Victor Turner, Merces Eliade, and Joseph Campbell (Norris, 2011). In this study, research findings emerge from these types of recollective practices.

It is to be noted that though my research is an inquiry into ND, I am not necessarily advocating for vision questing. Instead, I will introduce some critiques of these practices within a non-Indigenous context. Stephenson (2003) challenges these approaches by stating that the non-Indigenous re-creation of the traditional Indigenous rites of passage extracts traditional knowledge from its appropriate context and perpetuates the notion of individualism. He states that many traditional rites were performed by and for the entire community, and that without the presence of social and community transformation, the individual will not be able to successfully adopt a new role in society. Additionally, Grimes (2000) indicates that van Gennep and Eliade’s theories are “an invention... *imposed* rather than discovered” (p. 107). He believes that the current Western ideas of initiation are constructed, and that programs run by non-Indigenous people, like at the School of Lost Borders, misinterpret van Gennep’s work (Grimes, 2000). In *Crossing the Threshold Mindfully*, Norris (2011) supports similar findings. He states that many adventure therapists have incorporated Indigenous spiritual traditions and customs without the context in which they are created, neglecting the place, family, community, relationships, and reciprocity that are embedded in these traditions. Norris highlights the writing of Vizedom, who claims that the absence of rites of passage in Western culture is reflective of the social system that we live in, and that practicing such rites is incongruent with the larger structures of society.

Norris (2011) states that appropriation of Indigenous cultural practices is “unethical and ineffective” (p. 109) and is an extension of colonization. In this research, I acknowledge the messy terrain of these recollective practices that strive to reconnect humans to the natural world, and continue to centre my research on the lived experiences of ND.

Literature Discussion

Though concepts of darkness are diverse, it is important to acknowledge how darkness has largely been devalued, both metaphorically and materially, over the last few centuries in industrialized modern society (Davies & Smyth, 2018). Derrida argues that Western metaphysics creates a light/dark binary, placing more value in qualities of light (Burik, 2019). Through a Jungian ecopsychological lens, the subjugation of darkness is revealed through our current issues of light-pollution, which has had both ecological impacts (Davies & Smyth, 2018), and likely impacts on human health and well-being ((Bumgarner et al., 2020; Haim & Portnov, 2013; Kloog et al., 2010; Koo et al., 2016). The work of ecopsychology is to heal a split that, in Western metaphysics, has traditionally devalued darkness, and to reconfigure and reintegrate it into society and the human psyche. Similarly, through a Jungian theoretical framework, the invitation is to integrate the shadow aspects of self and society, in order to move towards greater healing on a personal, collective and planetary level. Recollective practices (Fisher, 2013; 2019), such as non-Indigenous vision quests, though contentious, engage with ND and may support this. In this study I will be using an ecopsychological framework to explore individuals’ lived experiences of darkness.

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

*To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.¹⁴*

¹⁴ Wendell Barry's *To Know the Dark* (1998, p. 68)

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodology used to respond to my research question: *What do individuals report as lived experiences of Natural Darkness (ND)?* Grounded in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011), I conducted this research in a way that highlights individuals' personal and unique descriptions about their experiences, which was analyzed using thematic networks (Attride-Sterling, 2001). In this chapter, I will describe the theoretical framework, the data collection methods and process, as well as how I analyzed the data. I will then address trustworthiness in hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, as well speak to processes of reflexivity and ethical considerations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework informs the methods in which the research is conducted. To respond to my research question about lived experiences of ND, I have chosen to use a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological methodology. In this section, I explain the reasoning behind my choice of theoretical framework, introduce the history of hermeneutic phenomenology, as well as highlight ways in which phenomenology is grounded in ecopsychology.

I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method for the following reasons:

- 1) As revealed in the literature, concepts and experiences of darkness are subjective. This subjectivity infers that there are multiple truths about the essence of darkness. One's relationship to darkness is informed by one's ontology and therefore is interpretive.

- 2) Phenomenology is deeply woven into the theoretical structures of ecopsychology.

Interpretive phenomenology, like ecopsychology, works to heal the Cartesian split of human/nature and inner/outer worlds by acknowledging the concept of *Dasein, the being-in-the-world* (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This orientation positions the researcher within the context of the research, and denies neutrality and objectivity.

- 3) I view humans and non-humans as creative agents, and believe that meaning is co-created rather than discovered.

Hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology research is conducted to create meaning and understanding of experience (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). The meaning of experience is sought through creating themes and interpreting data, and gives less importance to the described phenomena itself. Sloan and Bowe (2013) write that “the viewpoint of hermeneutic phenomenology highlights is a belief in the importance and primacy of subjective consciousness, an understanding of consciousness as active – as meaning-bestowing” (p. 1297).

History of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, meaning *interpretation*, was used to make meaning in modern and ancient Greece (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). The term derives from Hermes, a trickster-like character and messenger of the gods, who offered mortals interpretations of divine messages. Hermeneutic phenomenology was influenced by Edmund Husserl’s descriptive or transcendental phenomenology (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011; Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Husserl countered positivist¹⁵ scientific views of objects existing in external reality without an experiencing

¹⁵ Positivism is a philosophical system that believes that truth can be identified through scientific, mathematical or logical inquiry.

consciousness, and instead offered the idea that essences of phenomenon could be discovered through exploring human experience (Groenewald, 2004). He introduced the idea that *transcendental knowledge*, truth in its pure form, could be achieved when a researcher brackets, and *transcends* biases, beliefs and preconceptions (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). Martin Heidegger, the founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, alternatively, did not believe that the researcher or observer could rid themselves of “essence-identification” with the phenomena, or approach inquiry from a place of neutrality (Sloan & Bowe, 2013, p. 1294). He denied the possibility of uncovering transcendental essences and universal truth and instead focused on understanding individuals’ subjective experiences to create meaning. Heidegger’s phenomenology, the methodological approach for my study, offers the concept of *Dasein*, which is the “fundamental structure of *Being* (in-the-world)” (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, p. 2). *Dasein* is unitary, whole, and of the world, which contradicts Husserl’s view that consciousness can be separate from external reality.

Phenomenology and Ecopsychology

Phenomenology is considered by Abram (1996) as a research modality that “suggests that the human mind (is) thoroughly dependent upon (and thoroughly influenced by) our forgotten relation with the encompassing earth” (p. xi). Abram implies that counter to mathematics-based sciences, phenomenology describes the world through its interactions with our sensing bodies. Hermeneutic phenomenology, which assumes that meaning is created through experience, allows the possibility for plurality of consciousness beyond that of the human. This opens the opportunity to expand beyond notions of anthropocentrism to include an animistic, living, conscious world (Abram, 1996; Fisher, 2013). Fisher (2013) writes that the subjectivity of the researcher, identified in hermeneutic research, is a necessary philosophical

approach as it acknowledges the individual consciousness (of the researcher) as being-in-the world.

Data Collection Methods and Process

The phenomena studied in this research are the subjectively reported experiences of individuals described relationships with ND, and specifically focused on their descriptions of solo overnight wilderness experiences.¹⁶ Through this process, I have become aware that the intention of defining a phenomenon, like ND, is a challenging venture as it entails defining a presence which is most articulated by its polar absence (light). I also want to make a case that even though something is undefinable, it does not mean that it is without existence. Derrida similarly suggests that the world is “not completely intelligible”, and that there is existence in darkness, which extends beyond reason and knowing (Hadfield, 2016, para. 14). This concept is understood in Hinduism which views Shiva energy as non-being but also the source of everything (Dye, 1980). Despite this challenge, I argue that experiences of ND are worthy phenomena to put attention on, even though defining ND may not reflect its entirety.

The section includes participant recruitment, participant demographics, and the phenomenological interview process.

Participant Recruitment

I recruited eight adult individuals who have participated in overnight recollective practices within the past four years in North America. Participants were recruited through personal and professional contacts who are localized on Vancouver Island. I purposively chose

¹⁶ I define wilderness as a rural area with little to no disturbance by human activity.

eight participants who met the above criteria from ten people who replied to my recruitment email. Within these responses, I sought racial, gender, age and class diversity, but unfortunately, as noted in the demographic section, the respondents lacked racial diversity.

Participants were offered \$50 gift certificates to Mountain Equipment Co-op for their participation in the interview. Based on Vandermause and Fleming's (2011) recommendations, I informed interviewees about my interest in speaking to them about their experiences with ND beforehand, to allow opportunity to prepare before the interview. Further, I had interviewees sign an informed consent agreement, adapted by the phenomenology methods outlined by Groenewald (2004), which include the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of the research, the voluntary nature of research participation, and the procedures used to protect confidentiality.

Participant Demographics

As this research is not seeking universal truths, but rather subjective descriptions of ND experiences from interviewees, I will provide participant demographic information so that, as a reader, you have more context to the voices represented in this study.

The eight participants live on Vancouver Island, are predominantly white (except for one woman with part-Indigenous ancestry), and between the ages of 32 and 68. Most participants mentioned that they have participated in more than one recollective ND practice. This particular group expressed high levels of comfort in wilderness settings and half the participants have lived in environments with little to no light pollution.

Half the participants identified as cisgender females, and half as cisgender males. Over half are parents. Participants have various occupations: half are employed as counsellors or coaches; three work or have worked in public health; one raises a large family; and one works in

the realm of business operations. Four participants have worked in the field of outdoor recreation. Nearly all participants described themselves as being “privileged”.

All but one participant spoke about their experience in a three-to-four-day vision quest, and many shared significant experiences with ND outside of this context. Finally, all participants were not consuming food during their recollective practice.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Interview

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the eight interviewees based on hermeneutic phenomenological interview methods (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). In a hermeneutic interview, the interviewer seeks to understand the interviewee’s experience of *being*, through the sharing of stories (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). The researcher works to interpret the interviewee’s meaning and understanding of their experience. The interviewer’s knowledge and experiences are not bracketed, allowing the interview to be co-created by both parties. Interviews lasted between thirty-five and sixty minutes, and were conducted and recorded with the video-conference technology Zoom.

In my first three interviews, I asked participants the question: *What is the relationship with Natural Darkness and Healing?* I soon realized that this was a challenging question for interviewees to answer because it inspired interpretations rather than descriptions of experiences. I then shifted focus to explore their lived experiences of ND. I focused on the following categories:

- 1) The context of the recollective practice with ND;
- 2) Personal stories involving ND during the recollective practice;
- 3) If and how the interviewee experienced healing through ND;

- 4) Interviewee's personal definitions of healing.

Data Analysis

I will now speak to the process of data analysis. After transcribing the audio generated by the Zoom video interview verbatim, I engaged in interpretive data analysis methods based on Attride-Sterling's (2001) proposal of thematic networks. These networks offer a "web-like network as an organizing principle and a representational means in going from text to interpretation" (Attride-Sterling, 2001, p. 388). Throughout the process of repeatedly listening to the audio recordings, as well as reading the interview transcriptions, data was analyzed to create meaning about the interviewee's experiences with ND.

I used the following steps for data analysis: coding material; identifying themes; constructing thematic networks; and finally, describing, exploring and interpreting patterns. I represented the themes and subthemes via a mind map, as recommended by Attride-Sterling's (2001) to visually see the relationships between identified themes and subthemes.

Establishing Quality/Trustworthiness

Hermeneutic research differs from other natural sciences in terms of validity and rigour. In Hermeneutics, the rigour is not expressed through its "strict adherence to an inflexible method" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 172), or the ability to replicate the findings, but rather in its ability to contribute to the topic. Interpretations in hermeneutics cannot be duplicated, or lead to universal truths and final interpretations (Moules et al., 2015). The work of the researcher is to represent the described experiences of the interviewees, and to document the meanings that are co-created in the process. Accordingly, this research does not aim to solve problems, but instead works to offer different ways of understanding a phenomenon. Additionally, in my analysis, my

intention was to represent experiences of the participants. The themes and subthemes were created to include vast and diverse experiences rather than to articulate uniformity within the eight participants. Some subthemes represent the majority of participants, while other subthemes include only a smaller sample. I have done my best to create order out of participants' broad experiences, and additionally acknowledge that human experiences are irreducible to categories.

In order to establish trustworthiness in hermeneutic analysis, it is important to be transparent about the interpretation process (Whitehead, 2004). This can be achieved through including researcher's rationale of interpretation and actual data collected. Whitehead (2004) states that "hermeneutic phenomenology tries to address [trustworthiness] by remaining close to the original text and uncovering biases for the scrutiny of others" (p. 514). In order to be transparent about the original data, and potential biases, I have included extensive quotations of participants' words in the findings chapter and write about my insights and subjective position in the reflexivity section. Additionally, committee members, as well as other readers, have reflected blind spots in my writing. These were considered and led to the reworking of my analysis.

Reflexivity and Insights

As knowledge is co-created in hermeneutic phenomenology, the intention is to not remove biases but to be transparent with them in order to minimize their impact on interpretations (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). One method to ensure that the analysis represents participants' experience is to receive feedback from the research participants. Due to time limitations, this important step was not taken. Committee members offered feedback in places where they questioned how participants meanings were being interpreted, as well as where they believed that my biases were steering the interpretations.

Researcher Context and Subjective Positionality. To honour transparency, I will now share some insights connected to my subjective positioning captured throughout the data collection and analysis process. Goffman (1959) states that the researcher must be cognisant of how their social characteristics impact data collection. I was aware of moments when I had the inclination to respond to interviewees as a psychotherapist rather than a researcher. This appeared through my impulse to support emotional experiences and processes, by emphasizing conditions of safety, and prioritizing relationship in the interview process. I believe that this approach, at times, steered the interview from my research question. Also noted was my position of insider in the research. To mitigate the harmful impacts of having pre-existing relationships with some of the participants, I acknowledged the dual roles, emphasized confidentiality, and was transparent about the potential impacts of our dual relationships. A possible benefit of being an insider is that I have a more nuanced understanding of the context of their experiences (Teusner, 2020). Disadvantages include that “an insider researcher can be seen as too close to the data, may assume too much during an interview process, and may not challenge the responses as would a researcher with an external positioning” (Teusner, 2020, p. 6).

Further, a committee member reflected that I had overlooked an aspect in the research data in my analysis. In enacting the bias that *nature is healing*, I did not integrate some data that reflected a different reality, one in which nature can be destructive, and even traumatic in some situations. In uncovering this bias, I edited my analysis with a larger lens than when I started.

Due to my personal experiences with fear in overnight wilderness contexts, I also made assumptions that fear would play a larger role in their experiences. I also noted that my personal interest in spirituality likely placed increased attention on participant’s described experiences, thus potentially generating more data on this subject.

Ethical Considerations

Data and information related to this study was handled with accordance with ethical guidelines of The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) at the University of Victoria (#20-0582). Ethical considerations included acquiring informed consent through written documents from interviewees to share their stories under a pseudonym, protection of confidentiality, data storage and recruitment. Based on the recommendation from Josselson (2007), the research participants had the right to withdraw their involvement at any time throughout the process.

Cardano (2020) suggests that researchers follow three general principles in qualitative research: “minimization of harm, respect for autonomy, and that of confidentiality” (p. 69). Attempts to minimize harm was approached by creating a warm and welcoming interview environment, providing clear intentions of the process, and clear time expectations. Autonomy was addressed by informing participants of their right to disclose or withhold information throughout the interview. Finally, I attended to confidentiality by having participants choose a pseudonym for their name and through excluding detailed information that would reveal their identities.

Mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness . . .

Darkness within darkness, the gateway to all understanding¹⁷.

¹⁷ Lao-Tzu from *Tao Te Ching* (1988, p. 52)

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from eight interviews which explore the research question: *What do individuals report as lived experiences of Natural Darkness (ND)?*

I define four prominent themes from the analyzed data: (1) *Qualities of Darkness*, (2) *Dangerous*, (3) *Spiritual Experiences*, (4) *Drawing Inwards*. The theme, *Qualities of Darkness* includes participants' descriptions of ND's characteristics. These reported characteristics are organized into three subthemes; *No-thingness*, *Friendliness* and *Embracing*. The second theme, *Dangerous*, represents actual and perceived risks described by participants during their recollective practice at night. Within this theme includes two subthemes; *Fear of Predators* and *Environmental Challenges*. The third theme, *Spiritual Experiences*, includes descriptions which incorporate elements of spirit or soul; that which is beyond material reality. This theme includes subthemes *Altered Reality*, and *Connection to Something Greater*. Finally, the fourth theme *Drawing Inwards*, includes participants descriptions of their attention focusing on their internal and felt sense of self. This theme is divided into two subthemes; *From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being* and *Processing Self*. In the following sections, I define these themes and subthemes, as well as present participant voices and context for each theme.

In this study, participants chose to be represented by the following pseudonyms: Bear, Bill, Dale, Happy Dancer, Jack, Jaxon, Joanne, and Naani Aqusupe.

Table 1.

Themes, subthemes and descriptions

Themes	Subthemes	Descriptors
<p><i>Qualities of Darkness -</i> Represents the characteristics participants assigned to ND</p>	<i>No-thingness</i>	Qualities that include space, the void, and the unknown
	<i>Friendliness</i>	Qualities that are friendly and anthropomorphic
	<i>Embracing</i>	Qualities that are nurturing and enveloping
<p><i>Dangerous -</i> Actual and perceived risks reported by participants during their recollective practice at night</p>	<i>Fear of predators</i>	Described relationships to fear of predators at night
	<i>Challenging environmental conditions</i>	Descriptions of environmental conditions that impacted participants' experiences of ND
<p><i>Spiritual Experiences –</i> Descriptions which incorporate elements of spirit or soul; that which is beyond material reality</p>	<i>Altered Reality</i>	Descriptions of magical and mysterious experiences
	<i>Connection to Something Greater</i>	Descriptions of relating to a source, cycle, energy or intelligence that is larger and vaster than the self
<p><i>Drawing Inward –</i> Participants' descriptions of attention on their internal and felt sense of self</p>	<i>From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being</i>	Descriptions of entering a state of being which differed from daytime activity
	<i>Processing Self</i>	Narratives involving confronting and processing past experiences, relationships and psychological material

Qualities of Darkness

Qualities of Darkness represents the characteristics that participants have assigned to ND. Participants related to ND both as an environmental condition and as an animate entity. It is worthwhile to note that participants assigned quality or presence to ND, rather than relating to it merely as *absence*. This theme is divided into the following sections: *No-thingness*, *Friendliness*, and *Embracing*.

No-thingness

The subtheme of *No-thingness* emerged in half of the interviews. *No-thingness*, includes the interviewees' descriptions of ND as space and the unknown. *No-thingness* encompasses that which is without definition and form, but is not empty; at times referred to as the fertile void. Participants noted the qualities of the *No-thingness* with ND throughout their nighttime experiences, and most vividly on the first nights of their recollective practices. Bill described his perception of *No-thingness*:

The first feelings of darkness were just like a little bit of umm, just space Umm, little bit of void, just that thing of like, "umm okay, well I guess I'm just sitting here" ... that kind of feeling. (Bill)

Participants' perception of the qualities of *No-thingness* shifted from empty to fertile throughout the duration of their recollective practice. Its attributes of space were later perceived as a *full* space; possessing creative potential for the emergence of something new. Dale described the fullness of ND as "everything," while Bear noted that "it's not just black." In the following quotation, Jack speaks about ND's *No-thingness* providing conditions for "experience to happen":

It was very calm and quiet...the stars were out, there was a lot of space. Lot of space for this experience to happen, even though there was all this space, it was like I was just focused on ... the small area around me that felt accessible because it – everything – because of the lack of light – everything had kinda shrunken down to this – this space I was sitting in and the small area around it. (Jack)

Bill also spoke about the shift in his perception of space from empty to full. He shared how the spaciousness became a container for psychological material to emerge:

Giving enough space, and it took... I feel like a routine of a couple of days of being in the dark to then start to go, “okay there’s enough space now. You’ve had the little rest, that void, that kinda boredom feeling. And now you can fill it in a little bit with all these umm, all these unprocessed things, concepts, or fragments. (Bill)

The emergence of unprocessed things will be addressed in the *Processing Self* section.

Finally, ND was characterized as the *unknown*. For some, this attribute inspired both excitement and fear in participants. Bill’s description highlights this aspect of *No-thingness*:

[Darkness is] like a chasm... I feel like we always really like to have determined points and keep engaged through being able to see targets, you know? Goal setting and um looking down the path – that kind of feeling. And darkness creates this other feeling where it’s like, it’s umm... we don’t get to determine that anymore. There’s an openness that’s intimidating, you know? (Bill)

Happy Dancer also noted the unknown quality of ND in the following statement: “I always saw darkness as just owning our lack of understanding.” Whether defined as space, the fertile void, or the unknown, participants assigned ND with attributes of *No-thingness*.

Friendliness

The subtheme, *Friendliness*, highlights the friendly and anthropomorphic attributes assigned to ND. Participants perceived animistic qualities to ND, and used terms, like “friend” when referring to it: Happy Dancer described being with ND like “reconnecting with an old friend.” Bear stated that, “darkness is my friend. I feel very comfortable in darkness and even

more comfortable in darkness in the woods.” Further, Jaxon said, “[darkness is] my friend.... It’s a beloved darkness.” Dale, who referred to ND as “Lady Darkness,” spoke about her developing relationship with ND, and stressed the importance of *being* with her, rather than approaching ND with an agenda. Bear comments on his relationship with ND, “I do love the darkness.” It is worthwhile to notice that these attributes contrast definitions of darkness as evil or malevolent.

Embracing

The subtheme, *Embracing*, includes the nurturing, enveloping and comforting aspects assigned to ND. Joanne described, “I feel comfort; think about being enveloped.” Jaxon said that ND has an “embracing presence quality... I trust the darkness.... I feel comfortable in the darkness.” Bear, who said that ND, “brings me comfort” describes the presence of ND like a blanket:

The darkness feels like it brings a weight to this space, and for me it’s mostly a warm weight. Like, you know, I don’t feel the cold darkness – I mean like it has temperature too, but even in cooler weather. I don’t feel like the darkness is coming to take me to somewhere bad. I feel like it fills in like a blanket ... like it’s more tactile than it is visual, but it’s not really tactile. (Bear)

Dale also spoke about darkness as having weight. She offered an earthy and encompassing description of ND:

It feels like the earth, and so in that sense, that felt-sense of feeling heavy or down on, in, and more-earthly occurs. There’s definitely a settling that happens in the body when one is sitting or lying down that also obviously allows the thinking mind to settle as well. (Dale)

Happy Dancer also used nurturing attributes when he offered the imagery of a cocoon to describe ND: “[It’s] kinda like being in a cocoon... kind of being in this healing space ... You know? This place where you’re safe to explore your inner self... Yeah, you kinda get wrapped up in, in

the night.” The image of cocoon, the container for a butterfly’s transformational process, alludes to ND’s potential to support and contain human growth and change. The above descriptions of “embracing”, “comfort”, “wrapped up in” and “warm weight” also elicit the qualities of a womb.

Dangerous

The theme, *Dangerous*, represents actual and perceived risks reported by participants during their recollective practice at night. In the interviews, participants associated fear with the vulnerability to predators and challenging environmental conditions. This theme is divided into two subthemes: *Fear of Predators* and *Challenging Environmental Conditions*.

Fear of Predators

This subtheme presents interviewees’ descriptions of their relationship to fear of predators. Theorists have written that dark decreases perceived boundaries and exposes one more fully to their environment (Burik, 2019; Shaw, 2015); light on the other hand, is considered to separate, which can also create a sense of feeling more protected (Burik, 2019). These ideas were reinforced in the experiences of the participants. Bear spoke about how “boundary lines are blurring” in ND. Five others noted that with ND, there was an increased sense of vulnerability or exposure to dangers, like natural predators.

Unprompted, all but one interviewee spoke about their relationship to their fear of predators at night. Most surprisingly was that the majority of participants spoke about *not* being afraid. Joanne said that, “I found that the dark was really comforting. I was not afraid of animals; I was afraid of being with my own thoughts.” She continued to speak about her lack of fear of predators, even when she heard movement in the night: “I also felt like I would wake up in the

night and I felt very safe and very peaceful. I could hear things moving around and I wasn't afraid of that."

Naani Aqusupe reported to have spent her first day vigilantly preparing to protect herself from predators. As ND approached, she spoke about her fear dissolving: "I had let go of the fear in as much as it was not affecting me in a negative way anymore. I was aware but not afraid, and then when the night came, it was a complete non-issue." Similarly, Bill said that, "I didn't experience a lot of fear during that experience - just more intimidation I guess..."

Bear mentioned repeated encounters with predators in the past, and through this exposure he felt a sense of comfort with ND, even with the threat of bears and cougars:

I've never had, you know, some fear around a time in the night, but I've navigated through the darkness so much that it brings me this comfort. I don't have much concern about animals, in fact, I love animals. I love wildlife and I have very umm deep respect for them. And I don't fear. I don't really have a fear of an animal coming and doing something to me. So, for a lot of people I think that's something that would stop them in nature, like they think about a bear or cougar. (Bear)

Alternatively, one interviewee spoke about fear existing even when there weren't predators in the area. Happy Dancer said, "At night I felt more vulnerable, more scared... in daytime it's like, 'oh, you know ... none of that's there anymore'." Happy Dancer proposed that fear was an important experience for people, "In the natural world, you know, it's good for people to get scared and vulnerable, and to be outdoors, and to have some respect for that, and overcome their fear of that." He also alluded to the real dangers of being vulnerable to predators at night:

Nature's just as indifferent to us, you know, as we are - as we can be to it... So, I was just kind of noticing, like you know, here I am exposing myself in this spot and I'm trying to just respect what's going on around me. (Happy Dancer)

Dale also expressed her thoughts on the real dangers of predators with ND:

On a vision fast, vision quest, or rites of passage, we are inviting [animals], but there are places where it's real. There are creatures who see in the dark, and would like to kill you, you know what I mean? I don't talk about that metaphorically. It's actually true! (Dale)

Jack shared a past experience of threat of predators. His experience has had lasting impacts on his feelings of safety with ND in the natural world:

Now ever since uh... uh I went camping once and a bear tried to get into my tent... I have a very tough time sleeping in the dark... I'm – I'm very afraid of predators, specifically bears... Yeah and I think there was some terror, real terror there, and umm yeah. And so, I needed, like, knowing there were no bears on Salt Spring was a – was the real reason I could do [the recollective practice]. (Jack)

Participants had diverse relationships with fear during ND. As every participant, but one, alluded to fear at night with predators, it seems that this was a prominent theme in people's experiences of ND.

Challenging Environmental Conditions

In this subtheme, I draw attention to the experiences of three participants who mentioned how challenging environmental conditions impacted their experiences of ND. Jack demonstrated this challenge, “The weather was very stormy during these days and ... nighttime was really about hunkering down and protecting myself from the elements for the first few nights.” Jack was ultimately impacted by persistent stormy weather:

I was eventually worn down and ... kind of hung my head and started to shiver and at a certain point I recognized that, my resilience – my resilience was worn down and uh I kind of gave myself permission to – to end – end the ritual. (Jack)

Though Jack did not end his ritual at that moment, his words seemed to demonstrate that environmental conditions led him to focus externally on his environment and into a state of survival. In his case, ND and the environment failed to provide a “cocoon of healing” (Happy Dancer) to support the process of going inwards, and yet Jack spoke with increased esteem about

his ability to overcome adversity of the environmental challenge, “There was a sense of being alive, vulnerable, exposed, present and resilient”.

Joanne and Naani Aqusupe both mentioned how, at one point, challenging environmental conditions of rain and cold motivated them to sleep rather than to engage with their interiority in the night:

I couldn't – it was raining. I couldn't get a fire started. I just like, I feel like, “just fuck it!” And I just crawled in my sleeping bag, and balled my head off, and headed to sleep... And then it just progressively got better. (Joanne)

I would go to bed by 7:30-8 'o clock. I was in bed just because I was cold and... So, I'm wondering how different my experience would've been had it been warmer and... had I been able to have a fire to sit outside in the night with the fire. One of the things that we were...umm... [Linda], who was facilitating this said, “You know, you may wanna stay up one whole night.” (Naani Aqusupe)

Due to the challenging environmental condition of cold, Naanni Aqusupe did not stay up the entire night, and in that, had less time to explore the possibilities of ND. Most participants did not speak about challenging environmental conditions with ND, but for those that did, it seemed to have had considerable impact on their experience.

Spiritual Experiences

The theme, *Spiritual Experiences*, introduces interviewee's descriptions in ND, which incorporate elements of spirit or soul, as opposed to material or physical things. All participants described fasting, setting intentions and doing ceremony within their recollective practice, which likely impacted their spiritual experiences as well. This theme includes subthemes; *Altered Reality* and *Connection with Something Greater*.

Altered Reality

This subtheme represents participants' magical and mysterious experiences, including interactions with spirits of family members (deceased and alive), and animals. This subtheme highlights reported experiences which may challenge concepts of time and space. Participants expressed that being with ND was like entering a "different realm of our experience" (Dale).

Joanne noted that her experiences at night had a more magical quality:

Yes, it was more magical [at night] ... Right, like I was having a fire, like being around the fire, any ritual around the fire... that at night is just more magical ... Uh I just – I didn't have a very big fire, I wasn't very successful in the fire department (laughs) but I don't know. It's just definitely more magical. [Spiritual experiences] felt more potent. (Joanne)

Naani Aqusupe noted at night she had more access to her spiritual nature. She said, "I do some of my best ceremonies at night." Two participants described ND as having a thin veil, meaning that there is little separation between the physical and spiritual world. Bear said, "I feel energy, I sometimes see things...it's a bit of a liminal space... where the veil is thin in the darkness."

Jaxon described ND as a "gateway" for connecting to the spirit world:

[Darkness] is a place where the veil between the worlds can be thinner – not all the time but especially in a vision quest. [...] There's so much that helps contribute to that experience, but for me the darkness is a friend and a gateway. (Jaxon)

Jaxon continues to state other experiences of the thin veil:

I had the memory that I've done this (drumming) with women before like hundreds of years ago...so see that the veil is thin in the dark...it's like other lifetimes... other beings can come in. It's the permeability in the dark. (Jaxon)

Bill stated that with ND, the "internal becomes external" and, like other participants, images of people and animals appeared to him. Half of the participants also noted that

mysterious and sacred experiences became more intense the longer that they were in their recollective practice. Bill explained his experience in the following statement:

The third night was certainly a feeling of... feeling like a little bit of umm like mystery and hallucination kinda feeling ... umm not in the grand technicolour way but just getting umm, and I think it's because we're so wired for visual input that when you take it away...you start seeing some things ... So faces of people, some story from when I was young.. umm yeah just like that the void ended up getting filled in with because of I'm so used to processing in a visual sense ... I think it was like a little – at first like a little bit overwhelming, like a little bit upsetting... Because the images I was getting were like things that I didn't really wanna see those things very much. (Bill)

As noted earlier, over time several participants mentioned that the void “ended up getting filled in” (Bill) with images and thoughts that were psychologically significant. Jack had a similar experience with challenging material on the third night of his ceremony. His experience also challenged concepts of time and space:

I had also you know part of the fast was kind of by this time ... I don't know... kinda wanna say consciousness was a bit more fluid... And umm there was kinda more images appearing and I had a rattle and it was kind of like these images or energies from the woods...in particular one human man who was a predator. And ... from in that – in that position and with intention really just tried to face ... the predators of the dark and - and show that I wasn't afraid... Umm and there was even kind of like kind of images of light even like rainbow colours...it was kind of emerging from me and from this rattle. (Jack)

Participants also had welcoming experiences of encountering nighttime images of people and animals that challenged concepts of time and space. Jaxon mentioned that her deceased cat appeared to her, “it was so real...it's like I could feel his soft fur on my cheek.” Bear mentioned that his deceased dog appeared to him which led to significant resolution. Further, Naani Aqusupe and Jaxon had profound experiences with relatives during their time with ND. Naani Aqusupe spoke to the vividness of her experience with her deceased sisters:

So I had initially invited my ancestors to be there with me and I... and I knew they were there... I'm ... one of three children in my family but I'm the only one surviving, I have two younger sisters that are both gone... So let's just say it was more concentrated because there's, there's nothing, you know, distracting you, there's nothing to look at.

Yeah...so I, it's almost like a really strong orange juice - like overly concentrated. (Naani Aqusupe)

Jaxon and Jack also mentioned significant spiritual encounters with family members in ND.

Jaxon recounts another experience alone in the dark, in which she became aware of, and participated in her father's dying process:

I'm sitting in my friend's hot tub alone in the dark, and something... I started singing to my father singing, "it's time to go. They've been waiting for you." And like, I don't know where it came from but I was singing, singing him across the threshold... I didn't know why, but that's what I was doing. And the next day, I received a phone call from my sister saying dad passed this afternoon. So, it's the dark again, right? (Jaxon)

The above spiritual experiences occurred with ND present. Participants attributed this to the thin veil (Bear, Jaxon), to magic being more concentrated at night (Joanne, Naani Aqusupe), as a result of lack of visual stimulus (Bill), or because our "conscious mind is not as aware" (Dale).

Despite the cause, all participants noted experiences with *Altered Reality*.

Connecting to Something Greater

Connecting to Something Greater encompasses reports of participants' experiences of relating to a source, cycle, energy or intelligence that was larger than them. For some, this energy was called God, mystery or earth's natural cycles. In these connections, it appears that participants felt a deeper sense of belonging in the world or in the cosmos.

Dale spoke about the spiritual (and psychological) experience of seeing herself as part of earth's natural cycles:

I know that for myself I crave the dark time, the rest time, being in the other realm. I think that connecting with the wholeness of the earth, the wholeness of the seasons as a part of that, and the cyclical changes. I think that connecting with the dark is a part of acknowledging ourselves as part of the earth, and the cyclical changes that occur and the depth of that.... It's spiritual in one sense. (Dale)

Jaxon included an anecdote about communing with God in the night:

Here I am in my bedroom in Comox. I was living there at the time, and umm so, so struggling, and I said, “okay God, if you’re out there show me a falling star! Like, I need help here!” And there was a falling star. And I did that repeatedly, like “Okay, sure, that was a coincidence,” but for many nights... “Okay God, I need to know you’re there,” and it was the dark sky that I turned to, and there was every time the falling star...the falling star, so that’s – that was what helped me start to see the darkness actually as carrier of messages. (Jaxon)

Jaxon’s sharing illustrates that ND supported her spiritual connection to something larger than herself. She mentioned how these mysterious and sacred experiences felt healing for her, “I want connection with the other side and it helps me know that I, and all of us, and all of creation is much more than our consensus reality. For me, that’s part of healing.” (Jaxon).

Jaxon further describes a feeling of interconnection and belonging to the cosmos during her experience in a recollective practice:

Being held, being like... being held in the arms of yeah like mystery, the divine and – and just more acutely aware that I belong to the web of light ... something like that... And I’m a part of that, you know? Someone said, “We are stardust.” It’s like, yeah, I am... I am that, and that is, like yeah... just the interconnection... undeniable interconnection. (Jaxon).

Jaxon’s comment not only alludes to the feeling of connection to *something greater*, but also speaks of a shift in identity; whereas Jaxon viewed *herself*, also, as *something greater*.

Happy Dancer similarly talked about viewing stars as a powerful experience, “Every night I would sleep out under the stars, you know, if it wasn’t raining, and in Australia it doesn’t rain much... (silence). That was a really powerful time for me.”

In the following passage, Bear highlights a numinous experience of darkness in being with the night sky:

It makes me think of space too, and I mean outer space, ... there’s something magical – when I think about space there’s something scary about it too... Umm and you’re so small but you’re still part of this vastness, so I don’t know. It’s just something so majestic so immense about it... It’s like that paradox again...feeling small can make you feel helpless, but also part of something so big, right?... That you are not helpless. You are one with the – it’s part of oneness...it’s like my little life is kinda a speck of dust; sand

blowing in the wind, but I'm still a sand blowing in the wind in this greatness ... I'm part of this greatness, and I don't mean that I'm great, but it's just again, like you said, reverence is a great word or is a great word. I think umm *mystery* and I think the darkness and mystery really go hand in hand, and I think when we hold on to the value of mystery and how much it actually is a gift. It brings a deepness to life, a mystery to life. (Bear)

In Bear's statement, he alludes to the "value" of experiencing the self as belonging to a vaster system. He highlights the paradox of how sometimes feeling small within a larger mysterious system can also make one feel immensely large and connected.

Drawing Inwards

The theme *Drawing Inwards* refers to participants' descriptions of their attention moving from their sight sense towards their bodies, memories and internal experience of self. It seems that for many the environmental conditions of ND supported these specific experiences. This theme is divided into the following subthemes, *From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being* and *Processing Self*.

From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being

From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being represents participants' experiences of entering a state of being which differed from daytime activity. Included in this theme are participants' descriptions of their challenges with daytime activity and stimulation; as well as the ways in which ND supported a sense of being which was restful, present and embodied.

Nearly all participants spoke about the contrast between ND's reduced stimulation to the overthinking, overdoing and over-stimulation of Canadian modern society. Some participants framed society's preoccupations with doing and thinking as both unhealthy and unwelcomed. Happy Dancer expressed his response to the busyness of his life: "Our society is fucking crazy! [...] This is a time of madness!" Joanne expressed her dissatisfaction for "our capitalistic culture

of just doing, doing, doing, and occupying your time!” Nearly all the participants stated that daytime stimulation, life tasks and pressures had created experiences of stress, overwhelm, or disconnection in their lives. In the following passage, Bill speaks about his belief that stimulation, including light and computers, impacts his mental and physical health:

The word that’s coming to me right now is like *congestion*. With a lot of stimulation sometimes I feel congested or develop more stress in my body and in my mind. Umm, and then so by removing some of those stressors, um which like I’ve said to you before, the idea, like you know, less stimulation - which for me a lot of the time is less computer time, less focus on immediate communication. Umm and that – those kinds of demands... I feel like they occupy things in a way that we can, I don’t know, potentially interrupt natural process. (Bill)

In the example below, Jack spoke about the ways in which daytime stimulation directed his attention externally and motivated the need for action:

Just a feeling that there’s more activity during the day... whether it was cars on the other side of the-the ocean, there umm, work being done, even birds and animals. Feeling like that there was more association with, that was a time of work, umm and activity, and more to notice, more to see externally. Yeah, that’s it - more stimulus, more activity, more need to be doing something.” (Jack)

Participants also spoke about ND providing reprieve from activity. Their narratives implied that the lack of daytime stimulation promoted a different sense of being. Naani Aqusupe expressed how ND provided quiet in contrast to the demands of the day:

So, in the context of, of the night is - it was another opportunity for me to be quiet. Things are quiet at night. You know all the things that are demanding of me, and umm are all in bed at night (laughs). (Naani Aqusupe)

Joanne, who viewed darkness as a time of salvation from the day, recalled her experiences in her recollective practice, “I had, yeah, definitely more of that deeper knowing or stillness these are the things that I crave. I can experience them way more at night.”

The stimulation of daytime activity seemed to activate states of mental stimulation, while ND, at times, offered a sense of reprieve. In this example, Dale spoke about her longing to enter into a *Being-with* state, rather than an active state of *doing* with ND:

I want to be *with*. You know what I mean? ... Not mental because there's so much mental... the sun, Apollo... So I have had a big resistance to *doing*. So, for me what's more prominent (about ND) is the *felt sense*, the felt experience of *being with* (Dale)

This sense of being-with also referred to a quality of connecting with self that shifted with ND.

Dale continued by describing her felt sense of darkness in the following passage:

In the dark I feel much more... a friend to myself. You know? Or contained within myself, or *with* myself. Not that I necessarily wouldn't in the day, but the sight and the perceptual faculty are not going out as far... they are much closer in, and so that sense of myself is much stronger, as well as that sort of thicker feeling around. You know what I mean? So, there's more sense of one's self, or awareness of one's self, and just the perceptual sense doesn't go out as far, which is really important. So important! I would say that it's *extremely* necessary! (Dale)

Bill also spoke about how ND's reduced stimulation shifted his way of being, "With less stimulation you kinda slow down. You have to slow down. You have to be more observing of how it feels." Similar to the narratives of other participants, Bill's quote alludes to experiencing a *Different Sense of Being* with the presence of ND.

Processing Self

Subtheme *Processing Self* refers to acknowledging, connecting with, and integrating psychological material through one's physiology, emotions, spirit or intellect. This subtheme includes narratives about relationships, past traumas, and interviewees' perceptions of self. In this section, I bring attention to participants sharing their experiences of going inwards, avoidance of challenge, as well as feelings of self-affirmation in relationship to ND.

As noted in the last subtheme, the majority of interviewees noted that with the decrease in stimulation in ND, participants' attention shifted inwards. Dale said, "when you can't see so clearly, so you're not going outward, you're going inward or down." This inward focus brought participants' attention to their body, to emotional states, as well as to challenging psychological material. Jack said that, "the darkness allowed me to go deeper inside... that even in the darkness, it feels like there is less places to hide." Bill articulates the relationship between reduced stimulation and healing of the body and psyche in the following passage: "Our body is constantly regenerating and we have the capacity to heal within ourselves, and to be able to be in a space of healing. I feel like that a lot of the time that's in reduced stimulation."

Half of participants noted that when one's attention moved from external to internal, there was a need to "face yourself" (Bear) or to "face the darkness" (Jack). This shift in focus was, at times, initially met with resistance. Some participants spoke about the desire to just "go to sleep, and sleep throughout the night" (Bear) as a means of avoidance. Though these participants originally avoided these challenges, eventually they confronted their difficulty. Naani Aqusupe noted the challenges of avoiding the self with ND:

It's not like you can close your eyes and it (psychological material) goes away, cause it doesn't matter if your eyes are open or closed. It-it only goes away when you fall asleep, so as long as you're awake, this is what you're with. And I was with my sisters... umm... So, thank goodness it was something really nice cause it also could (laughs) be something not very nice, and you're still stuck with it (laughs). (Naani Aqusupe).

It was consistently noted, that the inward focus brought up unprocessed psychological material. Participants said that repressed emotions, challenging relationship dynamics, and past difficulties came to their attention in ND. This is evident in Bill's experience: "Things, like repressed feelings that I had during tough times, just like being a young teenager and that, all bubbled up, and it was the step that I've been avoiding feeling so much."

In confronting the challenging material that emerged in ND, participants noted shifts in their relationships. Jack, who had a challenging dynamic with his brother, spoke about a changing relationship due to working through issues in ND:

I had a very profound experience in relationship with a brother of mine on that night... That was very important to life after ... Uh what happened after the [recollective practice]... there was a letting go of responsibility ... And a giving of permission to live and die, or die... live or die as my brother pleased...umm the start of that process. (Jack)

Naani Aqusupe spoke about the unprocessed family grief regarding the deaths of her two sisters.

“There was no ceremony, there was no acknowledgment, there was nothing. So, [my mother] also left having lost her daughter and there - and she has a hole because of how it was handled.”

The presence of Naani Aqusupe’s sisters became more concentrated with ND, and the unprocessed family grief became more vivid. Naani Aqusupe was able to acknowledge and confront these difficult emotions, and to process them through ceremony:

I drummed my drum, and I sang terribly because I was crying, but you know it doesn’t matter. Umm it was a gift because you know when my middle sister died... a-a lot of my energy went into her children for years...you know they were five-years-old down to four months old. They were just babies so a lot of ... yeah. So again, not a lot of time for me to do uh my grieving, and that kind of thing. So, this was just a nice umm, yeah a beautiful reconnection. (Naani Aqusupe)

In the following quotation, Bill shares his interpretations of why psychological material emerges with ND. He also proposes an idea that the natural world teaches about the *physical* body in the daytime, and the *subconscious* in ND:

The darkness more to me is more instead of in the body, it’s more around like umm being a reflection of subconscious ... Like that darkness those... those parts that we can’t see in ourselves ... Umm when we see these reflections in the dark, we are able to look into it... Umm and just by the nature of that – like the idea of repressed thoughts or something... umm they start to bubble up. We start seeing those reflections in that void. (Bill)

Lastly, many participants shared the feelings of self-affirmation and confidence from experiencing and integrating challenging psychological material, or through confronting fear.

Jack spoke about his experience overcoming difficulty in ND:

Here was a sense of being alive; vulnerable, exposed, present, umm and resilient. [...] Umm, and as I kinda opened my eyes, I just – I saw umm the first light of the morning. And there was a sense that I uh just a greater sense of accomplishment umm that I had made it through the entire night – entirety of the night to the morning. (Jack)

Bill also connected to a feeling of vitality after confronting challenging psychological material on his third night:

And then in the fourth night, I remember kinda being excited for the night. And remembering, like when the sun was going down, it was just getting dark, of like letting out a huge yell - like the loudest yell I can make! And being like, “I love this shit! I’m - I’m ready – I like it!” (Bill)

Participants believed that the lack of external stimulation increased their connection to themselves, as well as provided the space for unprocessed psychological material to emerge.

Participants also mentioned that there was an increase in confidence and well-being through overcoming challenges connected to ND.

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see.
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood—
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den¹⁸.*

¹⁸ From Theodore Roethke's *In a Dark Time* (1966).

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I will offer interpretations of research findings in relation to the reviewed literature to investigate the research question: *What do individuals report as lived experiences of Natural Darkness (ND)?* I begin by summarizing the findings. I will then break down the discussion into three topics of conversation: (1) ND as a cocoon of healing, (2) A different way of being, and (3) Spiritual connection. I will also discuss conditions that may support beneficial experiences with ND for each topic. In this discussion of research findings, there is overlap and entanglement between these three categories as I believe that these topics are interrelated.

Summary of Findings

Qualities of Darkness, Dangerous, Spiritual Experiences and *Interiority* were the four overarching themes that I have created within the research. Within *Qualities of Darkness* were the subthemes *No-thingness, Friendly* and *Enveloping*. Within this theme, participants noted that ND had the following qualities: spacious, unknown, friendly, nurturing, enveloping and cocoon-like. In the second theme, *Dangerous*, participants shared perceived and actual risk of danger in the night. This theme was divided into the subthemes *Fear of Predators* and *Challenging Environmental Conditions*. Under this theme, participants spoke about their relationship to fear of attack from animals as well as how weather conditions (rain, wind and cold) in ND were an obstacle in confronting internal psychological material. The third theme, *Spiritual Experiences*, included the two themes of *Altered Reality* and *Connecting to Something Greater*. This theme highlighted participants' spiritual experiences with ND which included connecting with other spirits, with natural cycles, with the cosmos and with God. The final theme *Drawing Inwards* addresses how the conditions of ND directed participants attention to themselves. This theme

included *From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being and Processing Self*. Under this theme, participants spoke about being connected to rest, stillness, interiority, and included descriptions of processing psychological material.

ND as a Cocoon of healing

I will begin by discussing the possibility that conditions of ND provided a “cocoon of healing” or *temenos* for many participants in this research. The metaphor of cocoon is derived from Happy Dancer’s quote that being in ND was like “being in a cocoon... kind of being in this healing space.” *Temenos* is traditionally referred to as a sacred piece of land, dedicated to serve a god (Jung, 2014). Jung (2014) used this term to describe “a magic circle” (p. 167) or the “womb of the mother” (p. 171) in which mental or transformational work can occur. I use the term *temenos* to describe a sense of containment, or the necessary conditions for healing.

Participants spoke about transforming psychological material within their recollective practice at night. There were many factors which may have led to these experiences: specific ceremonial practices, fasting, psychological readiness of participants, as well as qualities of ND. This discussion focuses on how participants viewed ND’s role in providing conditions for this healing. As noted in the *Qualities of Darkness* section, ND was at times referred to with affection; “beloved darkness,” “darkness is my friend,” “I love darkness.” These remarks suggest that ND was experienced by many as having a presence which one can relate with - in other words, ND wasn’t always understood to be a lack or a void, but rather, it was related to as an animate entity. There was also consistency across participants in how the quality of ND was described; in the subtheme *Embracing*, the following words were used: “enveloped,” “embracing

presence,” “wrapped up,” and “cocoon-like.” These descriptions suggest an experience of *being held* and allude to feeling safe containment within this presence of ND.

Participants consistently drew a connection between ND’s lack of stimulation and the processing of unconscious psychological material. It is to be noted that reduced stimulation does not necessarily equate “lack of environment.” Instead, participants described lack of stimulation as an environment with a different presence than that of daylight. As noted earlier, participants described ND as “everything” and “not just black.” They also spoke about “reduced stimulation” as *differently* stimulating: Dale and Bear described ND as having weight which impacted their bodies in space. Bill attributed ND’s reduced stimulation as the catalyst for regeneration and healing: “our body is constantly regenerating and we have the capacity to heal within ourselves, and to be able to be in a space of healing. I feel like that a lot of the time that’s in reduced stimulation.” This theory that the organism heals, within appropriate conditions, mirrors the thinking behind the therapeutic modality, Somatic Experiencing, which proposes that we have the “innate capacity to heal” (Levine, 1997, p. 37) under the right environmental conditions. Interviewees attributed ND’s spaciousness as a contributing condition.

For participants, the processing of the psyche in reduced stimulation seemed to follow a specific sequence of stages: (1) Experience of spaciousness, (2) Attention moves inwards, (3) Confrontation with self, (4) Memories and relationships are processed through four aspects of self (body, emotions, mind and spirit) and, (5) An expanded feeling of empowerment via integration of past experiences.

Some participants noted how ND’s spaciousness seemed to direct the individual’s attention inward. The “internal self” considered by ecopsychologists to be “a phenomenon of nature” (Fisher, 2013, p. 7), took predominant focus over the external environment when ND

was present.¹⁹ With interior attention, participants noted that psychological material began to “bubble up,” (Bill) and that interviewees were required to face themselves. As Jack says, “in the darkness it feels like there are less places to hide.” Participants spoke about choosing to confront the emerging situation rather than to sleep. Once these situations were confronted, participants spoke about experiencing deep emotional states. Bear says, “it was really emotional.” Bill continues, “I felt some tears, and almost astonishment.” Naani Aquasupe also said, “I was crying” when she spoke of confronting unprocessed grief. As noted earlier, interviewees spoke about feeling a sense of empowerment and more vitality after processing challenging psychological material.

From an ecopsychological perspective, it is not the withdrawal of nature that connected participants to their interiority, but rather the influence of a different type of nature, which included qualities of reduced stimulation and spaciousness. As noted earlier, Jungian ecopsychologist Yunt (2001) viewed the human psyche as being composed of, and in dynamic relationship with, the natural world. He suggests that there is a link between unintegrated aspects of the human self and the destruction of the planet. In reviewing the narratives shared by the participants, it seemed as though ND aided participants in confronting their unintegrated aspects. One question this raises is the interrelationship between inner worlds and broader non-human environments, and the potential of mutual influence between. I would further wonder whether ND would foster reparative relationships with broader environments. The impact of the participants’ integration of unconscious material is challenging to measure. Further research

¹⁹ As mentioned in the Ecopsychology section, the self is paradoxically separate and inseparable from its environment. Similarly, *inner* and *outer* can be viewed as interconnected within the same system and dualistically separate. That being said, one may perceive an interior experience, but in so is intrinsically connected with the exterior environment. In this case, the environmental conditions of ND provided access to participant’s “interiority.”

would be required to elaborate on the connection between states of consciousness and one's broader ecological relationships.

The confrontations with self that were supported by ND might mirror the entry into the *nigredo* stage of alchemy, as outlined by Marlan in *The Black Sun* (2005). In this alchemical stage, which for a Jungian psychologist is a psychological process of individuation, one endures challenge and symbolic death of egoic identifications in order to individuate (Marlan, 2005). Rather than undergoing absolute ego-death, participants' more challenging experiences seemed to reflect what I might call a minor *nigredo* in which participants encountered their own suffering. Jung (1977) stated that when disowned aspects of the psyche (what he called the shadow) are encountered, it can be emotionally painful. For Jung, it can also elicit "the mystery of the *coniunctio*, the central mystery of alchemy, [which] aims precisely at the synthesis of the opposites, the assimilation of the blackness" (p.228). Marlan (2021) expands on the notion of the role of *nigredo* in alchemical process:

The engagement of consciousness with the unconscious reveals not simply a unity of opposites, but a multiplicity of intentions that challenge and oppose one another, as well as pull psyche toward unification—a fire in the stone and an alchemy of desire. When these tensions are held together, they catalyze a symbol-making process that produces complex archetypal images that exceed rational categories. (p. 2)

Participants accredited ND as facilitating a process of interiority, involving the requirement to "face yourself," to "face the darkness," and to not "hide" from the self. Their engagements with the unconscious aspects of themselves seemed, at times, painful processes that fostered a more fully integrated sense of self. Engaging in such processes are well-understood aspects of psychotherapeutic processes. What is unique about participants' experiences are that these

processes emerged, not in an office or with a human-therapist, but rather from engagement with the non-human phenomenon of ND. Again, this opens up the question as to the links between our ‘interior’ sense of self and the broader environment and how the relationship with the natural world might facilitate healing.

Contribution of Fear

In proposing that ND contributed to participants’ experiences of healing, I do not make assumptions that ND always provides such a *temenos*. As mentioned in the interviews, ND was additionally linked to experiences of fear by nearly all participants. Though the majority of interviewees did *not* experience fear with ND, it was alluded to in most interviews. It is important to note the increase in vulnerability to predators at night. Humans, as sight-dominant creatures, rely on sight to orient in self-protection. Without the resource of sight, we become more vulnerable to harm from predators. Losing access to this sense can elicit activated states and vigilant orientation towards one’s exterior. States of self-protection will offer a different experience than the internal processing that participants described. It is possible that participants were able to benefit from ND’s embracing *temenos* because they were predominantly without fear of predators at night. Similarly, when participants were in challenging environmental conditions, (rain, cold, wind), their attention was focused on surviving the conditions vs. internal explorations.

Interview participants likely have had more exposure to the natural world than most Canadians in urban centres. Their familiarity and relationship with the natural world may have created more ease in ND. Additionally, most participants did not recount having previous traumatic experiences in ND. Jack, on the other hand, experienced a traumatic event with a bear at night, which has had lasting impact. For Jack, it’s possible that ND became coupled with

threat and danger, amplifying his awareness of the dangerous aspects of ND. Bill warns that it is not psychologically useful to be in terror at night: “[When in] fight/flight brain states... you wouldn’t actually be exploring the dark anymore. You’d just be feeling shut down.” This suggests that when certain kinds of fear are present, ND may not provide such a *temenos*, but evoke states of overwhelm instead. Happy Dancer, on the other hand, believed that fear of predators was a valuable human experience as it can challenge anthropocentric perspectives. He saw fear as contributing to knowing one’s place within a larger ecological system:

So really reclaim that, yeah, we’re animals. We’re not, you know, the sentient species that is dominant over the natural world, you know? And so [darkness] is a good tool for that, you know?... To realize that we have our place in the natural world. It’s good for people to get scared and vulnerable and to be outdoors and to have some respect for that and overcome their fear of that. (Happy Dancer)

The variety of experiences of ND reveal that this phenomenon cannot be considered essentially good or bad; healthy or unhealthy. For some, ND provided conditions for psychological healing. For others it induced fear; fear that was overwhelming and traumatic, as well as fear that contributed to interconnection. More research is required to determine what conditions lead to beneficial experiences. I will now present conditions that participants considered as helpful in their recollective practice.

Possible conditions to support cocooning

Participants most frequently referred to the condition of physical and emotional *safety* as a requirement to enter into a healing or transformational space. As noted, when people did not feel environmental safety, their attention was directed externally, and thus they did not have the same opportunity to meet unprocessed internal psychological material. Both Bear and Bill believed that one must be introduced to ND slowly. Bear said, “it’s like kinda that exposure therapy. Like kinda taking steps in ways in darkness that you’re comfortable in.” Physical safety

was achieved through familiarity with the land, knowledge of local predators, preparation to address environment challenges, having access to help and “the option to escape” (Bill).

Participants said that emotional safety was acquired by having a spiritual and psychological framework to make sense of difficult emotional material, as well as access to trusted leaders who could help with processing experiences upon return.

Another possible condition includes duration of time in nature. Predominantly, the impactful psychological experience with ND occurred on the third or fourth night of their recollective practice. I am inclined to believe that there is a relationship between duration and the intensity of psychological experiences. Further research is required to determine this nature of this relationship.

A Different Way of Being

In this section, I explore the possibility that ND provided participants with *A Different Way of Being*. As noted in the subtheme, *From Active Doing to a Different Sense of Being*, participants expressed feeling stress and overwhelm from “capitalist” (Joanne) daytime activity that perpetuated production and doing. Their testimonials suggest that, generally in their lives, their relationship between production (daylight activity) and rest (nighttime activity) were out of balance. Participants expressed discontent from being overly-stimulated, and spoke to experiences that reflect the results of living in a light-preference society.

Participants consistently expressed that ND provided conditions for more rest, quiet, connection to the self, and doing ceremony.²⁰ Dale believed that being in ND offered an “important” and “extremely necessary” access to one’s experience of the self. She continued to

²⁰ Note that these more restful states were expressed when there was an absence of fear.

allude to earth's natural cycle of light and dark - daylight and nighttime - and proposed that culturally we so often deny alignment with darkness. She believed that ND helped her align with earth's larger cycle of light and dark, and in doing so, she noted how her experience of 'selfhood' shifted as she felt into the rhythms of the natural world. This again highlights the nature of interconnection; Dale's experience alludes to the idea that connecting to the broader environment creates (or co-creates) shifting experiences of being a 'self' in the world.

As noted earlier, light is associated with creating distance and deepening the subject/object separation (Burik, 2019). Darkness, on the other hand, is considered to create closer connections and facilitate experiences of "being in" (Burik, 2019, p. 358) our environment. Working with the idea that darkness reduces the subject/object separation inspires the question of ND's capacity to help individuals experience their environments more fully, and may potentially soften habitual human/nature and inner/outer splits. This line of questioning is supported by the narratives of participants who claim to have felt a deeper sense of "being-with" (Dale) in ND.

It is to be noted that this connection is not value-neutral or merely positive. As noted previously, for one individual, the connection to the more-than-human world induced fear states. This vision of connection isn't simply an idealized story of humans and more-than-human connection. We also need to admit the vulnerability of humans in these broader environments, not to mention the vulnerability of the broader environment to human behaviour. A self-protective response may be the most appropriate response to specific conditions. That being said, if our relationship with the broader environments is merely self-protective, we may miss out on important human experiences of being-in-the-world, and being-in-relation.

Conditions to support A Different Way of Being

Participants spoke about how mindfulness and contemplative practices helped them shift from doing/thinking toward states of presence. These practices included zazen and sit spots (Harper et al., 2019). Secondly, exposure to some level of perceived risk helped some participants, like Happy Dancer, access an experience of vulnerable openness to the environment. Lastly, as people sensed their boundaries are reduced, experiencing ND in a natural setting may enhance the experiences of inter-species connection, whereas experiencing ND with other humans may enhance intra-species connection.

Spiritual Connection

I will now explore the possibility that ND supported spiritual connection for the research participants. “Spiritual connection” is a vast term, with myriad meanings. In this section, I refer to the participants’ own uniquely personal experiences of connecting with the spiritual. In preparation for this research, I did not include extensive references to the spiritual aspects of ND in my literature review. Interestingly, this theme became a major focus of the interviews: Participants considered spiritual development and connection as an important aspect of their experience with ND. Due to this finding, I have included new literature in my discussion of spiritual connection.

It was noted by the interviewees that ND was a “gateway” (Jaxon) to the spiritual realm and that spiritual experiences became more concentrated at night. Spiritual experiences included interacting with deceased ancestors and family members; sensing oneself in another lifetime; feeling connection to others beyond time and space; and experiencing a relationship to the divine, or God.

The relationship between darkness and spirituality has been alluded to in literature across many fields of study (Bogard, 2013; della Dora, 2011; Hatchell, 2014; Koslofsky, 2011, Waldram 2008). There are numerous practices in which individuals engage with darkness as a means of spiritual connection. The Coast Salish sweat lodge, a place for purification and connection to the spirit world, is described by Waldram (2008) as a “physical representation of the feminine; dark and closed, the lodge represents the mother’s womb.” (p. 53). Hatchell (2014) speaks about the Tibetan practice of Dark Retreat, where the yogi is confined in a dark space for hours to decades for spiritual growth and mystical communication. He describes it in the following way:

They instruct the yogi to spend lengthy periods either gazing at the blank sky or residing in a dark room specially prepared to seal out all light. Both of these are forms of sensory deprivation and result in a series of unstructured appearances of light—like sparks, fireflies, and so forth—that ultimately coalesce into a vision of deities, or the appearance of a luminous goddess known as the Great Seal. (p.7)

In the 4th Century BC, caves were occupied by Christian hermits who intentionally secluded themselves in the darkness as a means of “emptying’ themselves of passions and earthly cares in order to be filled by divine grace” (della Dora, 2011, p. 761).

For mystics, like St. John of the Cross (1957), the dark was an opportunity to purge one’s worldly and spiritual attachments to create a union of the soul to the divine. The participants’ intentions were not necessarily to purge themselves of their attachments, yet for some, ND facilitated encounters with the divine: “[Darkness] helped bring me into a more of a connected place with spirit, with God in the darkness” (Jaxon).

della Dora (2011) explains how ND's visual absence (or *No-thingness*) invites the spiritual, and therefore a supportive environment for sacred connection: "visual presence conceals spiritual absence; visual absence invites divine presence" (p. 762). In the same way that caves are considered spaces of retreat from daily life (Moyes, 2012), ND seemed to offer participants seclusion from the world of objects and doing. Perhaps ND's quality of retreat or *No-thingness* is the reason that participants contacted a dimension of self that differed from everyday consensual reality. Less "daytime" stimuli, experiencing spaciousness or reduced boundaries seemed to heighten their access to the spiritual realm. Rational explanations to why the *veil is thin* in ND may be difficult to provide, but for the participants, ND seemed to support access to the spiritual.

As noted earlier, fear was a theme that emerged from the interviews. Otto (1958) proposes that in encountering the *numinous*, which is the combined experience of terror and fascination, one will commune with the divine. Numinosity seemed to be a part of Bear's experience of feeling paradoxically small and helpless amongst the vastness of a starry sky. He spoke about how this overwhelming experience was a "gift" that brought depth and mystery to his life. Happy Dancer and Jaxon also spoke about feeling rapture, awe and "undeniable interconnection" (Jaxon) when witnessing starry skies. Participants seemed to think that the experiences of interconnection and knowing our place within a larger system was healing in its own right. For these three participants, accessing views of the night sky evoked such experiences.

Bill drew a link between spiritual development and the ability to tolerate ND: "This is totally anecdotal but a lot of those people that I've met who talk about that *fear*, seem to be at a point where they feel quite spiritually disconnected." Bill continued by stating that the tolerance

of the unknown is an important ingredient to spiritual development. Seeing as participants had highlighted a relationship between ND and personal spiritual experiences, it's worthwhile considering the spiritual realm in the discourse on psychology and therapeutic process.

Historians of darkness have noted a correlation between fear of predators and increased light at night in Western society (Bogard, 2013; Davies & Smyth, 2018; Edensor, 2015; Koslofsky, 2011). Based on participants' descriptions of addressing and transmuting fear within their recollective practices, I wonder if engagement with fear in ND would lead to future reduction of fear of ND. If so, there is significant potential to shift the dominant dynamic in which humans transform their outer landscapes, via security lights etc., as a means to mitigate their experiences of fear. If we are able to confront the fear within us, I wonder whether this would reduce humans' alteration of earth's natural cycles of light and dark?

In traditional therapeutic practice in modern western society, therapy occurs indoors, primarily under artificial light. Understanding that ND inspired spiritual connection, and that participants found this to be an aspect of their "wholing" process, I see an opportunity for therapists to consider the possibilities of collaborating with ND to support spiritual development with their clients.

Conditions for spiritual connection

All participants had a psychospiritual framework for their recollective practices. These unique frameworks, such as doing ceremony on the land, calling in 'shadows,' praying for visions, supported the individuals to make sense of the spiritual aspects of their ND experiences.

It should be noted that most participants were fasting during their ND experience. Since fasting has been employed as a method for spiritual connection (McKnight, 2010), it may be

possible to draw a connection between fasting and spiritual experiences during ND. I would recommend more research into this as well.

*We grow accustomed to the Dark -
When Light is put away -
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Good bye (...)*

*The Bravest - grope a little -
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead -
But as they learn to see -*

*Either the Darkness alters -
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight -
And Life steps almost straight.²¹*

²¹ Emily Dickinson's *We Grow Accustomed to the Dark* (1998)

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this final chapter, I note the limitations of this study of experiences of natural darkness (ND) and offer recommendations for practice and further research based on the findings and discussion.

Limitations

This research explores the narratives of eight, predominantly-white, adults who live on Vancouver Island, Canada. This study is localized and findings cannot be generalized. This is a common limitation in hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. As data analysis is subject to my biases and interpretations, there is a lack of universality in this study. Also, growing up in a Western context, my perspective on ND reflects a specific ontology, and will not reflect the experiences of people whose lives, relationships and cosmologies are differently organized and integrated with the natural world. Lastly, the interviews were conducted over one meeting per participant, and the data collected was representative of what was shared in that specific moment in time. Because meaning is co-created between researcher and participant in hermeneutic research, it is recommended that findings be validated by participants within the analysis process. Due to time pressures, this stage was not enacted which heightens the probability that my phenomenological subjective position dominantly influenced the findings.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

As mentioned earlier, there are numerous ecotherapists who engage with ND, and yet there is little research on the impacts of this engagement. Based on the findings from this sample group, I focus on the following recommendations: physical and psychological safety, time on the

land, reduced stimulation, engaging with fear, mindfulness practices, fasting, and psychospiritual frameworks.

It is important to note that in my findings, there is a tension between how a sense of safety on one hand, and how an experience of fear on the other, might contribute to beneficial experiences of ND. Whereas some associate fear with numinosity, others participants found that a lack of environmental safety drew their attention to surviving their environment, which restricted their access to healing internal psychological material.

I want to suggest that facilitating vulnerability, as well as fostering safety, are equally important to a psychological process, and need to be calibrated to individual needs. Fear may support external connection, an awareness of one's vulnerability and *place in the universe*, while safety and a sense of preparedness and security may support a more internal experience.

In order to foster more safety, familiarizing participants with the natural environment in daylight, educating about the dangers of local predators, and attending to environmental safety measures (e.g., ensuring warmth and dryness) would be recommended. Other recommendations include incorporating the engagement with darkness without additional stimulation (e.g., use of flashlights and cell phones), as well as planning for longer time on the land which may support more psychological material to emerge.

Allowing some level of risk may support participants to see their vulnerability, which may awake them to their dependence on the web of life. Risks may include allowing for proximity to other animals, and for exposure to the elements (e.g., sleeping under a tarp vs. in a cabin). Further, as psychological material can "bubble up" in ND, it's essential that guides have appropriate training, and that their participants are psychologically ready; An assessment process

would be advised. Recommendations for practice include practices that support mindfulness, including zazen meditation or nature sit spots (Harper et al., 2019).

It is recommended that practitioners find practices and frameworks that are culturally sensitive and appropriate to support spiritual connection with individuals involved. Because the vision quest is a practice and psycho-spiritual framework that is correlated with ND, appropriative practices and contentious “borrowing” from other traditions needs to be considered.

Further research recommendations include investigation into Jung (1960) and Yunt’s (2001) hypotheses about the relationships between the healing of subjugated psychological material and environmental health. As well, participants expressed a relationship between the duration of time of their experience on the land, with the intensity of psychological experiences. Further research is recommended to determine this relationship, and if increased time supports more impactful processing of psychological material. Other recommendations for research include investigations into the relationships between ND, fasting and spiritual experiences.

Finally, as the majority of the participants in this sample were white adults with extensive experience in the wild, I recommend further study with a more diverse population.

Denouement

This research focused on investigating peoples lived experiences of darkness in nature-based contexts. As I have not discovered any literature pertaining to the role of ND in recollective practices, this research fills a considerable gap within the field of ecotherapy and ecopsychology. In the findings, it seemed that engaging with ND created opportunities for

participants to process psychological material, confront fear, enter a different sense of being, and support spiritual connection.

It is my hope that this research will support individuals to engage in relationship with ND. As noted by the participants, ND contributed to states of being that are distinct from daytime states of thinking and doing. I believe that these states of *being-with* can expand our sense of self beyond conventional ego identifications, and the roles we play in the day to day. Arriving at this experience of selfhood could mitigate the damage caused by overemphasis on production, growth and expansion. On a planet flooded with light, I believe that humans need to restore a healthier relationship to ND so that, at the very least, we allow space for the planet to rest at night, and for the protection and restoration of earth's species and cycles. Further, in this time of ecological and political uncertainty, I wonder whether ND could help us learn to navigate and tolerate the unknown. Even after this study, ND continues to represent the unknowable and unnameable, and with this, an unquenched desire to continue to explore this phenomenon. Perhaps I could say that staying open and curious about the unknown is an ethical orientation which ND has helped me embody.

You, darkness, of whom I am born—

*I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illuminates
and excludes all the rest.*

*But the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations—just as they are.*

*It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.*

I believe in the night²²

²² Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Night* (2005)

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