

Spiritual Beekeeping:
An Ethnographic Exploration of Sacred Apiculture
in Present-day United States

By

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of a Master of Arts in Ecology & Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

While many have acknowledged the existence of sacred apiculture traditions, very little research has been undertaken to understand the practices, experiences, and cosmologies of beekeepers who cultivate spiritual relationships with bees. Historians and researchers have observed sacred apiculture traditions throughout Euro-American culture, with origins of practice and belief reaching back to antiquity.¹ Similarly, sacred apiculture is currently prevalent amongst beekeepers throughout the United States.² However, to date, virtually no ethnographic research has been conducted to better understand the nature of the spiritual relationships between beekeepers and their bees.³ In order to contribute to this underserved area of academic inquiry, this qualitative study leverages one-on-one interviews with sacred apiculture practitioners throughout the United States to explore the myriad rites, beliefs, and experiences associated with these practices. This research finds that sacred apiculture enables practitioners to gain a capacity for interspecies communication, direct access to spiritual wisdom, experiences of miraculous healing, the dissolution of individual identity, and a heightened sense of ecological consciousness. As the first dedicated study of sacred apiculture among active practitioners throughout the present-day United States, this research contributes new and unprecedented insight into the nature of sacred apiculture as it is currently understood, enacted, and experienced by contemporary practitioners.

¹ Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee In Ancient Times And Folklore*, (Mineola, New York, Dover Publications Inc., 2004), p. 218.

² Tammy Horn, *Bees in America: How The Honey Bee Shaped A Nation*, (Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2006), pp. 406–407.

Jake Eshelman, 'Hive Minds: Exploring The Spiritual Connections Between Beekeepers And Bees', in *Sacred Geography: Conversations with Place*, ed. by Bernadette Brady and Jack Hunter, (Ceredigion: Sophia Centre Press, 2024), pp. 203–218.

³ Simon Buxton, *The Shamanic Way Of The Bee: Ancient Wisdom and Healing Practices of the Bee Masters*, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2004), pp. 9–10.

Note: Based on my research and to my knowledge, what little ethnographic work there is which explores sacred apiculture as a contemporary practice consists solely of acknowledgements that it exists (Ransome, Horn, Möller, etc.) rather than in-depth analyses. That said, there is some literature sharing these practices and beliefs written by active sacred apiculture practitioners (e.g. Buxton), though these are highly personal in nature—and sometimes controversial within the community—such that they do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and experiences of all practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

While many have acknowledged the existence of sacred apiculture traditions, very little research has been undertaken to understand the practices, experiences, and cosmologies of beekeepers who cultivate spiritual relationships with bees.⁴ As such, this qualitative study specifically explores the nature of sacred apiculture as it is currently practiced throughout the United States, using one-on-one interviews and a phenomenological analysis to reveal how practitioners understand, access, and experience the sacred through intimate interactions with their bees. In this study, I begin by tracing the lineage and evolution of sacred apiculture, from its origins in antiquity to how it is currently enacted in America. Turning to my field work, I then discuss how contemporary practitioners find their way to sacred apiculture, whether through a process of individual revelation, as an outgrowth of ecological stewardship and activism, or as an evolution of prior religious or spiritual conditioning. From insights gathered during interviews, I consider how sacred apiculture enables practitioners to access the divine through various rites, offerings, and phenomenological experiences. Finally, I explore what practitioners gain from such sacred experiences with their bees—namely a capacity for interspecies communication, direct access to spiritual wisdom, experiences of miraculous healing, the dissolution of individual identity, and a heightened sense of ecological consciousness.

1.1

An Unfolding Relationship

Humans and bees have been intimately intertwined for millennia. Among the most prolific pollinators on our planet, bees have played a fundamental role in creating the ecological conditions in which humanity could take root and grow.⁵ The longstanding connections between our respective species gradually led to the development of apiculture (the domestication of bees), which can be traced

⁴ Simon Buxton, *The Shamanic Way Of The Bee: Ancient Wisdom and Healing Practices of the Bee Masters*, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2004), pp. 9–10.

Note: Based on my research and to my knowledge, what little ethnographic work there is which explores sacred apiculture as a contemporary practice consists solely of acknowledgements that it exists (Ransome, Horn, Möller, etc.) rather than in-depth analyses. That said, there is some literature sharing these practices and beliefs written by active sacred apiculture practitioners (e.g. Buxton), though these are highly personal in nature—and sometimes controversial within the community—such that they do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and experiences of all practitioners.

⁵ Noah Wilson. *The Bee: A Natural History*, (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 15–16.

back as early as 2,600 BCE.⁶ The advent of beekeeping marked a watershed moment in human history by offering farmers a more reliable means to encourage bees to pollinate—and thereby increase the productivity of—their crops.⁷ As beekeeping and agriculture continued to influence one another, humans have grown steadily more reliant on bees, both existentially and economically. This is especially evident following the invention of the now ubiquitous Langstroth beehive in 1852, which provided beekeepers with a heightened ability to control and manipulate bee colonies in service of humanity's growing agricultural and commercial ambitions.⁸ Today, humans depend on bees more than ever, with wild and domesticated bees pollinating roughly 75% of all the fruits, nuts, and vegetables currently grown in the United States.⁹ This, of course, is a big business. All told, these bees pollinate roughly \$15 billion worth of American crops every year, marking a considerable contribution to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹⁰

In addition to reaping the benefits of pollination, archaeological evidence suggests that humans have been harvesting bee products (e.g., honey, wax, propolis, etc.) for at least 10,000 years (see *Figure 1*).¹¹ Beyond their nutritional value, materials produced in the hive have also been used medicinally to treat various ailments and afflictions in humans, with the earliest known inclusion of honey in a medical prescription dating back to 2,100 BCE.¹² Other practices such as Bee Venom Therapy (BVT) have been in continual use by various cultures for over 5,000 years.¹³ Today, advancements in medical research confirm that various chemical compounds in bee products are indeed beneficial for human health, particularly in slowing the progression of cancer, inhibiting bacterial and viral growth, and mitigating parasitic-related symptoms.¹⁴

⁶ Gene Kritsky. *The Tears Of Re: Beekeeping in Ancient Egypt*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 22015), p. 26.

⁷ Rebecca Ellis, et al. 'From A Free Gift Of Nature To A Precarious Commodity: Bees, Pollination Services, And Industrial Agriculture', *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2020), p. 440. <DOI: 10.1111/joac.12360>

⁸ Ellis, 'From A Free Gift Of Nature', p. 440.

⁹ United States Geological Survey, *The Buzz About Native Bees*, 2015 <<https://www.usgs.gov/news/featured-story/buzz-native-bees>>. [accessed 13 Oct, 2024].

¹⁰ R.A. Morse and N.W. Calderone. 'The Value Of Honey Bees As Pollinators of U.S. Crops in 2000', *Bee Culture*, 128 (2000), pp. 2–15.

¹¹ Melanie Roffet-Salque, et al., 'Widespread Exploitation Of The Honeybee By Early Neolithic Farmers' in *Nature*, Issue 527, pp. 226–230 (2015). <DOI: 10.1038/nature15757>.

¹² *The Beekeeper's Bible: Bees, Honey, Recipes & Other Home Uses*. (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2011), p. 44.

¹³ Rim Wehbe, et al. 'Bee Venom: Overview Of Main Compounds And Bioactivities For Therapeutic Interests'. *Molecules*, 24(16), (2019), 2997 <<http://doi:10.3390/molecules24162997>>.

¹⁴ Firzan Nainu, et al. 'Pharmaceutical Prospects Of Bee Products: Special Focus On Anticancer, Antibacterial, Antiviral, And Antiparasitic Properties' in *Antibiotics*, 10(7): 822 (2021), <DOI: 10.3390/antibiotics10070822>.

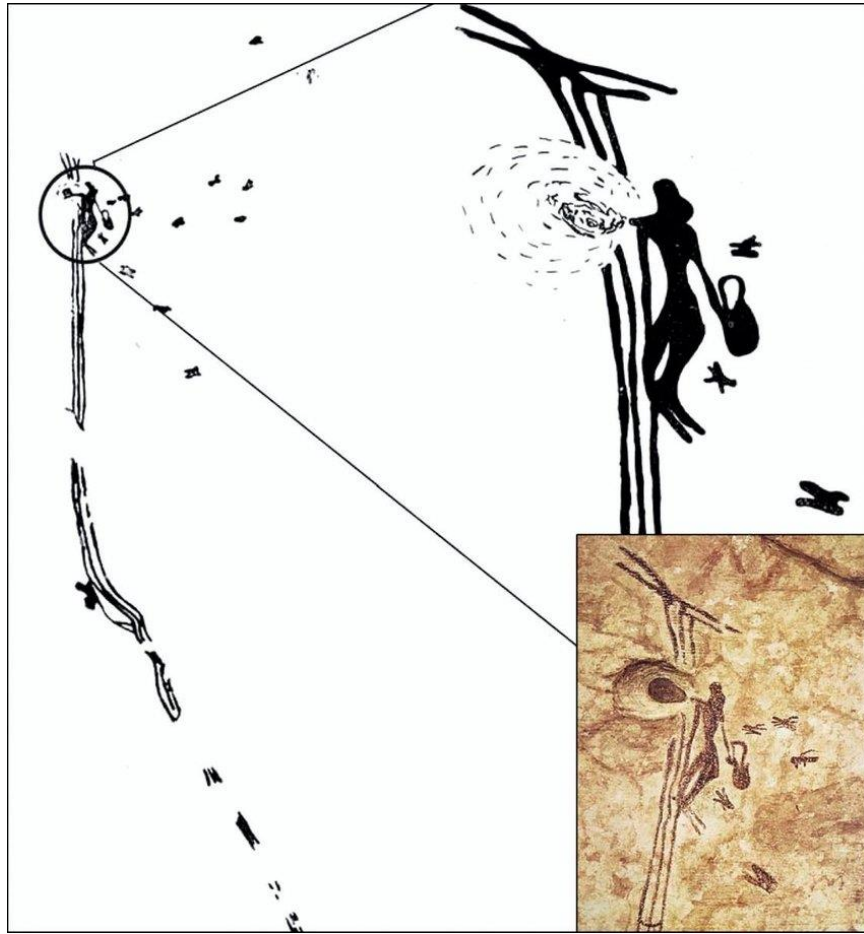


Figure 1. Honey hunting has been traced back to the early Mesolithic. This cave painting dated as early as 8,000 BCE is one of the earliest known depictions of humans harvesting bee products. *Figure courtesy of M. Dams and L. Dams.*¹⁵

Tracing human use of hive products into the depths of pre-history, archaeological evidence indicates that bees may have played an active role in shaping human physiology and cognition. A growing body of research spanning evolutionary biology, human geography, and field anthropology suggests that the consumption of honey provided early hominids with a glucose-rich food source that fueled the sudden growth and development of our brains around two million years ago during a period

¹⁵ M. Dams and L. Dams. 'Spanish Rock Art Depicting Honey Gathering During The Mesolithic', *Nature*, 268(5617), (1977) pp. 228–230. <DOI: 10.1038/268228a0>.

that coincides with the creation and use of specialized tools for harvesting hive products.¹⁶ As Thor Hanson adds, ‘honey [is] the most potent brain food of all’ and has therefore been uniquely valuable throughout the evolution of our species as our brains consume up to 20% of our body’s everyday energy requirements.¹⁷ Put plainly: bees help(ed) make us human.

1.2

Bees & Cosmology

In addition to guiding our evolutionary biology, bees also have a long legacy of influencing what we believe. Bees have long been a central component of sacred and spiritual traditions across time, geography, and culture.¹⁸ A papyrus dating back to ancient Egypt explains that honey bees emerged from the tears of Re and are thus direct manifestations of the divine.¹⁹ Elsewhere in classical Greece, bees were seen as holders of sacred knowledge. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* recounts how three oracular bee nymphs taught Apollo the art of divination (see *Figure 2*).²⁰ This is further corroborated in the *Odyssey*, where we learn from Circe that honey is a key ingredient in divinatory necromancy rituals to access hidden truth from the dead.²¹ These connections between bees, truth, and fate are also reinforced etymologically, with *meli-* acting as the common root for both ‘honey’ and ‘the future’ in ancient Greek.²² Fittingly, the Delphic oracles and priestesses of Demeter who enacted the Eleusinian mysteries were likewise called the *melissae*—meaning ‘bees’.²³

¹⁶ Alyssa Crittenden. 2011. ‘The Importance Of Honey Consumption In Human Evolution’, *Food and Foodways*, 19:4 (2014), 257–273 <DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2011.630618>.

¹⁷ Thor Hanson. *Buzz: The Nature And Necessity Of Bees*. (New York: Basic Books, 2018), pp. 133–134.

¹⁸ Eva Crane. *The World History Of Beekeeping And Honey Hunting*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 594.

¹⁹ Frank Leek. ‘Some Evidence Of Bees And Honey In Ancient Egypt’, *Bee World*, 56(4), (1975), p.163. <DOI: 10.1080/0005772X.1975.11097564>.

²⁰ Hugh G Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homeric*. (William Heinemann: London, 1914), pp. 403–405.

²¹ Homer. *The Odyssey*, trans. by Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), p. 258.

²² Catalin Anghelina. ‘Apollo’s Bee Maidens In The Homeric Hymn To Hermes’, *Eranos*, (2023) 114:2, 63–69, pp. 65–66.

²³ Mara Lynn Keller. ‘The Eleusinian Mysteries Of Demeter And Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality, And Rebirth’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4(1), (1988), p. 33.



Figure 2. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, three oracular nymphs known as the *Thriai* were described as having the human heads and breasts, but the bodies and wings of bees.²⁴ This similar metallic bee goddess figure was produced between 700–600 BCE.²⁵ Figure courtesy of The British Museum.

Beyond their association with esoteric knowledge, bees are also mythologically linked to cycles of life and death. This is embodied in the epithet *Melitodes* (meaning ‘the honeyed one’) used to invoke the goddess Persephone, who was rare in her ability to cross between the realms of the living and the dead.²⁶ The mythological understanding of bees as psychopomps has also been traced throughout folk

²⁴ Evelyn-White, *The Homeric Hymns*, p. 403.

²⁵ [Artist once known], Item 1860,0404.124 [*Decorative plaque*], [Electrum], c. 700–600 BCE, British Museum, London. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1860-0404-124>. [Accessed 17 Dec, 2024].

²⁶ Lucia Prauscello. ‘Μελίβοια: The Chthonia of Hermione and Kore’s Lost Epithet in Lasus Fr. 702 PMG’, *The Classical Quarterly* (2011), 61, pp. 19–27. <<https://doi:10.1017/S0009838810000492>>.

belief in Western Europe.²⁷ This is particularly evident in the tradition of Telling the Bees, in which beekeepers will inform their beehive(s) of notable events in the family such as births, deaths, and marriages, with the idea that their bees could carry the news across the veil to their departed loved ones (see Figures 3 & 4).²⁸ This tradition lingers today—even in international headlines when the English royal beekeeper had to break the news of Queen Elizabeth’s death to her hives in 2022.²⁹ Others, such as media scholar and cultural theorist, Dominic Pettman, presently enact Telling the Bees as a form of self-care to address feelings of alienation and anxiety brought about by the shallow exchanges of social media and ‘the violent vibrations of hyper-entropic capitalism’.³⁰



Figure 3. [Detail] Hans Thoma, *Der Bienenfreund*, 1863.

Translated to “The Bee Friend”, this oil painting possibly depicts the once common practice of Telling the Bees.³¹ Figure courtesy of Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe.

²⁷ Hilda Ransome. *The Sacred Bee In Ancient Times And Folklore*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937; repr. Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2004), p. 161.

²⁸ Ransome, *The Sacred Bee*, pp. 19–20.

²⁹ Daniel Victor. ‘When The Queen Died, Someone Had To Tell The Bees’, *The New York Times*, 13 Sept, 2022.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/13/world/europe/bees-queen-elizabeth.html>>. [accessed 3 Dec, 2024].

John Dingwall. ‘EXCLUSIVE: Royal Beekeeper Has Informed The Queen’s Bees That The Queen Has Died And King Charles Is Their New Boss Is Bizarre Tradition Dating Back Centuries’, *Daily Mail*, 10 Sept, 2022.

<<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11199259/Royal-beekeeper-informed-Queens-bees-HM-died-King-Charles-new-boss.html>>. [accessed 3 Dec, 2024].

³⁰ Dominic Pettman. *Telling The Bees: An Interspecies Monologue*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024), p. XIV.

³¹ Hans Thoma. *Der Bienenfreund* [Oil on canvas] (1863). (Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe.)

<<https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Hans-Thoma/Der-Bienenfreund/3010961644CA646DBE9788B00C1366F8/>>. [accessed 18 Dec, 2024].



Figure 4. Charles Napier, *The Widow*, 1895.

Though not an explicit depiction of Telling the Bees, the artwork's title and inclusion of mourning clothes supports the lingering cultural association between bees and the dead in 19th century Europe.³² *Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Complementing their ability to traverse the veil between worlds, bees were also seen as both metonyms and direct manifestations of the human soul. In his discussion of bees in Homer's *Odyssey*, Porphyry quotes Sophocles, who describes the bee-like qualities of the dead who travel 'in swarms' while emitting 'a humming sound'.³³ Similar mythologies also persist throughout Western Europe, where contemporary traditions maintain that the human soul emerges from the body of a sleeping person in the form of a bee.³⁴

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

³² Charles Napier. *The Widow*. [Oil on canvas] (1895). Wikimedia Commons.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Widow_by_Charles_Napier_Hemy.jpg#globalusage>. [accessed 18 Dec, 2024] .

³³ Porphyry, *On The Cave Of The Nymphs In The Thirteenth Book Of The Odyssey*, trans. by Thomas Taylor, (London: J.M. Watkins, 1917), p. 23.

³⁴ Ransome, *The Sacred Bee*, p. 161.

Beekeeping as a Sacred Practice

Given the myriad mythical associations surrounding bees, it is little surprise that beekeeping has emerged as a spiritual practice across cultures. In her work exploring bee mythology and folklore, Hilda M. Ransome notes that sacred apiculture is well established amongst contemporary beekeepers throughout Euro-American culture, with possible lineages of belief and practice reaching back to beekeeping's early origins.³⁵ Focusing specifically on beekeepers within the United States, Tammy Horn's anthropological research finds that spiritual beekeeping is prevalent in apiaries and communities throughout America.³⁶

Yet beyond acknowledging that sacred apiculture *exists* in the present-day United States, virtually no ethnographic research has been conducted to explore how it is currently understood, enacted, and experienced by active practitioners. Offering a possible explanation for such a dearth of research into sacred apiculture, it has been suggested that these traditions remain highly esoteric in part to protect practitioners from persecution.³⁷ In the influential—albeit recently controversial—book amongst sacred apiculture practitioners, writer and practicing shaman Simon Buxton shares his own interpretation of why such practices have evaded outsider inquiry, stating that:

where powerful, arcane information is being transmitted from one person to another, the oral tradition is usually the safest way of protecting this knowledge from those who might put themselves and others at risk by using it.³⁸

Such reticence to share one's spiritual experiences in relationship with bees echoes the lingering distrust of anthropologists held by certain minority and indigenous groups who suffered as a result of

³⁵ Ransome, *The Sacred Bee*, p. 218.

³⁶ Tammy Horn, *Bees In America: How The Honey Bee Shaped A Nation*, (Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2006), pp. 406–407.

³⁷ Buxton, *Shamanic Way Of The Bee*, pp. 9–10.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

Note: The controversy surrounding Buxton's work stems from accusations of plagiarism and irresponsible scholarship put forward by other sacred apiculture practitioners. For some within the community, these accusations have cast considerable doubt on the veracity of the lineage, traditions, rites, and experiences Buxton shares in The Shamanic Way of The Bee, as reported by Interviewee B.

anthropology's sordid colonial leanings.³⁹ Similarly, non-dominant spiritual communities in America often remain deliberately secretive about their beliefs due to ongoing experiences of persecution, vandalism, and traumatic governmental interventions into their personal lives.⁴⁰ Even within contemporary beekeeping circles, those inclined towards alternative or spiritual practices report being mocked, ostracized, and even attacked by other beekeepers.⁴¹

Looking beyond the possibility that sacred apiculture practitioners have deliberately flown under academia's radar, it may also be possible that ethnographers—for whatever reason—simply have not been interested in exploring these traditions. Regardless of the root cause(s), the shortage of research provides a considerable opportunity to explore sacred apiculture as it exists today.

2.2

Defining Sacred Apiculture

One of the key challenges of studying sacred apiculture is to clearly define it. Apiculture—or the practice of domesticating bees—speaks for itself. However, the associated concepts surrounding apiculture as a 'sacred' and 'spiritual' practice tend to elude clear-cut definitions. Because both terms conjure a breadth of complementary and competing interpretations, it is important to articulate how these terms are used and understood in context of this research.

To do so, I will lean on David Hay and Rebecca Nye's work exploring the spiritual experiences of children, which inspired a particularly elegant definition of spirituality as the 'potential to be much more deeply aware both of ourselves and of our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves'.⁴² In other words, spirituality is a subjective experience of heightened consciousness and radical relationality. This definition is particularly generative in the context of sacred apiculture. Firstly, it establishes that spirituality is unique to—and inclusive of—every individual's idiosyncratic experience(s). Secondly, it demonstrates that spirituality can exist independently of ideological dogma, social strata, and devotional rites often associated with religious practice. As such, this approach finds that spiritual experiences can manifest in innumerable ways, including beekeeping.

³⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research And Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd edn, (London, Zed Books Ltd, 2012), p. 2.

⁴⁰ Sabina Magliocco. *Witching Culture: Folklore And Neo-Paganism In America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 11.

⁴¹ Lotte Möller. *Bees And Their Keepers*, trans. by Frank Perry (New York: Abrams Image, 2021), p. 204.

⁴² David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit Of The Child*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2006), pp. 21–22.

Similarly, it is important to pin down the swirling and elusive concept of the ‘sacred.’ For this, it is fruitful to borrow from multiple scholars, whose various contributions can be woven together to create a workable mosaic of meaning surrounding the sacred as it manifests in apiculture. In fact, an apiary is a fitting illustration for Durkheim’s concept of the sacred as that which we ‘set apart’ from everyday experiences and maintain through regular ritual and community-building.⁴³ Managed beehives are generally situated in the periphery such as along fences, in back yards, on rooftops, near property lines, beside crops, and other locations people rarely venture into without specific intent or invitation. Even the most secular of apiaries is maintained through everyday ritual. Before interacting with their bees, most beekeepers don specialized garb (e.g., bee suits, netted bonnets, etc.) unique to the apiary. Using purpose-built canisters, they ritually conjure smoke to calm their bees before opening their hives. Then there is the dedicated community that exists within the apiary: bees, beekeepers, their apprentices, and other potential initiates. As Young and Goulet point out, these social interactions are often catalysts for spiritual encounters, stating that ‘what is seen at first as an “extraordinary experience” is in fact the normal outcome of genuine participation in social and ritual performances through which social realities are generated’.⁴⁴ In other words, the sacred manifests in—and through—relationship.

Complementing the functionalist approach to the sacred, other scholars contend that the sacred is more than a product of the human psyche and our social impulses. German philosopher and theologian Rudolph Otto argues that the sacred is greater than an abstract concept. Rather, it is *real*. In *The Idea of the Holy*, he describes how the sacred (or what he calls the *mysterium tremendum*) exists in an objective, noumenal realm just beyond the bounds of language, description, and our everyday reality.⁴⁵ Further breaking from a purely functionalist understanding of the sacred, Edmund Leach adds that instead of *creating* the sacred, ritual provides the means through which humans can *access* the power and wisdom of the divine.⁴⁶

Regardless of whether the sacred is a social construct or objective reality, it is also important to consider the nature of sacred *experience*. Taking a phenomenological approach, Mircea Eliade argues that interactions with the sacred characteristically alter our normal perceptions of place and time such

⁴³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of Religious Life*, Translated by Karen E. Fields, (New York, The Free Press, 1995), p. 118.

⁴⁴ David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, *Being Changed By Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology Of Extraordinary Experience*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 8.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea Of The Holy*, Reprint (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978), p.26.

⁴⁶ Edmund Leach. *Culture And Communication*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 82.

that we can temporarily lose our spatial and temporal bearings.⁴⁷ As Andrew von Hendy summarizes, Eliade suggests that experiences of the sacred catalyze a simultaneous sense of timelessness and radical presence that momentarily suspend our foothold in quotidian life.⁴⁸

While there are notable differences between the respective pathways into the sacred carved out by Durkheim, Otto, Leach, and Eliade, their collective contributions nonetheless work largely in tandem to create a three-fold assemblage of the sacred—namely that which is separated from mundane reality, confronts us with experiences of the ineffable, and temporarily re-writes the rules of our time-space continuum. Returning to the context of beekeeping, we can therefore understand sacred apiculture as a practice of accessing the divine through direct interaction and relationship with bees.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Though spiritual worldviews can be shared by many, the nature of spiritual belief and experience is inescapably subjective.⁴⁹ As such, this study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to access deep insights into sacred apiculture through the first-hand accounts shared by individual practitioners during semi-structured, one-on-one interviews.⁵⁰ By revealing the nuanced cosmologies and rites of individual practitioners, this research offers a foundational glimpse into sacred apiculture as it is practiced and experienced today.⁵¹

3.1

Finding Participants

Given the highly personal nature of spiritual belief, it was essential to establish trust amongst what turned out to be a far-reaching, yet tightly woven community of sacred apiculture practitioners

⁴⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred And The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York, Pantheon, 1957), pp. 68–70.

⁴⁸ Andrew Von Hendy. *The Modern Construction Of Myth*, (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 184.

⁴⁹ Worthington, Everett, et al. 'Religion And Spirituality', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 67(2), (2011), p. 204.
<DOI: 10.1002/jclp.20760>.

⁵⁰ David Woodruff Smith. 'Phenomenology', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>> [accessed May 2, 2024].

⁵¹ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 2nd edn, (London, Sage Publications Ltd, 2020), p. 42.

throughout the United States. To do so, I leveraged relationships I've built while exploring the ethical and ecological relationships between people and bees since 2018.⁵² Indeed, it was through this overarching research that I first discovered the existence of sacred apiculture and managed to meet some of those who practice it.⁵³

Though there are many rites, belief systems, and experiences underlying sacred apiculture, it would be recklessly reductive to suggest there is a single representative demographic or orthodoxy that defines spiritual beekeeping in America. Myriad practices and practitioners coexist, each emerging from—and often blending—various cultures, ethnicities, ideologies, and spiritual frameworks.⁵⁴ As such, it was essential to gather a diverse roster of research participants for this study.

Knowing that people may feel reticent or vulnerable discussing their spiritual beliefs (especially in context of research), I began my fieldwork by identifying potential participants who speak publicly about their spiritual relationships with bees, whether through their online presence, public workshops, writings, lectures, or other outlets. This included several practitioners who are outwardly working to share, celebrate, and even steward spiritual beekeeping practices. After amassing a list of self-identifying sacred apiculture practitioners, I began by contacting individuals whose emails were publicly available *in context of* spiritual beekeeping (i.e., through their websites) asking if they would be interested in participating in this study. In each email, I briefly summarized my research objectives, invited them to a one-on-one interview, explained the purely voluntary nature of their participation, and articulated how I would use and protect their data.⁵⁵

Once participants confirmed their interest, we scheduled loosely structured, one-on-one interviews, either in-person or through video chat depending on their location. Regardless of format, I invited each participant to speak with me in or near their respective apiaries. This choice of setting served four essential research functions. Firstly, it provided a safe, familiar, and private context in which participants could feel comfortable—even inspired—when discussing their spiritual connection(s) with bees. Secondly, encouraging such proximity to their bees opened up the possibility for their hives to be implicated—if not directly included—in our conversations. Thirdly, it enabled me to observe the behavior of participants and their bees, adding an additional layer of insight into their spiritual connections.⁵⁶ Lastly, given the phenomenological emphasis of this research, situating our conversations

⁵² See Jake Eshelman, *Telling Of The Bees*. <www.jakeeshelman.com/Telling-of-the-Bees> [accessed 1 Oct, 2024].

⁵³ Eshelman, 'Hive Minds', pp. 203–218.

⁵⁴ Ransome, *The Sacred Bee*, p. 218.

⁵⁵ For reference, see the email invitation template document in the addendum.

⁵⁶ Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 171.

near the hives heightened our collective ability to explore the sensations of interacting with bees in a spiritual context.

Before beginning each interview, I reiterated the intended usage, privacy protections, and voluntary nature of each discussion. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, I then recorded each interview, using my iPhone for in-person conversations and Zoom for virtual meetings. To ensure confidentiality, I stored these recordings on a biometric- and password-protected device, with back-ups saved to a private cloud server. I also made a point to only collect personal identifying information for the purpose of scheduling our interviews and maintaining correspondence, as appropriate.

Despite—and because of—the tight-knit nature of the sacred apiculture community in America, I worked to keep participation strictly confidential so practitioners could feel safe sharing their ideas and experiences without fear of judgement or backlash, whether from their peers or the general public. However, I was nonetheless able to leverage sacred apiculture’s informal network structure to help find practitioners I may not have been able to identify, approach, or speak with without the help of word-of-mouth references from within the community.⁵⁷ To this effect, I ended each interview by asking the participant if they felt comfortable inviting other practitioners to participate in this study (without revealing they themselves had been interviewed). I gave explicit instructions that any interested practitioners should then email me directly to keep their participation confidential. This strategy granted me access to practitioners who weren’t necessarily public about their sacred apiculture practices, which heightened the diversity within my research sample and improved the quality of insight gleaned from our conversations. Lastly, I have further safeguarded what little personal identifying information I collected by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, as well as using the personal pronoun ‘they’ to help obscure suggestions of the respondent’s sex and gender identity.⁵⁸

3.2

Limitations

Like any type of ethnographic research, this study may be influenced by certain limitations and caveats. Firstly, despite obtaining informed consent, respondents may have felt social or professional

⁵⁷ Hennink, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 171.

⁵⁸ Admittedly, the personal nature of what some participants shared may undermine my efforts to obscure their respective sex and/or gender identities.

pressure to participate due to their previous interactions with me or their relationships with other practitioners. Secondly, despite working to amass a diverse research group, this sample of eight respondents cannot fully represent the experience of all sacred apiculture practitioners throughout the country. For example, I was not able to access practitioners representing certain minority groups (e.g., Native Americans, non-English speaking communities, etc.), who may maintain completely different rites and cosmologies around spiritual beekeeping. Furthermore, my research revealed notable ethical and ideological schisms that divide members *within* the sacred apiculture community, suggesting there could be more subgroups and factions not yet accounted for.⁵⁹ Further research of this kind would be required to assess whether these considerations influence the findings from this study.

3.3

Reflexivity

Though not a beekeeper myself, my ongoing interest and familiarity with apiculture grants me a heightened ability to understand beekeepers' cosmologies, which may otherwise be lost to a layperson. Furthermore, such 'insider' knowledge helps preempt some of the concerns previously mentioned regarding the perceived and potential dangers of sharing knowledge with those outside of a given community.⁶⁰ Despite my ability to relate and empathize with sacred apiculture practitioners, my 'insider' knowledge nonetheless carries unique challenges. I of course have my own personal relationship with bees, which transformed from childhood terror into an ongoing conceptual, ethical, and aesthetic fascination. Because of this, I've become increasingly interested and invested in the wellbeing of bees—and the relationships we collectively cultivate with them. This impulse is not unique to my research.⁶¹ Tracing a similar cognitive, sympathetic, and spiritual evolution through her own fieldwork, Sabina Magliocco discusses how participating in Neo-Pagan rituals she was studying simultaneously influenced her own personal cosmology while actively improving the quality of her research. She writes:

⁵⁹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

⁶⁰ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, pp. 1–2.

Buxton, *The Shamanic Way Of The Bee*, pp. 9–10.

Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, p. 11.

⁶¹ Young and Goulet, *Being Changed By Cross-Cultural Encounters*, p. 8.

I chose to actively participate in the religions I was studying [...] and as a result of these experiences, I changed in significant ways. Because I decided to remain open and vulnerable during rituals, I gained access to imaginative experiences I had banished from my consciousness since reaching adulthood. These were crucial in helping me understand the essence of the culture I was studying; had I *not* had them, I would have failed to grasp the importance of religious ecstasy in the Neo-Pagan experience.⁶²

Here, Magliocco eloquently recounts how ethnographers themselves can be actively shaped by their research, while also acknowledging that this can nonetheless *enrich* their work when handled responsibly and reflexively. As such, I worked to leverage my own existing interests, ideas, and experiences surrounding bees without *projecting* them onto those shared by my research participants.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

As previously mentioned, sacred apiculture is a highly idiosyncratic spiritual practice influenced by myriad factors, such as one's cultural, philosophical, or religious leanings. However, this research nonetheless revealed several common themes that help to clarify the multifaceted nature of sacred apiculture as it is currently enacted and understood by practitioners throughout the United States. As such, we can establish a broad understanding of sacred apiculture by exploring (1) how people find their way to practicing sacred apiculture, (2) how practitioners access the sacred through beekeeping, (3) how practitioners *experience* the sacred, and (4) how spiritual interactions with bees reformulate individual cosmologies.

⁶² Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, pp. 11–12.

Pathways to Sacred Apiculture

Just as sacred apiculture has many winding and complementary antecedents reaching back towards the ancient world, there is no single path to becoming a practitioner. In fact, it seems resolutely malleable and inclusive. Within the intimate sample size of eight participants, this study revealed practitioners who self-identify as Protestant Christian, lapsed Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Agnostic, Atheist, Animist, and Neo-Pagan.⁶³ As such, it appears that one's spiritual or religious background does not exert much—if any—influence on whether one gravitates towards sacred apiculture. Furthermore, several practitioners noted that they often blend or inhabit multiple spiritual ideologies at once. One participant embodies this rather vividly, sharing that their sacred interactions with bees are mediated through a motley collection of Catholic Saints and Neo-pagan figures, with St. Benedict and Green Man enjoying particular prominence.⁶⁴

i. Spiritual Ecology

Although the sacred apiculture practitioners in this study represent a wide range of spiritual and religious belief, interviews revealed that all participants view nature as a spiritual home and/or an expression of the sacred. One practitioner puts it rather plainly, stating that their baseline spirituality revolves around the idea that 'there's a consciousness in all things—and that it wants to be interacted with'.⁶⁵ While this does not innately conflict with the spiritual or religious ideologies of these research participants, their shared veneration of nature suggests a common cosmological foundation underpinning sacred apiculture.

Fittingly, many practitioners discovered sacred apiculture following formative experiences in nature. In an effort to support the declining health and population of bees, Blake transformed their backyard into a pollinator sanctuary, eventually culminating in a dedicated apiary.⁶⁶ Others came to

⁶³ Interviewees A–H, interviewed between 21 Apr, 2023–8 Mar, 2024.

⁶⁴ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

⁶⁵ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

⁶⁶ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

sacred apiculture as an outgrowth of land stewardship and agricultural work.⁶⁷ Jordan explicitly links the shared spiritual significance of agriculture and apiculture, stating that both are ‘in service of the Earth and her wellbeing’ in that they provide ways for us to ‘heal the human relationship between ourselves and the “other”—whether it’s other human beings, animals, plants, minerals, or our own bodies’.⁶⁸

ii. Trauma

Healing is another common pathway into sacred apiculture. Behavioral research finds that when people face adversity or experience trauma, they often turn to spirituality to find solace, guidance, and affirmation.⁶⁹ Taylor embodies this shift rather succinctly, recalling how a deep professional, personal, and existential crisis ‘brought me to the bees’.⁷⁰ For Harper, the connection between bees, trauma, and spiritual healing is particularly salient. They share how:

in the process of building a hive, I got pregnant. And, after three months, I miscarried in the spring. It was a hospitalized miscarriage; a surgery, unfortunately, so it was a very traumatic event. And about 10 days later, I got my first swarm call. I would say—without knowing it—I worked with the bees therapeutically, as a healing modality. The bees required such attention, focus, and presence that I was able to stay in my body in a way, where otherwise the grief and the loss was very dissociative. Watching [the bees]... caring for them really tethered me on a physical level, but also an energetic level.⁷¹

In Harper’s experience, bees were not only witness to, but active participants in their healing journey, ultimately leading to a deepening spiritual connection.

⁶⁷ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

⁶⁸ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

⁶⁹ Ca Trice B Glenn. (2014). ‘A Bridge Over Troubled Waters: Spirituality And Resilience With Emerging Adult Childhood Trauma Survivors’, *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 16(1), (2014), pp. 37–50.
<DOI: 10.1080/19349637.2014.864543>.

⁷⁰ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

⁷¹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

iii. Synchronicity

Other practitioners find their way to sacred apiculture through synchronicity or what some describe as fate. Morgan was deathly terrified of bees when they were suddenly entrusted to care for a friend's beehive, triggering a gradual process of engagement and spiritual revelation.⁷² As they put it, what started as a panic-ridden duty of care evolved into a realization that a hive 'isn't just a bunch of insects in a beehouse; there's a consciousness'.⁷³ Soon after this cosmological shift, they began receiving spiritual insights directly from the bees.⁷⁴

4.2

Enacting the Sacred

Given that beekeeping provides a pathway into the sacred, it is important to understand how practitioners actually get there. Broadly speaking, there are two main arteries. The first is through dedicated ritual and ceremony. The second is by entering into altered states of consciousness. Naturally, these two pathways overlap and influence one another—and it is not necessarily clear, useful, nor possible to fully distinguish one from the other.

i. Ritual

Ceremony and ritual are fundamental aspects of sacred apiculture. Speaking in broad terms, Blake posits that 'ritual is *engrained* in beekeeping because you need to come see the bees on a regular basis'.⁷⁵ A deeper analysis reveals that these ritual observances are highly personal and unique to each practitioner's individual experiences, interests, and beliefs. Blake, for example, recites the *Blessing of the Bees* prayer to their hive every year on St. Benedict's Day, incorporating elements of their Catholic upbringing in ceremony with the bees.⁷⁶ By comparison, Jordan enacts rituals for—and with—the bees

⁷² Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

⁷³ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

⁷⁴ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

⁷⁵ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

⁷⁶ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

in accordance with the pagan Wheel of the Year calendar.⁷⁷ Describing a ceremony enacted during winter solstice, Jordan explains that each participant carries a lighted beeswax candle to the beehives and, once there, offers songs to the bees.⁷⁸ For the participants, this communal gesture celebrates the:

inner light of the bees... the warmth and light they radiate in their winter clusters. I feel a little bit of magic there; almost like the blessing of Hanukkah, where it's not only physical substance that keeps the candle lit—it's also spirit.⁷⁹

Here, the gathering's symbolic act of bringing light to the hives during the darkest day of the year invokes a felt sense of collective kinship, not only through the shared use of sacred material (i.e., beeswax candles), but by recognizing the bees as luminous manifestations of the divine.

In a similar fashion, other practitioners use ritual to consecrate and heighten the spiritual potency of these sacred spaces. As the bees begin to reemerge during the spring, Harper transforms a beehouse in their apiary into an altar, which they decorate with flowers, candles, symbols, and sacred objects (*see Figure 5*).⁸⁰ After consecrating the altar, it is then maintained throughout the year with gestures and gifts in observance of Celtic and European seasonal holidays.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

⁷⁸ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

⁷⁹ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

⁸⁰ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

⁸¹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.



Figure 5. This photograph depicts a beehive altar adorned with offerings of water, flowers, wax, incense, and other votives. *Image courtesy of Harper.*⁸²

ii. Offerings

Both within and beyond the ritual context, sacred apiculture practitioners also venerate bees through offerings. Again, these gestures are highly idiosyncratic. Some offerings, such as gifts of ancestral foods, are purely spiritual in nature.⁸³ (Honey bees are less inclined to feast on Colcannon; it is the thought that counts). Other practitioners infuse the sacred into their practical, everyday hive management processes. Blake offers that their bees really enjoy the water fountain they installed near the hive, adding that it ‘makes sense too, because it’s holy water’.⁸⁴ Elliot offers another charming example, in which they always incorporate a bit of plant matter from around each colony as fuel for the

⁸² Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), photograph emailed to author, 27 November 2024.

⁸³ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), photograph emailed to author, 27 November 2024.

⁸⁴ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

hive smoker.⁸⁵ For Elliot, this gesture is an important step in ensuring that the smoke has ‘a positive impact on our interaction’.⁸⁶ In many ways, this mirrors the practice of smoke cleansing (e.g., *saining*), in which smoke from spiritually significant plants, resins, or woods is used to ritually purify a space, person, or energy. Taylor enacts a similar practice with their bees, adding that ‘if I’m about to open a hive or gather a swarm, I *always* will smoke myself to clear my energy. And then I offer [the bees] the smoke to clear their energy too’.⁸⁷ Here, the blessing becomes communal.

In keeping with the ethereal nature of smoke, other practitioners give fragrant offerings to their bees, such as flowers and incense. This dovetails with a longstanding tradition of beekeepers rubbing the inside of their hives with aromatic herbs that bees are known to enjoy.⁸⁸ Building on this practice, Harper burns propolis near the hive to honor the bees using their own material culture.⁸⁹ As bees are particularly sensitive to scent, this is seen as an especially potent means of veneration.

iii. Altered Consciousness

Ritual and ceremony are far from the only paths into the divine. In Greenwood’s work exploring experiences of the sacred, she states that ‘otherworldly reality is experienced through a shift in consciousness. It involves trance states and “opening up” to a rich imaginative inner world’.⁹⁰ This requires vulnerability—or at very least, a release of one’s inhibitions.

Intoxication has been noted as a common means through which practitioners can transcend the bounds of normative behavior and everyday experience to reach the sacred.⁹¹ Bees, of course, have helped intoxicate humans for millennia. Made from an alchemical mixture of honey, water, and time, mead is the first alcoholic drink to grace the human palette and still carries magico-medicinal significance across cultures.⁹² However, sacred apiculture practitioners need not partake in the mead itself to feel the bees’ intoxicating influence. In describing the lemongrass-like smell honey bees emit

⁸⁵ Interviewee G (Pseudonym: Elliot), interviewed 24 Jan, 2024.

⁸⁶ Interviewee G (Pseudonym: Elliot), interviewed 24 Jan, 2024.

⁸⁷ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

⁸⁸ Möller, *Bees and Their Keepers*, p. 98.

⁸⁹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

⁹⁰ Susan Greenwood. *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld*, (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 24.

⁹¹ Lionel Obadia. ‘Ritual Intoxication? A Combined Ethnography Of Alcoholized Rites, From Asian Shamans To European Judaism (Nepal-France)’, *Civilisations*, 1(66), (2017), pp. 91–104. <DOI: 10.4000/civilisations.4380>.

⁹² P.E. McGovern, *et al.*, ‘Fermented Beverages Of Pre- And Proto-historic China’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 101.51 (2004), pp. 17593-17598 <DOI: 10.1073/pnas.0407921102>.

while swarming, Taylor muses that the scent is ‘trance-inducing; very mind-altering’.⁹³ Avery and Harper are more direct, both stating that the smells, sounds, and vibrations of the hive are ‘intoxicating’.⁹⁴ Regardless of how practitioners become inebriated by the bees, this altered state provides them with a felt sense of the ineffable; a leap out of mundane reality into another realm.

Several practitioners also access the sacred through decidedly sober means of liminal consciousness, such as meditation and dreamwork. Embodying both, Devon first connected to bees on a spiritual level during:

a very intense three-month winter retreat at a remote monastery where we were in various states of meditation all day long—from 5am to 9pm. That’s deep space; deep heart. Whoever goes into those conditions, the dreamworld becomes very alive, receptive, and transparent. I started dreaming about bees then. That’s where I *met* bees for the first time.⁹⁵

Devon’s experience mirrors those shared by other practitioners—particularly Morgan, Harper, and Jordan—who frequently receive spiritual information from bees in the space between being asleep and fully awake.⁹⁶

4.3

Phenomenology of Sacred Experience

Having established some of the mechanisms through which practitioners can access the sacred, it is useful to explore how they then *experience* it. Tracing various stages of spiritual initiation, Greenwood argues that the body is the conduit through which we can access sacred wisdom.⁹⁷ Put another way, the divine literally incarnates within us. Such sensuous qualities of the sacred are artfully articulated by Harper, who explains that:

⁹³ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

⁹⁴ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

⁹⁵ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

⁹⁶ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

⁹⁷ Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld*, p. 31.

a lot of our profound spiritual insights come through really paying attention to our senses—somatically. When we allow that awareness to be coupled with imagination and meditation, we can have profound experiences that are led by the body. And the bees require that of you, otherwise you get stung [laughter].⁹⁸

Building on Greenwood and Harper, it becomes clear that the divine characteristics of sacred apiculture are mediated through the senses. As such, I will explore how practitioners experience the sacred both in—and beyond—the body.

i. Touch

Physical encounters with the sacred have a way of catalyzing spiritual revelations. Take for example the common refrain of being ‘touched by God’ to explain experiences of miraculous healing, sudden good fortune, or shifts in one’s worldview. Touch carries similar gravity in sacred apiculture, particularly as a means of initiation. Reflecting on their early experiences exploring beekeeping as a spiritual practice, Harper found themselves unexpectedly doused in bees from head to toe.⁹⁹ This sudden intimacy with the bees sparked an immediate revelation:

I felt myself become *one* with the bees. And I knew I wasn’t going to get stung. There were over one hundred bees crawling all over my body; in my ear and my armpit—uncomfortable places. And I just felt a complete euphoria with them. A complete trust of them. And a love of them. And a sense of transcendence. For all of my spiritual seeking through meditations and all the things, there are only a handful of moments in your life when you get that *direct* transcendent experience. [...] I just understood that they were my path forward—following the bees.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

⁹⁹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

Such a profound revelation through touch is reflected in a recently-coined phenomenon known as The Hodges Effect, which describes a person's existential reorientation after they've been suddenly struck (or perhaps blessed) by a celestial object, such as a meteorite.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, researchers find that the intimacy of these physical encounters stimulates a renewed sense of curiosity, wonder, and possibility—themes which also characterize the spiritual revelations experienced by sacred apiculture practitioners.¹⁰² Admittedly, I felt similarly inclined when one of Avery's honey bees alighted on my forehead and remained there for the duration of our hour-long interview in their apiary.

Sacred touch is not always pleasant. Indeed, Jordan's revelation may be more accurately described as communion through apitoxin (bee venom). While attempting to retrieve a swarm from high up in a tree, dozens of bees fell down their shirt and stung in unison.¹⁰³ Jordan elaborates:

quite a significant amount of venom entered me then. I got to the ground and was feeling a bit light-headed. [...] Then, as I was laying there, I felt myself lifting upwards out of body and saw myself back down at the base of the peach tree with my apprentices surrounding me. I was up there for about an hour and a half. That experience isn't easy to describe. I knew I was in council—in *circle*. I saw bright, egg-shaped orbs or beings all around in this circle with me. It's hard to say exactly; I don't have English for it, but when I came to and went forward in my relationship, it was a really significant moment. [...] It felt like some kind of initiation or walking through a threshold. And things just opened up for me with the bees after that. I became a better beekeeper almost immediately. All the sudden, I had a deeper sensitivity to the subtlety of their movement and vibration and sound and smell—their inner life.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Sean Miller and Sean Taylor. *The Hodges Effect: A Field Guide To Hurling Through Space*, (Cork: National Sculpture Factory, 2021), p. 1.

¹⁰² Miller and Taylor, *The Hodges Effect*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

Beyond the dissociative possibilities of pain, Jordan's apitoxin-induced, out-of-body experience can be understood as a sort of rebirth prompted by a direct (and notably intense) communion with the bees. This experience with bee venom also recalls previously discussed links between revelation and ritual intoxication.

Touch does not have to be sudden nor surprising to trigger a spiritual epiphany. Other practitioners outlined how they gradually started to shed their protective gear as a gesture of trust and comfort with their bees. While encased in what they described as a protective 'hazmat suit', Morgan began to overcome their fear of bees when one landed on their wrist.¹⁰⁵ After sharing prolonged eye contact with the bee, Morgan felt the urge to take off their clothing bit by bit to encourage more intimacy.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Taylor adopted a practice of beekeeping barefoot, literally grounding into the earth as a way to enrich their interactions with the bees.¹⁰⁷ Given that others practitioners share a similar impulse to remove any barriers separating them from their bees, the deliberate lack of protective garb might serve as a defining characteristic of sacred apiculture.

Spiritual interactions with bees also extend beyond just *physical* touch. Paradoxically, Devon's metaphysical interactions with bees simultaneously root into and transcend the body. They note that on one hand, 'being touched by this presence we call honeybees [is] the ultimate home, beyond our bodies, beyond our cultural karma, beyond anything'.¹⁰⁸ Here, the sacred eludes the corporeal. Yet on the other hand, Devon indicates that the sacred kinship they feel with the bees 'penetrates every single cell; all parts of my being'.¹⁰⁹ Here, the sacred kinship with bees manifests an animating ontological and physiological connection—even without direct *physical* touch.

ii. Sight

When beekeepers intimately observe their hives, they often experience a shift in how they see and understand the world.¹¹⁰ This is true for sacred apiculture practitioners as well, who often discuss the revelatory power of observing and visualizing connections to their hives. For Devon, this

¹⁰⁵ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Siobhan Maderson and Sophie Wynne-Jones, 'Beekeepers' Knowledges And Participation In Pollinator Conservation Policy', *Journal of Rural Studies at Bangor University*, (2016), pp. 1–43 <<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.02.015>>

cosmological shift emerged the first time they peered inside a wild honey bee nest in their natural habitat—‘the womb of the tree’.¹¹¹ Upon peeking in for the first time, Devon:

did not know what I was looking at. It was glowing. That moment shattered everything from before. I was looking into a whole different cosmology. It had a liberating quality of removing the cloak of beekeeping... of hardware... of practices... of ‘management’. It had all fallen off. All the sudden, there they were... in their *beingness*. Something ancient was revealed. Something of the bees’ true nature.¹¹²

Devon’s experience offered a direct glimpse into the sacred, which triggered a comprehensive shift in their worldview. Additionally, the radiant and luminous qualities of the bees mirrors descriptions and depictions of sacred experience across cultures.¹¹³

Our eyes aren’t the only means through which we can behold the sacred. Visualization also plays an important role. Jordan shares that before going to sleep, they visualize a lemniscate form ‘as a golden thread that goes through my heart and to the core of the beehive and back through my heart’.¹¹⁴ Through this visualization exercise, they are able to offer blessings and obtain information directly from their bees.¹¹⁵ They also incorporate this practice into their daily hive management routine, combining this lemniscate meditation with a visual inspection of each hive to build deeper connections with their bees.¹¹⁶

iii. Smell

Given its ethereal and redolent qualities, scent is frequently associated with the sacred. In his work exploring the phenomenology of extraordinary experiences, Joshua Cutchins notes that

¹¹¹ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹¹² Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹¹³ Barbara Weightman. ‘Sacred Landscapes And The Phenomenon Of Light’, *Geographical Review*, 86(1), (1996), pp. 59–71. <DOI: 10.2307/215141>.

¹¹⁴ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

encounters with the supernatural often carry specific fragrant qualities.¹¹⁷ Devon echoes this in context of sacred apiculture, explaining that ‘scent is the carrier of spirit. It’s very ephemeral. It brings worlds together’.¹¹⁸ For Devon, scent even connects us through time. They elaborate how smelling the bees’ scent grants us access to an unbroken line of genetic memory and, as a result, illuminates a deep kinship with bees developed over millions of years.¹¹⁹ By expounding on fragrance’s association with memory (known colloquially as The Proust Effect), Devon’s experience illustrates how the sacred scent of bees brings us deeper into ourselves—both spiritually and ontologically.

Fragrance also offers other revelatory properties. Olfaction is a particularly important aspect of sacred apiculture given that bees use pheromones not only to communicate, but also to alter the biological development of other bees.¹²⁰ As Harper suggests, bee fragrances might have a similar effect on our human disposition as well. They elaborate how experiencing the:

semi-fermented bakery smell of the hive [...] always leaves you with a sense that “all is well. All is as it should be”. Even when I’ve lost hives, I’ve had this same experience through the scent; that all is as it should be.¹²¹

Here, fragrance reinforces a feeling of cosmic harmony and divine presence, even in the face of death and loss.

iv. Sound

For sacred apiculture practitioners, the hum of the hive not only offers a diagnostic tool to gauge the bees’ health and happiness, but it also imparts a sense of sacred wisdom and healing. Avery explains that the buzzing of a beehive sonically corresponds to:

¹¹⁷ Joshua Cutchins. *The Brimstone Deceit: An In-Depth Examination Of Supernatural Scents, Otherworldly Odors, And Monstrous Miasmas*. (San Antonio: Anomalist Books, 2016), p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹²⁰ Lars Chittka. *The Mind Of A Bee*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 10

¹²¹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

the 'C' note. It's the frequency of the world. [...] They've researched the effects of hives and the human body—specifically the 'C' note—and they've found that it lowers your blood pressure; it *grounds* you. And what's so funny is that I've got the lowest damn blood pressure. It's crazy. *[laughter]*. [...] My heartrate drops with the bees. So I have that experience to reference. The bees help me relax—and *know how* to relax.¹²²

For Avery, the sound of the hive is not just an auditory sensation; it is *felt* in the body. Furthermore, the constant din of the hive acts as a form of somatic sound therapy, which helps them overcome physical and psychological stress.

For other sacred apiculture practitioners, sound also operates as a means of transcendence. Recalling their experience 'hearing the apian voice resonating in hollowed-out trees', Devon states that the hum makes you 'forget yourself. You cease to exist. And you don't want to leave'.¹²³ For Devon, the primordial duet between 'apians and arboreal elders' subverts any sense of individual identity, replacing it with an all-encompassing connection with the divine. This was further emphasized by an accompanying sound visualization, which translates a high-quality audio recording of 'apian voice' (i.e., the hum of wild bee nests from inside a tree) into visual data. As Devon elaborates, the resulting images (see Figure 6) have distinct qualities that are 'only visible in the voice of humans who have an active spiritual practice', thereby suggesting that sound may act as a shared spiritual and ontological connection linking our respective species.

¹²² Interviewee G (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

¹²³ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

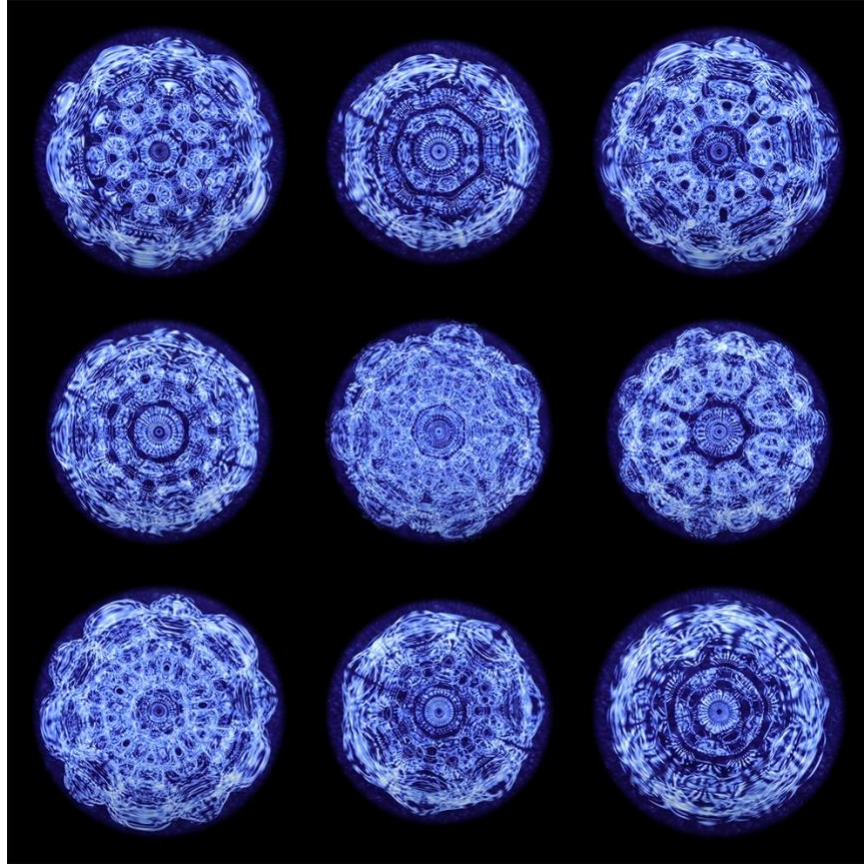


Figure 6. This image depicts nine still images captured from a sound visualization, which translated the auditory din of a wild honey bee nest into visual data. *Image courtesy of Apis Arborea.*¹²⁴

Whereas Devon’s sense of self dissolves into the divine, other practitioners experience sacred sound in ways that encourage self-actualization. While meditating with a bee they rescued from a river, Taylor shares how they suddenly heard a voice saying ‘we are more than people think we are, but no one stops to listen. Stop and listen’.¹²⁵ This spiritual directive triggered an entirely new lifepath, wherein Taylor began to pay closer attention to divine signs and synchronicities, eventually culminating in their path to sacred apiculture.¹²⁶ Through channeling the voice of the bees and expressing it out loud through various ‘strange noises’, Taylor was able to ‘find my voice’ and cultivate a greater sense of

¹²⁴ Apis Arborea. *Apian Songline*. [Composite of still images made from digital data visualisation video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6IIYgZ-ooo> [Accessed 12 Sept, 2024].

¹²⁵ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹²⁶ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

confidence as a person, practitioner, and healer.¹²⁷ Following their own personal transformation by embodying bee sounds, Taylor now relies on similar sonic energies to help others ‘clear and restore their energy’.¹²⁸ To do so, Taylor channels and incorporates bee sounds during client sessions to share sacred healing using the bees’ sonic signature.¹²⁹

v. Taste

Many sacred apiculture practitioners share a regular—or even daily—practice of ‘taking’ honey as a form of communion.¹³⁰ This of course carries a conceptual and ecological underpinning. Honey itself can be described as a concentrated expression of local plant biodiversity, as it is created from nectar gathered from nearby flowers. Offering a memorable example, Dale Pendell cites that honey produced by bees who visit nightshades also carries the plants’ hallucinogenic properties.¹³¹ Furthermore, such mind-altering substances may even become more potent when alchemized into honey.¹³²

When we ingest honey, we intimately interact with our immediate ecology—including the invisible beings who writhe and wriggle throughout our bodies. Indeed, honey is alive insofar as it is animated by countless microorganisms.¹³³ Just as ritual intoxication can influence one’s perception and behavior, biomedical research has found that the microorganisms in our gut influence how—and therefore what—we think.¹³⁴ By implication, to ingest honey is to embrace other perspectives and cosmologies.

These connections between honey and human cosmology are especially evident amongst spiritual apiculture practitioners. For Blake, the gradual changes in the quality and characteristics of their hive’s honey prompted a deeper spiritual connection with bees—and the biosphere at large. They describe how the bees’ honey changed color dramatically after the large, 25-year-old lemon tree in the apiary died.¹³⁵ Beyond recognizing the practical reality that the bees then had to find nectar from other

¹²⁷ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹²⁸ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹²⁹ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹³⁰ Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

¹³¹ Dale Penell. *Pharmakopoeia: Plant Powers, Poisons & Herbcraft*. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), p. 95.

¹³² Pendell, *Pharmakopoeia*, p. 95.

¹³³ Ray Zirui Xiong, et al. ‘Microbiome Analysis Of Raw Honey Reveals Important Factors Influencing Bacterial And Fungal Communities’, *Frontiers in Microbiology*, 13, (2023) <DOI: 10.3389/fmicb.2022.1099522>

¹³⁴ Beibei Yang, et al. ‘Effects of Regulating Intestinal Microbiota on Anxiety Symptoms: A Systematic Review’, *General Psychiatry*, 32(2), (2019) <DOI: 10.1136/gpsych-2019-100056>

¹³⁵ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

sources, Blake also sees the transformation as spiritually significant in that it suggests the bees were actively mourning the loss of their sacred tree and were channeling their grief into the honey.¹³⁶

vi. A Sixth Sense

Sacred experience often exists beyond the bounds of the body's normal senses (i.e. sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste). As Morgan puts it, 'my interactions with the bees give me access to a different interior sphere within myself. I get a "sixth sense" I guess you'd call it'.¹³⁷ This intuitive means of perception takes form in different ways for different people, yet it nonetheless emerged as a common theme for each practitioner I interviewed. This suggests that sacred apiculture activates alternative capacities through which we might experience the divine.

While the mechanisms underlying such connections remain vague (even to those who experience them), we may nonetheless consider a similar allegory in pollination studies. Researchers have discovered that bees and flowers sense one another electromagnetically, such that flowers can invisibly indicate to bees when nectar is available.¹³⁸ Practitioners enjoy similar invisible bonds with their bees, mediated by diaphanous and extracorporeal means of exchange. Jordan, for one, describes their personal capacity to empathize with bees on an extrasensory level. They elaborate:

it's right that you ask me if I *feel* that the bees respond [to offerings]—
because I do. Because it's not like the bees recline in happiness and say
'oh that's so goood'. But that's the *feeling* I get in my meditation.¹³⁹

This empathic link is extraordinary in that it establishes a remote, yet deeply *felt* connection between Jordan and their bees. This is an important consideration in understanding extrasensory perception in sacred apiculture, especially given that the bodily senses only function within set proximities to that which is touched, seen, smelled, heard, or tasted.

¹³⁶ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

¹³⁷ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹³⁸ D Clarke, et al. 'The Bee, The Flower, And The Electric Field: Electric Ecology And Aerial Electoreception', *Journal of Comparative Physiology*, 203(9), (2017), pp. 737–748. <DOI: 10.1007/s00359-017-1176-6>.

¹³⁹ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

Bees also influence human perceptions of time. Whereas beeswax candles were used across cultures as a time-tracking technology as early as 500 C.E., sacred apiculture practitioners share that interactions with their bees prompt *different* experiences—and understandings—of time.¹⁴⁰ For Blake, ‘the apiary is a place where you can sit and just *be*. When you just sit here and watch, time slows down’.¹⁴¹ Whereas time stretches for Blake, others find it impossible to orientate themselves within the time-space continuum. Avery shares that ‘when I go into the hive, I forget about the world around me. I’m *here* and don’t even know what’s going on out *there*. I lose time’.¹⁴² Others experience a sense that time ceases to exist—at least in the way we know it. Taylor shares that they frequently:

enter what I call ‘bee time’ where the perception of time is *actually correct* [laughter]. It’s non-linear. It’s almost like there *is no* time. I don’t know if I’ve been there with the bees for ten minutes or two hours.¹⁴³

Taylor’s account suggests that while human experience may differ from objective reality, sacred apiculture nonetheless provides a way to access the true nature of existence.

4.4

(Re)Shaping Cosmologies

Having already established *how* practitioners experience the sacred, it is similarly important to expand on *what they receive* from such encounters. To do so, I will specifically discuss five key attributes of sacred apiculture that actively shape practitioners’ cosmologies: the ability to (i) communicate across species, (ii) access esoteric knowledge, (iii) experience divine healing, (iv) reformulate one’s individual identity, and (v) cultivate deep ecological consciousness.

i. Interspecies Communication

¹⁴⁰ Leo Rogers. ‘A Brief History Of Time Measurement’, (2011). <rich.maths.org/articles/brief-history-time-measurement> [Accessed 18 Nov, 2024]

¹⁴¹ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

¹⁴² Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

¹⁴³ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

Communication with the supernatural offers a means through which everyday reality and extraordinary spiritual experience can entangle to transform worldviews.¹⁴⁴ This makes communicating with bees particularly pertinent, especially since the linguistic strategies of humans and bees are uniquely linked. Referencing the honey bee's waggle dance, Lars Chittka states that 'no other species (besides humans) uses a similarly symbolic representation to communicate about spatial locations in the real world'.¹⁴⁵ Complementing this shared linguistic capacity, entomologists have also discovered that bees can learn the languages of other species.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, sacred apiculture practitioners share that their communication strategies with bees may also transcend linguistic structures. Devon, for one, specifically converses with their bees using 'a pre- or non-verbal language [rooted in] the *feeling* realm'.¹⁴⁷ Given that all sacred apiculture practitioners enact at least some form of interspecies dialogue, it is worth exploring what they learn from the bees during these exchanges.

Gesture & movement

Beyond traditional language systems, gesture and movement are generative forms of communication for bees, humans, and many other species. Pettman introduces the possibility that in addition to sharing locations of food sources, the bees' waggle dance might also convey poetic or philosophical musings—a sort of bardic cavort.¹⁴⁸ He is not the first to consider the expressive possibilities of bee dances. In a review of dance traditions across cultures, Lawler notes that humans imitate bees through movement, costuming, and choreography to honor and/or channel their divine powers.¹⁴⁹ This sensibility is alive in sacred apiculture as well. Avery draws an explicit parallel between movement and spiritual interactions with their bees, recalling how:

after I became disgruntled with my church, I started going to ecstatic dance every Sunday morning, which involves non-verbal dancing with the community. [...] When I say that out loud, it sounds a lot like my

¹⁴⁴ Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁵ Chittka, *The Mind Of A Bee*, p. 73.

¹⁴⁶ Su Songkun, *et al.* 'East Learns from West: Asiatic Honeybees Can Understand Dance Language of European Honeybees,' *PLOS One*, 3(6), (2008), pp. 1–8. <DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0002365>.

¹⁴⁷ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Pettman, *Telling the Bees*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁹ Lillian B Lawler. 'Bee Dances and the "Sacred Bees"', *The Classical Weekly* (1954), 47(7), pp. 104-106.

experience working with bees because it's all about trust and communication.¹⁵⁰

For Avery, dance and beekeeping intertwine to provide a new spiritual home. Furthermore, Avery's experience using movement as a collaborative dialogue helped them forge stronger relationships with humans and bees alike.

Taylor offers additional insight into the communicative capacity of bees' movement. Describing when bees repeatedly fly toward and away from someone in a dance known as 'buzzing', Taylor explains that this gesture can clear a person's energy field and disrupt harmful behaviors or thought patterns.¹⁵¹ While enacting the sign of the cross, Taylor adds, 'it's a bit like a blessing' in that the bees' movement initiates a process of self-discovery and self-reclamation.¹⁵²

Telling Asking the bees

Though the previously mentioned Telling the Bees tradition uses bees to courier information from the living to the dead, sacred apiculture practitioners are more inclined towards cultivating *two-way* conversations with their hives—enacting what might be better described as *Asking* the Bees. Harper puts this rather bluntly, stating that sacred apiculture's 'true teaching is to *listen* to the bees'.¹⁵³ Through this process, practitioners gain practical and spiritual insight to better navigate relationships, challenges, ecological change, and the unknown. Taylor shares that 'whenever I feel confused or unsure about something, or that I need support, the bees are who I usually go to for advice'.¹⁵⁴ These reciprocal exchanges establish a sense that the bees not only hold divine wisdom, but are also able to share it through sacred dialogue.

Telepathy and dreamwork

¹⁵⁰ Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

¹⁵¹ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁵² Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁵³ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

It has already been established that liminal consciousness provides a pathway into sacred encounter with bees, but what do these silent and often sedentary channels of communication reveal in the way of esoteric knowledge? Some information is notably practical in nature. For Morgan, everything they know about caring for their hives ‘was dictated to me directly *from* the bees’ in the liminal state between being asleep and awake.¹⁵⁵ Yet in addition to benefitting from pragmatic knowledge, the direct line of feedback from the bees also strengthens their shared spiritual and psychic bonds. Similarly, Harper frequently experiences direct revelations by ‘inviting the consciousness of the bees to bring a dream, or to support my dreaming’.¹⁵⁶ In a particularly formative experience early in their beekeeping career, Harper recalls how:

I had two weeks of dreams about black widows. And they kept getting worse and worse. So by the end of this series of nightmares about black widows, I dreamt I was in my basement and there were so many webs just encroaching on me until I was just crawling underneath all of them out towards the beehive. And I woke up in the in-between state before being fully awake, I suddenly understood that there was a black widow in the hive. So before anything, on go the gloves and I walk out to the hive and, sure enough, a black widow is taking up half the beehive and the bees are totally cramped; they couldn’t be in their hive. So that’s when I realized there’s something to this. It’s not just my imagination; it’s very real.¹⁵⁷

This experience of receiving tangible esoteric knowledge from bees during intentional dreamwork exemplifies how they communicate divine insight, even without relying on symbolic language.

ii. Access to Esoteric Wisdom

¹⁵⁵ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁵⁶ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

Sacred apiculture practitioners frequently suggest that bees travel between multiple dimensions. Harper notes how bees operate ‘in a very different experience of reality’ that is more ‘objective’ and ‘true’.¹⁵⁸ By implication, humans may simply bumble about in our little sliver of reality until the bees reveal a glimpse into the noumenal.¹⁵⁹ Describing this experience, Blake shares that such revelation ‘feels like you’ve entered another realm—and it only lasts a while’.¹⁶⁰ Unfettered by the fleeting nature of sacred experience, many practitioners actively seek other modes of being, sensing, and knowing that emerge during spiritual encounters with bees. Yet while some see ‘the great mystery’ as a challenge to be solved, others seem content lingering in the unknowable. For Devon, sacred apiculture is ‘trusting that the apian being can act through me, even without me knowing. That it’s my offering. I don’t need to know’.¹⁶¹ Through sacred relationship, Devon becomes both a vessel and agent for the unknown.

Hive divination

Because bees are understood as keepers of esoteric knowledge, sacred apiculture practitioners frequently engage their hives for divination. Those who appeal to bees’ oracular aptitude often receive spiritual counsel and divine knowledge. Such insights enable practitioners to see and understand themselves in profoundly different ways. Through hive divination, Taylor recounts that ‘bees have connected me more deeply to a sense of purpose that I didn’t really have before,’ which not only improved their work as a beekeeper, but also helped them support others as a Tarot reader.¹⁶² Discussing the bees’ increasingly active role in Taylor’s client readings, they elaborate that:

the bees started coming in a lot and bringing in some really specific information. [...] Since then, I think the conversation between myself and the bees has deepened. Anything I have going on at this point that I feel like I need more information about or support with, I just go to the bees.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁶⁰ Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

¹⁶¹ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶² Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁶³ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

The physical and energetic relationship Taylor has cultivated with bees establishes a sense of mutuality, wherein bees proactively bring spiritual guidance, even without being asked. Yet, this relationship has to be continually nurtured through trust and accountability. Offering a cautionary explanation of engaging the divinatory services of bees, Morgan reflects that they will *always* follow the bees' guidance.¹⁶⁴ From their perspective, ignoring sacred advice is a great way to lose access to it. They elaborate how they 'make sure that I keep my word. It's by *not* keeping your word that you become disconnected from bees' and—by extension—the spiritual wisdom they carry.¹⁶⁵

In addition to harnessing spiritual guidance, sacred apiculture practitioners also share experiences of obtaining sudden gnosis, even when that information is confounding. With considerable levity, Morgan shares how bees sometimes transmit information human recipients can't quite comprehend.¹⁶⁶ Remembering one such lecture on quantum physics, they explain that the bees assumed Morgan:¹⁶⁷

would be able to understand this stuff; or at least that I could figure it out. I had to go and look it up. And of course, what they said was accurate. But it was amazing to me because I couldn't make any of that up; I'm not smart enough!¹⁶⁸

Morgan's humorous anecdote attributes an omniscient quality to the bees, while nonetheless reinforcing the importance and power of human humility in our attempts to keep up the intellectual pace. All self-effacement aside, Morgan's experience implies that humans *can* learn complex cosmic truths. Taylor also finds value in the cryptic lessons from bees, wondering why our species is so quick to dismiss 'different ways of receiving knowledge when, right now, we need all the help we can get?'.¹⁶⁹

iii. Miraculous Healing

¹⁶⁴ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶⁵ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶⁶ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁶⁹ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

In a historical survey of hive medicine, Kritsky notes that its efficacy relies ‘as much on its magical significance as on its physical properties’.¹⁷⁰ This is illustrated rather evocatively in the Finnish *Kalevala*, which tells of a mother who sends a bumblebee into another realm to retrieve a special honey she then uses to reassemble and reanimate her son’s corpse after he was hacked apart.¹⁷¹ Fortunately, no one I interviewed needed such extreme healing, but the magico-medicinal aura surrounding bees is acutely felt by practitioners, who report experiences of miraculous healing through various forms of apitherapy (the use of bee products to treat illnesses and promote everyday human health).

Some practitioners undergo apitherapy without necessarily knowing it. Avery shares that their health greatly benefitted from ‘the smell, the vibration, the exercise, [and] the honey’ before learning apitherapy even existed as a concept or discipline.¹⁷² Since then, Avery actively relies on apitherapy to overcome illness, such as crediting their recovery from Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) to a breathing machine filled with propolis.¹⁷³

Many practitioners specifically see Bee Venom Therapy (BVT) as an important healing modality. During BVT sessions, patients are injected with apitoxin to treat various ailments and health conditions. Though not widely supported by allopathic medicine, many apitherapy patients and practitioners maintain that BVT is the only treatment that relieves symptoms associated with incurable conditions.¹⁷⁴ As a relatively unregulated practice, BVT is often self-administered or simply ‘received’ in the field. Taylor shares that in addition to helping manage chronic nerve pain, BVT also offers emotional support in that the ‘venom carries an energy of change; it brings information around surrendering to change; of being adaptable’.¹⁷⁵ Taylor’s experience underscores how apitoxin acts as both emergency and preventative medicine that simultaneously heals practitioners on physical, psychological, and spiritual levels.

The bees’ *desire* to heal also determines apitoxin’s medicinal efficacy. Taylor shares that ‘the bees are very intentional about where they sting you—and *why*’.¹⁷⁶ This suggests that the bees perform diagnostic reviews and make strategic decisions to heal their intended patient. Morgan experienced this firsthand, recalling the moment when a bee:

¹⁷⁰ Kristky. *The Tears of Re*, p. 93

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 93

¹⁷² Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Avery), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

¹⁷³ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁷⁴ K. M. Socarras, et al. ‘Antimicrobial Activity Of Bee Venom And Melittin Against *Borrelia Burgdorferi*’. *Antibiotics*, 6(4), (2017), p. 31. <DOI: 10.3390/antibiotics6040031>.

¹⁷⁵ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

flew up in the air, turned a circle, and landed right at the base of my thumb where I was sore from pruning. And all the sudden, she stung me. I was like, “wait a minute... that doesn’t fit the picture I had of the moment we were having there.” She *stung* me! I was more surprised than anything else. [...] But I realized within a minute that her venom had gone into my hand and it stopped hurting. So she knew exactly what I needed, and then gave it to me.¹⁷⁷

Morgan’s account suggests that bees remotely sense aspects of our health and wellbeing—and feel inclined to help. It turns out, bees may know more about what is happening in our bodies than we do. Scientists have recently discovered that honey bees can reliably detect early cancer cells in humans through smell alone.¹⁷⁸

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of apitherapy is that you don’t necessarily need to get stung, breathe propolis, ingest honey, or undergo any specific procedures to benefit from it. Simple proximity to one’s hive can work wonders. Avery shares how being in sacred relationship with bees inspired them to prioritize everyday health. They recall how:

I started taking care of myself, got a doctor, and started going to see her regularly. And about five years in, she told me that my numbers—my *everything*—gets healthier every time she sees me. Usually, it’s the other way around. And she said, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think it’s because you’re a beekeeper”.¹⁷⁹

In this moment, apitherapy and allopathic medicine validate one another in concluding that the very act of relating with bees improves practitioners’ health outcomes.

¹⁷⁷ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Michael Parnas, et al. ‘Precision Detection Of Select Human Lung Cancer Biomarkers And Cell Lines Using Honeybee Olfactory Neural Circuitry As A Novel Gas Sensor’. *Biosensors and Bioelectronics*, 261, (2024), pp. 116466. <DOI: 10.1016/j.bios.2024.116466>.

¹⁷⁹ Interviewee H (Pseudonym: Elliot), interviewed 5 Jan, 2024.

iv. Ontological Reorientation

Sacred encounters with bees lead some practitioners to reformulate—and even dissolve—their sense of individual identity. Though this process is highly personal, several common themes emerged linking practitioners' experiences.

Self and Superorganism

The social behavior of bees has long prompted humans to ponder the dubious nature of individuality. Referring to the intelligence that seems to permeate the swarm, Chittka argues that the collective 'appears to "know more" than the sum of its individual members' and therefore 'resembles a single being'.¹⁸⁰ One could recognize a similar sense of hive mind between sacred apiculture practitioners and their bees, as these encounters trigger revelations that are only accessible in sacred relationship. This emergent collective consciousness between practitioners and bees further blurs the boundaries that otherwise separate our respective species. As such, it is worth considering whether—and to what extent—sacred apiculture practitioners feel like they are part of the overarching superorganism.

Experiences vary. Morgan, for one, is very clear, stating 'I am part of the hive, for sure'.¹⁸¹ Blake, however, introduces a bit more nuance, citing that they belong to 'the hive once and a while' when conditions are just right.¹⁸² This situational enmeshment into the superorganism is also mirrored by Taylor, who explains:

sometimes you're allowed in and sometimes not. There have definitely been moments when I feel a total sense of oneness with my bees—that the boundaries completely dissolve.¹⁸³

Here, Taylor highlights the fact that relationships—and therefore identities—are dynamic and porous.

¹⁸⁰ Chittka, *The Mind Of A Bee*, pp. 140–141

¹⁸¹ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁸² Interviewee E (Pseudonym: Blake), interviewed 21 Apr, 2023.

¹⁸³ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

Furthermore, needing permission to enter bee realm carries connotations of initiation—an important rite of transformation and community-building within sacred communities.

Becoming bee

Taking the dissolution of individual identity a step further, some practitioners receive spiritual insight through metaphysically merging with bees. Conjuring the lingering sensation of one such experience, Jordan mentions that ‘it’s hard to say where I end and where the bees begin’.¹⁸⁴ Ironically, this ontological haze nonetheless informs a clearer sense of self *through relationship* with the ‘other’. Jordan elaborates, ‘more and more, I feel myself as an individual who wouldn’t be anything of what I am, if not informed by the whole of the hive’.¹⁸⁵ This gradual expansion towards a more inclusive, interspecies sense of self underscores the ontological reality of what it means to be human. After all, on the most basic biological level, we are walking, talking amalgamations of countless bacteria, archaea, viruses, and other microorganisms who are essential for the wellbeing of the overarching ‘individual’.¹⁸⁶ The blurring of ontological boundaries has a similar effect for Harper, whose Kafka-esque transformation into a bee during meditation instilled a deeper sense of (inter)personal identity. While imagining a swarm of bees permeating their body, Harper shares how:

all of my body was a swarm. I was a swarm in human form. And it was so beautiful... but so absolutely strange. It took me so long to come back in [to my body]. I had to go to the mirror and say “you are *you*, you are *human*.” [laughter] I was looking into my eyes and it felt like I was a bee looking back at myself. It was very bizarre and amazing and hard to describe.¹⁸⁷

Harper’s temporary transformation into the sacred ‘other’ ultimately triggers a renewed expression of what anthropologist Jon Mitchell calls the ‘existential grounds of selfhood’, wherein a practitioner

¹⁸⁴ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Elakshi Dekaboruah, et al. ‘Human Microbiome: An Academic Update On Human Body Site Specific Surveillance And Its Possible Role’, *Arch Microbiology*, 202(8), (2020), pp. 2147–2167. <DOI: 10.1007/s00203-020-01931-x>.

¹⁸⁷ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

continually crafts and reformulates their personal identity (i.e. identities) based on their unfolding experiences and interests rather than their static, 'essential' qualities.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, Harper's experience also parallels other forms of egoic transformation, wherein practitioners ritually embody the spirit of sacred animals to transcend and regenerate the self.¹⁸⁹

v. Ecological Consciousness

Though taxonomically incorrect, bees are sometimes colloquially called 'gateway bugs' since they are credited with encouraging popular support for environmental conservation. They encourage the same in beekeepers, whose duty of care to the bees makes them more inclined to participate in ecological stewardship and biodiversity initiatives.¹⁹⁰ This growing sense of ecological consciousness has a spiritual dimension as well for sacred apiculture practitioners. Taylor states how interacting with bees continually deepens their connection with 'the whole of the natural world'.¹⁹¹ Feeling a similar kinship, Jordan elaborates:

if you follow the path of the bee, it's a window or threshold you walk
through to see that if the land isn't healthy, the bees aren't healthy. And
if the water's not healthy, the air's not healthy.¹⁹²

Put another way, sacred apiculture attunes practitioners to the ecological kinships that support all life—bee, human, and otherwise.

Healing human shame & chauvinism

¹⁸⁸ Jon P. Mitchell. 'Ritual Transformation And The Existential Grounds Of Selfhood.' *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 23(2),(2009), pp. 53–66.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44368810>>.

¹⁸⁹ Mitchell, 'Ritual Transformation', p. 53.

¹⁹⁰ Maderson and Wynne-Jones, 'Beekeepers' Knowledges And Participation In Pollinator Conservation', pp. 1–43

¹⁹¹ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁹² Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

This heightened sense of spiritual, ethical, and ecological advocacy is particularly salient in context of the unfolding impacts of anthropogenic climate crises. However, rather than scolding humans for the devastation, sacred encounters with bees provide practitioners with generative models to heal humanity's relationship with our biosphere. Harper witnessed such cosmological shifts amongst their sacred apiculture mentees, whose interactions with bees taught them that humans:

are not just the “virus” so to speak, or the violent animal coming in and destroying everything, and so on. Instead, there's this sense of inclusion and invitation to repair those relationships. And I think people come away from their experiences realizing that the bees actually *want* them around.¹⁹³

This realization affirms the agency of everyone involved. Firstly, it establishes the possibility that bees *choose* to engage with us rather than simply being ‘kept’ as livestock. Secondly, it suggests that humans can affect positive global change by recognizing our place *within* nature, as opposed to presiding *over* it. Finally, Harper's account suggests that bees view humans as capable collaborators worthy of the sacred knowledge they offer us.

Sacred apiculture practitioners also credit bees with protecting humanity. Discussing their own revelation, Taylor explains that bees are helping ‘humanity navigate the changes that Earth is experiencing—and that their main focus is to help us shift out of fear and into love.’¹⁹⁴ Such intent introduces a humbling possibility: just as humans work to ensure the health and happiness of their bees, the bees also do the same for us. These mutual expressions of care and guardianship undermine any perceived teleological hierarchy separating our species. In turn, this shared devotion retrieves humans from our isolated, egoic towers and resituates us firmly within an interdependent web of ecological relationships. To maintain sacred relationships with bees is to also acknowledge that we are nature too.

Untamable wildness

¹⁹³ Interviewee B (Pseudonym: Harper), interviewed 16 Jan, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

By catalyzing deeper connections to our biosphere, sacred apiculture also reveals insight into the enduring nature—and power—of wildness. For Elliot, spiritual encounters with bees provide a direct connection to that which cannot be tamed. Drawing an analogy, they state that while farmers can contain cattle to control their gene pool, bees elude *true* domestication because managed and wild colonies will always interbreed.¹⁹⁵ In other words, wildness always wiggles its way into the apiary.

This dynamic tension between wild and domesticated colonies instills a reverence for bees' sovereignty and instinctual behavior. For Elliot, the fundamental inability to 'tame' bees casts wild colonies as being more sacred compared to their domesticated kin. Elliot elaborates that spiritual interactions with feral colonies stimulate a sense of 'respect for what is wild, free, and self-sufficient'.¹⁹⁶ The setting also matters, as some practitioners more readily access the sacred—and with greater intensity—through interacting with unmanaged bees nesting in the forest compared to managed hives neatly situated in someone's backyard. Devon feels similarly, but with an important caveat: while '*apians* are always sacred', beehives are not given that this term merely describes the hollow, human-made bee containment vessel created during the Enlightenment—a zeitgeist that actively undermined 'the agency and sentience of the non-human world'.¹⁹⁷

There is a clear spectrum of sacred experience that varies between hives, nests, and apiaries. For Taylor, the sacrality of a hive depends on the relationship between beekeepers and their bees.¹⁹⁸ They explain that while the apiary is a *de facto* sacred space, they don't necessarily sense the same *degree* of holiness when encountering bees in a commercial bee yard.¹⁹⁹ They clarify that those bees are adversely affected by the impersonal mechanization of industrial-scale beekeeping to the point where they become dissociated from their true nature.²⁰⁰ This perspective mirrors common observations that industrialized agriculture reduces organisms to mere 'resources' to be extracted or exploited.²⁰¹ Taylor elaborates that in this context, livestock bees become:

dumbed down through factory farming; they don't know who they are.

They don't have any immune response to outside stimulus. They're

¹⁹⁵ Interviewee G (Pseudonym: Elliot), interviewed 24 Jan, 2024.

¹⁹⁶ Interviewee G (Pseudonym: Elliot), interviewed 24 Jan, 2024.

¹⁹⁷ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

¹⁹⁸ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

¹⁹⁹ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

²⁰⁰ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

²⁰¹ John Rossi and Samuel Garner. 'Industrial Farm Animal Production: A Comprehensive Moral Critique', *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27, (2014), pp. 479–522. <DOI: 10.1007/s10806-014-9497-8>.

meant to be really docile, so it doesn't feel like they demand that same level of consciousness to be around them.²⁰²

To truly encounter the sacred, it must carry the capacity to sting. However, the sacrality of bees is resilient. On a more positive note, Taylor concludes that beekeepers wield the power to nurture, revitalize, and protect their bees' sacred sovereignty through active spiritual engagement.²⁰³ Again, the sacred emerges through right relationship.

Radical interconnectivity

Sacred interactions with bees enable practitioners to forge deeper connections with the cosmos—and everyone we share it with. Referencing their heightened sensitivity to subtle environmental changes, Jordan asserts that sacred apiculture is 'a lived experience of really deep connection'.²⁰⁴ As such, spiritual encounters with bees also precipitate intimate bonds with other species. Morgan reflects how their bees have led them to 'see everything in a different way—especially plants. There's this consciousness in them. [...] I'm sitting here looking at these huge pine trees and [I'm aware of] their breathing'.²⁰⁵ Similarly, bees also helped Taylor reexamine their relationship with spiders. They recount a moment when they asked a swarm why they refused to enter a newly prepared log hive, only to get swiftly stung in the face.²⁰⁶ Interpreting this as a direct response to their question, Taylor decided to:

receive this sting and see what comes. I was immediately overtaken with a vision of a giant spider. And I had forgotten that in that log hive, there was a giant spider that I had killed. I felt awful about it. [...] I was trying to get it out but couldn't take the lid off. And I couldn't move the swarm in there with this huge spider, so I had to kill it. So the bees showed me this spider and told me that that was *not* the right thing to

²⁰² Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

²⁰³ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

²⁰⁴ Interviewee A (Pseudonym: Jordan), interviewed 12 Feb, 2024.

²⁰⁵ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

²⁰⁶ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

do. Then they gave me this whole download about spider medicine. I had previously thought that bees and spiders were enemies. Spiders *eat* bees. And the bees were like, “No. The spiders are our allies.” [...] They taught me that we need to honor the spiders. I’ve had now a lot of affirming experiences with spiders and bees since that experience.²⁰⁷

This extraordinary experience shaped a new cosmology, wherein Taylor understood that despite the unpleasant realities of predation, respect is both a necessary and animating principle of ecological kinship.

Sacred interactions with bees also situate practitioners in a state of cosmic unity. Devon shares that before they enter the forest to commune with wild bees, they always hold a ceremony to greet and honor *all* stakeholders, including the ‘other-than-human, the invisible, the plants, the air, *everything*’.²⁰⁸ Though enacted in context of bees, this observance nonetheless acknowledges that our biosphere is a teeming and resolutely entangled whole. This kinship is then reinforced physically, as Devon ritually touches the surface of the nearby river, stating that:

touching the water is a way to touch the apians. [...] We can feel our way upstream and downstream. Not only that; we can feel through the water element into the ground, because water is everywhere. We touch the river and we can feel the roots of the trees and we go up into them and touch bees. [...] We touch the river, and we touch the shores of Gaza. We touch the river, and there’s no place in the universe we do not touch.²⁰⁹

Through this ceremony, the tenuous delineations between practitioners, bees, and cosmos collapse entirely. The resulting merge catalyzes an experience of unity consciousness, where all life intertwines.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

²⁰⁷ Interviewee F (Pseudonym: Taylor), interviewed 8 Mar, 2024.

²⁰⁸ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

²⁰⁹ Interviewee D (Pseudonym: Devon), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

Owing to millions of years of our respective species' coevolution, interdependence, and mutual influence, the unfolding relationships between humans and bees are ripe with ontological, epistemological, and spiritual implications. The sacred connections between contemporary beekeepers and bees are far from novel, yet the depth, quality, and nuance of these encounters have been unduly neglected by ethnographers. Filling a considerable gap in contemporary studies of spiritual experience, this qualitative research study specifically explores the essence of sacred apiculture as it is currently enacted, experienced, and understood by contemporary practitioners throughout the United States. Whereas previous research has simply acknowledged the *existence* of sacred apiculture, this study specifically weaves together insights offered directly from active practitioners during semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to help elucidate some of the myriad spiritual rites, phenomenological accounts, and belief systems that characterize sacred apiculture.

The relationships sacred apiculture practitioners cultivate with bees provide a highly accessible and remarkably personal means through which individuals can directly engage with the divine. Though lineages of belief and practice reach back to antiquity, there is no set path through which people begin to understand beekeeping as a sacred practice. For some, sacred apiculture is a natural evolution of their prior spiritual or religious conditioning. Others become practitioners as a result of transformative ecological experiences, moments of trauma, or fate. As such, sacred apiculture is notably malleable and inclusive, welcoming practitioners from wide variety of backgrounds and ideologies. Similarly, sacred apiculture seems to resist and elude any sense of established orthodoxy, as many practitioners bring and/or blend various aspects of different spiritual, religious, and cultural traditions together into a cohesive framework. By welcoming such a diversity of practice, belief, and ideology, sacred apiculture creates an overarching spiritual community that also encourages highly personalized systems of belief and practice unique to each individual practitioner.

In addition to understanding what sacred apiculture *is*, this study also seeks to understand what it *does* for practitioners. First and foremost, this research reveals that practitioners are able to invoke the sacred through various means of engaging with bees, particularly through the transformative powers of enacting ritual, dedicating offerings, and accessing altered states of consciousness. These direct pathways into the divine provide practitioners with especially generative means through which they can actively embrace new ways of thinking, being, and relating.

This research also illuminates how practitioners *experience* the sacred through right relationship with bees. Using a phenomenological approach and analysis of research participants' firsthand

experiences, this study finds that sacred apiculture enables practitioners to embody the divine through their five senses (e.g. touch, sight, smell, sound, and taste). Additionally, spiritual interactions with bees also provoke anomalous sensory abilities that register somewhere *beyond* our biological limitations, activating a ‘sixth sense’ through which practitioners can engage with the numinous.

Sacred encounters with—and *through*—bees wield incredible power to shape how we understand ourselves, the world, and our connection to the cosmos. Indeed, practitioners often cite experiences with bees as stimulating profound shifts and evolutions in their individual cosmologies. Broadly speaking, this research reveals that sacred apiculture is especially generative in influencing practitioners’ worldviews, in that it provides them with the ability to communicate across species, harness divine wisdom, accept miraculous healing, reformulate ‘individual’ identities, and deepen their connection to the natural world.

While this research offers an unprecedented glimpse into the nature of sacred apiculture as it is enacted by present-day practitioners, it is also important to note that there is immense potential in expanding this research to explore other perspectives and experiences throughout the broader sacred apiculture community. For one thing, spiritual relationships between beekeepers and bees may be more common than one might imagine. Morgan shared a similar realization after beginning to write openly about their experiences channeling information directly from bees.²¹⁰ Despite initially feeling a sense of dread as to whether anyone would engage positively (or at all) with their writing, they were pleasantly surprised to receive hundreds of letters from all over the world from people who thought they too were alone in cultivating spiritual relationships with bees.²¹¹ At very least, Morgan’s experience establishes the existence of a vast (albeit not always visible) community of practitioners worldwide, whose true breadth and extent even came as a shock to an active practitioner, let alone an outside researcher. Similarly, sacred apiculture has also benefitted from the overarching rise of popular interest and enthusiasm surrounding bees. As of writing this, sacred apiculture has become the focus of a dedicated film documentary and a multi-day, international conference.²¹² Given the increasing prevalence—and perhaps proliferation—of sacred apiculture, there is considerable cause to continue this research to better understand the nature of sacred apiculture as it is currently practiced in and beyond the United States. After all, there’s no telling what the bees have yet to teach us.

²¹⁰ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

²¹¹ Interviewee C (Pseudonym: Morgan), interviewed 15 Feb, 2024.

²¹² See Amrita [<https://www.amritadocumentary.com/>] and the Learning from the Bee Conference [<https://www.learningfromthebees.org/>]

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ADDENDUM

Item 1

Research Participant Invitation Email Template

subject: Spiritual beekeeping

Hi [NAME],

My name is Jake Eshelman—I'm an artist, visual researcher, and emerging scholar with a deep interest in the complex and nuanced relationships between people and bees. I've been following your work for a while now and wanted to reach out to see whether you might be interested in participating in a study I'm conducting for my Master's dissertation in Ecology & Spirituality through the University of Wales, Trinity St. David.

In short, I'm working on the first academic study of its kind that specifically explores the beliefs, practices, and experiences of people who have spiritual connections to bees. Your participation would simply consist of a one-on-one interview/conversation with you—and your bees, if possible—either in-person or via Zoom. It wouldn't last more than an hour.

I want to emphasize that your participation would be completely voluntary. You'd be more than welcome to end our conversation at any time or decline answering any of the questions that arise over the course of our discussion. Similarly, I will keep all of your personal identifying information strictly confidential every step of the way in accordance with the ethical research guidelines outlined by my university.

If you have any questions, I'm more than happy to provide any additional information. These interviews have been extremely valuable in enriching the quality of my research to accurately appreciate sacred apiculture as it's practiced today, so I very much hope you're interested in sharing your experiences and expertise. I look forward to hearing from you!

All my best,

Jake Eshelman
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