

# Doing Theology with Snakes

*Face-to-Face with the Wholly Other*

—KIMBERLY CARFORE—

It was a cool, brisk summer morning in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> I was leading a girl's adolescent group through the wooded terrain of the Pisgah National Forest, nearing the end of my fourth year working as a field instructor for an at-risk youth wilderness therapy program. Students attending the program struggled with problems ranging from depression, anger/defiance, anxiety disorders, trauma, low self-esteem, emotion regulation difficulties, a history of sexual abuse, substance abuse, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and minor autistic spectrum disorder.

Six girls were asleep in their bags when I awoke to welcome a new day. Each day I woke up an hour and a half earlier than the students to enjoy some solitude before attending to the unique responsibilities the day presented. As the wildness of the land combined with the wildness of each student's psyche, it was impossible to predict what I might encounter. It was my job to maintain a high level of vigilance to keep the girls safe twenty-four hours a day, for seven days straight, for two weeks at a time.

My morning routine consisted of a few stretches and a visit to the stream to wash my face and collect water for tea. After starting a fire with my

1. My intention in writing this piece is to recall a real-life event. Following Timothy Morton's "eco-mimesis," I chose to write in the past tense to maintain a certain level of authenticity. According to Morton, the more I attempt to evoke the atmosphere—where I was in the moment of the event—the more figures of speech I must employ, narrowing the rift between fiction and non-fiction. In other words, "my attempt to break the spell of language results in a further involvement in that very spell." Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 29–32.

bow-drill set, or assembling the portable stove (depending on what season it was), I would pour the stream water into my enamel camping cup, bringing it to a boil. While my black tea steeped, I did a few push-ups and crunches to get the blood flowing through my body. This morning was particularly chilly even though we were just coming out of the mid-summer season. The thick, spruce-fir tree canopy above and dense, moss-covered understory of the Appalachian temperate rainforest created a consistently cool and damp climate.

In response to the chill, I put on my thick fleece hoodie and quickly slipped on my sandals, grabbing my metal cup on my way to the banks of the stream. After sliding on a patch of mud at the top of a steep grade, I found a shallow slope with dry footholds to safely descend toward the stream bed. I looked around to find a flat, sturdy rock to support my weight near a deep part of the stream. This perfect combination was sometimes hard to find and, depending on the campsite, impossible. I lucked out this time. Tapping the flat rock with my toe to ensure it wouldn't give when shifting my entire body weight onto the rock, I squatted down, in one smooth motion. As I squatted, I simultaneously took off my glasses with my left hand, placing them on a soft patch of dirt within arm's reach and began splashing water onto my face.

I gasped as the cold water touched my face. It was always so refreshing and I looked forward to this part of the day, every day. No matter how difficult the therapeutic and logistical dynamics of wilderness therapy could get I always felt fortunate having access to fresh, clean stream water. To be outdoors and touch wildness twenty-four hours a day seemed to make the stress of the work worthwhile. At the stream I let my mind wander wherever it wanted to go, letting the rush of the water guide it from thought to thought. I would daydream about my friends and family back home. I would think about office jobs and how strange that seemed to me at the time. I'd think about the person I was and wanted to become. I thought about the universe and how its dynamics are at work in social systems and structures, sometimes becoming blocked, repressed, or oppressed.

The outdoors provided the space away from society for students and instructors alike to reflect on themselves and their role in the world. Moments outdoors, in the wild, outside of comfort zones, revealed secrets of one's self and psyche within the backdrop of the wild. The inner landscape became the outer world where students could work on developing more positive coping strategies and behavioral habits that would help them when they returned to their everyday lives. The wilderness setting becomes a catalyst for personal growth and development. It became a catalyst for my work as a theologian.

## WILD SLITHERS

Although I wished to sit alone near the stream for hours, it was time to continue my day and go wake the girls. Still squatting and still without my glasses on my face, I turned to my left to pick them up. Something felt off. My body lit up and I immediately froze. Even though I couldn't see it clearly, I knew something was there staring back at me. I felt it. Something registered in my blurred field of vision; something was not right. It is important to note that I am quite nearsighted. In fact, I purchase special eyeglass lenses in order to thin my prescription to keep the frail skin on my nose healthy under those would-be Coke bottle lenses. Without my glasses the rush of the stream and the world around appeared as a blur. Adrenaline pumped through my veins. In my bleary-eyed state, my eyes eventually focused and I registered the being I was encountering: a snake sat coiled directly in front of me.

Inches from my face, it did not move. I did not move. My left hand suspended in the air on its way to retrieve my glasses. Somehow, I placed them within centimeters of this snake's coiled body on my way to the stream. In that frozen moment, which could not have been more than a few seconds, this snake lapped its tiny red tongue at me. As gently as possible, I inched my left hand next to its body, exuding unobtrusive intentions. After picking up my glasses and placing them on my face, I could see that it was a venomous Copperhead snake.

This Copperhead is native to the Pisgah National forest and is one of two venomous snakes in the area (the other is the Timber Rattlesnake). These reptiles are masters of camouflage and can be easy to miss. The irregular tan and dark-brown diamond-banding on their back blends in easily with forest floor foliage. Accidentally stepping on them is a common story among those who have been bit. I was stunned having an uncommon and all too intimate face-to-face encounter with this snake.<sup>2</sup> One wrong move could prove to be deadly. At the very least it would send me straight to the hospital. Considering that our group was many miles away from base camp, it could take hours before I could get to a hospital.

While I immediately intuited its danger when my glasses were off, seeing this snake opened me to feelings of profound dread. Without breaking eye contact (because that was my instinctual response) and still in the squatted position, I placed my hands in the air in surrender, but to this day I cannot recall if this happened in the phenomenal world or only in my imagination.

2. In this essay I am both playing off and challenging Emmanuel Levinas's interview "The Paradox of Morality" where he is questioned on whether or not animals are included in his face-to-face ethics. Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality."

Somehow this posture of surrender was in my field of intention. It *was* my field of intention. It was almost all I had as a defense mechanism. The air felt thick, and every possibility seemed heavy with consequence. It felt like there was no myself, and there was no snake; there was simply this moment; this event; the “thereness” of it all. There was no decider, only decision; there was no thinking, only thought. There was no space for thought to wander, to think, to swing back and forth as the grasping monkey-mind, nor was there space to decide. Decision was made within a space-time that was merged. Space and time in this moment was more continuous than in ordinary life. Decision was closer to instinct, but even this word does not relay the truth of this experience. I could say it was a corporeal, embodied, or affective response, but the experience resists easy categorization.<sup>3</sup>

As this snake sat inches from my face and I looked into its tiny black eyes, I experienced (what I later deduced as) an ethical imperative. Speaking different languages—my verbal, cognitive-centric, rational language juxtaposed with this snake’s nonverbal wildness—there was no lack of communication. We both communicated the same imperative, “Don’t kill me,” sounding like the divine commandment, “thou shall not kill,” and also translated as “you shall not murder” (Exod 20:13).<sup>4</sup> Within this space exuding a mutual ethical imperative, I backed up. The snake did not move an inch. It did not uncoil. It did not slither closer to me. It did not follow me. It simply sat there, being itself.

Just by being itself this snake won its territory. I had nothing but respect and fear for this animal. This reptile exuded a power I’ve never experienced before. These species are much older than we are. Early ancestors of snakes appeared over 300 million years ago. They have survived three mass extinctions. It has seen more than I have. Its skin had a tightness that displayed perfection. Each scale seemed to tell a story, and there were thousands on this snake’s body. Evolution got this design right and stuck with it, perfecting the spaces between each scale over hundreds of millions of years.

3. I agree with John Llewelyn’s interpretation of Levinas’s “face to face” in that the face-to-face encounter “cannot be named or nominalized. It cannot be said.” I expand on his statement that the “proximity of the face to face . . . is not a topic of theology.” Llewelyn, “Levinas, Derrida, and Others Vis-à-vis,” 147.

4. In his work, Levinas recalls often that the face of the other always presents itself as a commandment, “you shall not murder.” Derrida draws attention to the important distinction between murder and killing—murder is something humans do to other humans, namely homicide. An animal is not murdered, it is killed. Derrida critiques Levinas’s humanistic ethics, “Levinas insists on the originary . . . character of ethics as human.” Levinas’s ethics places the human before animals and “never looks at him to say ‘Thou shalt not kill.’” Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 110, 108.

While this snake won its territory, due to logistical concerns we were forced to spend the day and another night at this campsite. When night fell and we prepared ourselves for bed, off in the distance a student screamed that something had brushed up against her foot. I immediately met eyes with my co-instructor and with fear and mutual understanding we made our next move. Sure enough, as I scanned the ground for any disturbance in my field of vision, I saw leaves rustle and something moving through them. There it was, slithering on the forest ground. It moved slowly, nonviolently, making small s-patterns about thirteen feet from us, paralleling our path. My stomach dropped. I turned to this snake, focusing all my thought and intention to it, and spoke directly, “Please spare yourself, friend. This is your warning. I do *not* want to kill you. But I will, if I have to, if you get too close.”

Ten minutes passed. I approached the branch that established the boundary between the wild oak forage of the forest and the groomed, soil-exposed, ground of our campsite. The snake had just rounded the corner at the end of the branch and began darting towards us in tight s-, almost z-patterns quite aggressively. It felt like this snake was teasing me with its movements. It was making fun of my inferiority. The time for words had passed; it was now time for action.

A blur of adrenaline, instinct, and action ensued. I do not remember exactly what happened, but my body was on fire. As I held this snake’s neck to the ground with my walking stick, my co-instructor, in one smooth, quick movement, decapitated this snake with a shovel. Separated from its body, the jaw snapped a few more times—its final attempt to fight back. Energy pulsed through its long corpse, causing it to squirm in random positions, back and forth, until it coiled into its final resting position, which happened to be in the shape of an infinity symbol. I felt the weight of certainty as I knew at that moment that infinity symbol signaled the end of my career as a wilderness therapy field instructor. Although I had no training in reading symbols, I intuited what this meant for me. I ended my career knowing I was “uniquely responsible” for this snake’s life, and perhaps more profoundly, the event of this snake’s death.<sup>5</sup>

Mourning the creature, and confused about the event, I sat hunched over this snake and cried. It felt like I was vomiting tears of disgust; disgust with myself as I had always considered myself a giver, not a taker. This was my ethic in life, the rule I lived by, to always leave things better off than I

5. Llewelyn, “Levinas, Derrida, and Others,” 148. Llewelyn draws from Exodus 33:11, “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face.” When the Other commands, I am “ethically and religiously bound to answer . . . I am uniquely responsible.” For more on the concept of “the event” see, Caputo, *The Weakness of God*. According to Caputo, the event exposes God as weak, uncertain and unstable, and “a trace of a voice.” Ibid., 97.

received them. If someone or something needed something, I gave. If there was a cause, I gave. So much so that this had become an identity of mine; a category so solidified that I experienced shock the moment it shattered. “I am a taker,” I thought. I could only feel deep sorrow letting these words sink into my heart. But when such words began to sink in, the tears stopped, caught within a net of paradox. The moment these words entered my being became an overwhelming moment filled with pain, sickness, truth, knowing, rejection, and acceptance. Rejection-acceptance-rejection was the dance of emotion. I was shocked. The ambiguity of the situation was nauseating. I wanted to vomit to experience release but I was empty; emptied of any sort of certainty about almost anything. There was nothing solid to hold onto and spit out, except for my tears.

I felt furious about being forced to make what seemed to be an impossible decision. I felt this decision had been unfairly presented to me—I did not ask for it; I did not want it. Was it the death of my identity, my ethical status as a “giver” or the ending of this snake’s life that was so impossible to digest?<sup>6</sup> I could not digest the feeling of being a taker—to take another creature’s life with no intention of eating it, or using it for any other purpose other than my selfish human needs. If I could use this corpse, as it represented the telos of this snake’s entire life, if I could bear witness to its death, its meaningless suffering, then maybe I could recycle the energy of everything this snake represented back into the cycle of Earth. Life to death could be rebirthed into life-death-life. If I could simply *do* something, maybe the overwhelming ambiguity I experienced might become meaningful. If I could make sense of this nonsense the situation might become bearable. If I could take action, or control, then maybe the pain would go away.

What did I *do* then? I buried its body. I could not eat it because I could not start a fire that late into the night. I could not leave it for an animal to eat because it would attract human predators (bears, badgers, coyotes) into our camp. Under the ground no animal would find it. It could not be “utilized” back into the food chain. It was a trace signifying an event passed.<sup>7</sup> The

6. The death of this snake took place in spite of its commandment towards life, “don’t kill me.” I imagine if this animal remained a faceless other, if I wouldn’t have encountered this snake hours earlier, it wouldn’t have been such an ethically traumatic event. In other words, recognizing my kinship with this snake, experiencing the wholly other in this other, made the event of its death utterly confusing and devastating. The ethical tension resulting from the double exposure of vulnerabilities resulted in my experience of indigestion. While Derridean and Levinasian ethics perhaps assume that peace is a possibility, my encounter with this wild Earth other demonstrates something a bit different, something closer to an ethics of ambiguity (a term borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir).

7. “The trace” is a Levinasian concept that Derrida exposes in deconstruction,

decision had been made. Its life had been taken by me. There was no turning back. I felt weak. I felt violent. I felt both that I had saved and failed, helped and harmed my group.

We first buried the head to prevent venom poisoning. Decapitated snakes are known for retaining reflexes and will continue to bite, releasing the venom left in their glands. I uncoiled this snake's beheaded carcass and caressed it, speaking to it, mumbling prayers. I turned it on its black-diamond back revealing its soft, creamy white underbelly, where I skinned it with my bare hands and a dull Shrade Old Timer knife. This was my way of respecting, remembering, and honoring this snake. It felt like all I could do to render my emotions allowing the shock to subside. After I cut a vertical slit through its neck I pulled the skin back, peeling the rest of the skin off this snake's flesh.

We buried the body and said a few prayers. I wandered down to the stream, and washed the skin in the water where I first encountered this snake. I remained awake for most of the night, maintaining vigilance for I don't know what—for anything that might come: an insight, a bear, a meaning. The skin remains mounted on a stick above the entrance to my apartment, at the threshold of my home: the liminal space between here and there, home and foreign, domestic and wild, self and other. I tattooed my arm with a block infinity symbol in solidarity with my decision to kill that snake, and to never forget this one snake's life, nor this remarkable event. In a sense, tattooing my skin was marking the remarkable, or marking that which could not be marked. An experience that moves beyond all categorization cannot actually be marked. There is something infinite about experiences that cannot be catalogued or captured by understanding. The otherness I encountered in the face of this snake shook me to my core, and it still haunts me today, shaping my interpretation of myself, snakes, and every other, including that which is wholly Other—God. When I do theology, I do it with snakes.

#### WILD GOD TALK

What stands out in my particular experience is the mark of infinity that was traced on an experience of my own finitude. If I am to begin interpreting my encounter with this snake, the point would *not* be to interpret an encounter

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undoing the metaphysics of presence. Undoing the presence/absence dualism, the trace signifies a rupture in presence, which is always haunted and complicated by non-presence.

with the infinite, or to otherwise bring infinity into finitude, dark into light, or unconscious into consciousness.<sup>8</sup> This would be assimilating the wholly otherness of the infinite into one's own horizon. Assimilating the other into the self does violence to the other, closing off the possibility of justice. However, there is no non-mode of interpretation that does not already assimilate an event into one's own horizon of experience. This paradox of otherness is one I came to articulate through Jacques Derrida's deconstruction.

As Derrida affirms, "There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended."<sup>9</sup> In other words, you can't jump over your own shadow to step into the world of the other. Derrida's philosophy, specifically his method of interpretation and literary analysis known as *deconstruction*, offers a theologically sound mode of interpretation leaving open the possibility of a justice to come. While Derrida does not necessarily *do* theology, his sense of the deconstruction of religion offers a postsecular *religion without religion* that opens up the name of God to the names of multiple others, indeed, every other.<sup>10</sup> If the work of deconstruction opens structures to be more "comprehensive, generous, open, extended," then a deconstructive *religion without religion* would be the practice of extending religiosity to welcome more others, including snakes.<sup>11</sup>

Deconstruction, as developed by Derrida, is not destructive. It is about doing justice. It opens to events of justice by welcoming the arrival of every other. In this sense, deconstruction activates a religious structure—a messianic call for justice—while holding in suspense any commitment to the biblical context that gave rise to that structure. In other words, Derrida's deconstructive sense of justice seeks to "remove a biblical surface from a

8. The point, if I were to need to articulate a *point*, would be towards justice.

9. Derrida, "There is No *One* Narcissism," 199.

10. While Derrida himself was not necessarily a theologian per se, scholars of Derrida—especially John D. Caputo—have interpreted Derrida's work as religious and theological. See Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. According to Caputo, Derrida "practices a secret religion." Caputo, "Before Creation," 91. In addition, Edith Wyschogrod and Hélène Cixous have offered the term "postmodern saint" to describe the life and work of Derrida. For more on this see Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*; Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*.

11. "Religion without religion" is a term Caputo uses to describe Derrida's religion. According to Caputo, Derrida "has a religion" but does not follow specific religious rituals. He "speaks of God all the time" but does not speak to "religion's God." Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xvii. The purpose of a *religion without religion* would be to welcome an event of the impossible. For example, welcoming a saint is not necessarily impossible since it has already occurred. Welcoming a snake as saint, or messiah, would be closer to something like welcoming the impossible.



messianic structure.”<sup>12</sup> “*Deconstruction is justice*” is a phrase that is religious and, at the same time, without religion.<sup>13</sup>

Recovering a messianic structure without a determinate messiah or messianism might do justice to religion in a postmodern, postindustrial, globalized world. As some religions might be awaiting the arrival of the second coming of Jesus Christ as the messiah in order to mark the arrival of the wholly other, individuals practicing their religion might miss the arrival of the messiah, or of multiple messiahs throughout their lived experiences. Practicing a *religion without religion* would be practicing messianic justice without a determinate messiah or messianism. In other words, the arrival of justice would not necessarily be the second coming of Jesus Christ. It does not rule out the possibility of Christ as the messiah, but other others might slither in as well.

Opening to otherness (“alterity” in deconstructive parlance) marks the arrival of an event of justice. Interpretation closes oneself within neatly marked categories—infinite/finite, sacred/profane, human/animal, religious/secular, self/other. Assimilation then easily becomes a mode of violence—marking the self from the other opens onto a slew of misinterpretations that can all too easily fall into xenophobia, racism, sexism, and speciesism. Ambiguity, uncanniness, paradox—these are modes of post-secular *religion without religion* opening towards justice. Welcoming the uncanny, ambiguity, and paradox marks the arrival of an event of justice. Deconstruction offers a method that does not close off violating interpretations of the other, but rather leaves open the paradoxical arrival of otherness. The nausea I experienced encountering this Copperhead snake in the Pisgah National Forest signifies how overwhelming ambiguity is. Letting the ambiguous be without making it something it was not—something bearable for me—was an unbearable experience that somehow I bore.

My encounter with the Copperhead snake was an encounter with the *arrivant*—a French word which can be translated as “comer,” “newcomer,” or, “one who arrives.” Derrida considers the *arrivant* as the arrival of the wholly other—the “absolute and unpredictable singularity” that interrupts relations that humans have with one another, as well as between humans and Earth others.<sup>14</sup> The wholly other, according to Derrida, is palindromic, “*tout autre est tout autre*,” which translates reversibly as “every other is altogether other” and “altogether other is every other.”<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates

12. Ibid., 135.

13. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 243.

14. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28.

15. Ibid., 195, n. 37.

the paradoxical singularity and universality of God as wholly other, “Every other (one) is God,” and “God is every (bit) other.”<sup>16</sup> *Tout autre est tout autre* signifies that “every other is singular” as well as “every one is each one.”<sup>17</sup> “Every one is each one” implies a universality, whereas God is “is to be found everywhere,” specifically where “there is a trace of the wholly other.”<sup>18</sup>

An ethics of alterity marks an opening where the other overflows proper boundaries of self/other. As I experienced in the wild, alterity is not reserved for humans, but applies equally to all life on Earth and, indeed, to all beings. An encounter with alterity demands respect. My encounter with this Copperhead snake overflowed these neatly human concepts of reverence and respect. The ethical call emanated from the wildness of being which does not settle neatly into categorization. “Don’t kill me” was my plea to the snake, as well as the plea I experienced emanating from the snake. In the event of our encounter, I did not choose to think the thought “you shall not murder.” Rather, the thought erupted from some place, someone, else. You could call it God; you could call it the ethics of the wild. This call emanating from my encounter with this snake was a call for a response and responsibility for every other as wholly other. Hearing that call, how could I not find myself deconstructing conceptions of God, opening to a non-anthropocentric theology? The encounter between myself and this Copperhead provided an experiential invitation into deconstructive theology. This encounter broke open my concept of God as a transcendent, monotheistic God to new possibilities accounting for the divine otherness (alterity) overflowing this event. I could not wrap my head around this event. This encounter broke through concepts of God that I had lived and acquired growing up in the Catholic Church. My experience simply did not fit. It had a force, perhaps the weak force of God, which forced itself out of preconceived notions of God.

Facing this snake broke open my concept of God in two ways: ontologically and ethically. After the event I considered God as the wholly other Being that is and interpenetrates all beings, not simply humans, and the ethically compelling force that runs through all beings. This ethically compelling force is the call of justice. This sense of justice accompanies the politics of a democracy to come. It is always to come, for if justice arrives it “rests on the good conscience of having done one’s duty,” and “loses the chance of the future.”<sup>19</sup> This “to come” makes possible the space for the arrival of the

16. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 92, 87.

17. *Ibid.*, 87.

18. *Ibid.*, 78.

19. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28.

wholly other, which is never finished arriving, for “[t]he unconditional is always to-come.”<sup>20</sup>

It is overwhelming. Who am I when I feel responsible for the wholly Other issuing forth from my encounters with every single other? In the words of Derrida, “[w]hat is the ‘I,’ and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the ‘I’ trembles *in secret*?”<sup>21</sup> To help demonstrate this question I turn to James Hatley, who describes his experience facing a bear attack. In this encounter, he states, “I am placed utterly outside of myself, to the point that *I am an other* and/or the other is so utterly inside me that *no space remains where I can be merely myself*.”<sup>22</sup> However, it is not merely terror that accompanies face-to-face encounters with wild others. The “uncanny goodness” of being edible to wild animals was palpable to me. The same body that encompasses one’s being is the body that could be inside another being’s body within seconds, so that other body can endure in its life. In other words, as the *Taittiriya Upanishad* states, “From food are born all beings which, being born, grow by food. All beings feed upon food, and when they die, food feeds upon them.”<sup>23</sup>

An experience of being food undoes tidy dualistic categories of self/other, subject/object, inside/outside, human/animal. Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood demonstrates this in her famous essay, “Being Prey,” which accounts for her near-death experience while being attacked by a crocodile. Plumwood states, “In the moment of truth, abstract knowledge becomes concrete.”<sup>24</sup> In this “moment of truth” there is an “extreme heightening of consciousness evoked at the point of death” where “extraordinary visions and insights” appear. It hits you that “you were completely wrong about it all—not only what your personal life meant, but about what life and death themselves actually mean.”<sup>25</sup> The experience of being prey is the experience of being mortal. It is the experience of being shaken outside of oneself and of everyday conceptions of reality. It is revelatory. This revelation transgresses the boundaries of the human, crossing every other, from divinity to animality, a crossing Derrida names with the portmanteau “divinanimality.”<sup>26</sup>

20. Caputo, “Before Creation,” 97.

21. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 92.

22. Hatley, “The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears,” 21.

23. Prabhavananda, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, 55.

24. Plumwood, “Meeting the Predator,” 10.

25. *Ibid.*, 11.

26. For more on this see Moore, *Divinanimality*.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my encounter with the Copperhead snake was *not* an encounter with God as an anthropomorphized being in the sky (transcendental monotheism), but God as the ethically compelling trace that runs through all beings, insisting on justice. My life changed after this encounter; it took on a new direction. I was not the same person after the encounter. I had grown up following an idol-type figure—a temperamental Father who seemed a far cry from the insistent call of the wild wholly Other. It was not the really real, the other who arrives in and as every other, that keeps coming, always already demanding justice. That dubious Father figure has ceded his authority, and now I do theology with snakes and with people like Derrida. I should add that Emmanuel Levinas is not far from my thinking here. His sense of ethics and religion as an encounter with alterity exemplified in face-to-face relations is an important influence on Derrida and on my own theology.<sup>27</sup> However, Levinas remains too anthropocentric in his thinking. For him, not every single other bears the compelling trace of a face. Consider this remark. “I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question.”<sup>28</sup> With Derrida, I *can* answer that question. A snake has a face; it harbors the radical alterity of the wholly Other, as does every being we encounter on Earth.<sup>29</sup>

I had thought the path to God was a path inside or beyond, but then I realized that God is in the face of a snake, and beyond this that the wholly Other shows up in every single other. I used to practice purifying my thoughts in order to attain spiritual heights. Now, I practice attending to the otherness of every other, engaging in wild God talk, and the ongoing work of justice. I’m still haunted by the wild. My vision is still blurry as I look out at a world in which every other is wholly other. Feeling uncertain and uncanny, I have no idea what my theology is, if it can even be said that I have or possess a theology. Without knowing, without having, without seeing, as

27. On religion as a relation with alterity, i.e., a “relation without relation,” see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

28. Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 172. Levinas continues: “A more specific analysis is needed.”

29. In Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 105–18, Derrida suggests that Levinas has all the resources to embrace the other as animal but does not. Derrida analyzes Levinas’s humanism, inferring that “a more specific analysis is needed” to be “an admission of nonresponse,” declining responsibility, 108. Furthermore, Derrida draws attention to Levinas’s choice of animal—the snake—a creature that carries “immense allegorical or mythical . . . biblical and poetic weight,” making attributing a face to this creature “highly improbable,” 110.

Derrida says, “*sans savoir, sans avoir, sans voir*,” whatever place theology has for me remains in the wild.

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