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**Being Edible.  
A Biological Mysticism**

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In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.

*T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets<sup>1</sup>*

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Foreword by Bayo Akomolafe

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## 1 Rio Gelato

There is a stream in the Italian mountains to which I always return. I visit it full of anticipation as soon as I arrive in my village in the Apennines. I hike up its gorge to the headwaters, where the narrow stream leaps over rounded boulders. But even when I am elsewhere, I can turn to my little river. I can visit it whenever I want. All I have to do is take a sip of water. Then I taste my mountain river. I moisten my lips with the little brook, speak with a tongue wetted by its lively waters.

While I slowly swallow the liquid, I think of the mountain water. I follow its jumping cascades with my inner eye, up the mountain towards the source, under slender alders, along the wild cherries colored in autumn red and the already defoliated sweet chestnuts, to the upper course with its smell of moisture and granite. I swallow the water slowly and feel the stream trickle through me.

It is a tender touch that gives me confidence and reminds me that all the water in this world is one water, from which even the fluids of my body interior are not separate. On the contrary. The brook embraces me from within, branching out into the blood vessels of my body and flowing into the nerve endings that palpate the river's moisture. I myself am the brook. I can entrust myself completely to its flow; it knows more about me than I do.

When I visit the sometimes lively, then again quiet little stream, then also to pay him the honor of giving him precedence. I no longer want to know anything better. I don't care about my knowledge at all, about all the facts I

know about the supposed things of this world. I visit the brook to silently sink all this supposed knowledge in him, to know nothing more than he does, to make myself completely empty and fill myself with nothing but the flowing of his clear liquid. I let myself dissolve.

The amazing thing is that I do not perish in this process, but gain form. But it is a form over which I am not master. It is a form like the one in which all other forms also concretize and then dissipate again. I am called by the stream, I become the world. I am allowed to be me because I trust what is not me.

The stream comes from the mountains. It rises below Mount Gottero, at just over 1600 meters the seventh highest peak in the Ligurian Apennines. The people who inhabited this landscape before the Romans worshipped this mountain as a deity. Seen from my stream, its summit appears as a flat ridge supported by a series of wooded rocky rims anchored in the valley. Now in early fall, the narrow dales between these ridges are mottled with the warm tones of changing foliage. The crest of the mountain begins to transform its color from a dull green to a quiet brown.

The air is still. It tastes of emptiness, of elemental things; there is moisture and a hint of granite in it, as if the tiny crystals had dissolved and turned into the atmosphere. Here and there a yellow leaf detaches itself from an alder or a wild walnut tree and falls to the ground with a soft rustling. Close by, at the foot of Monte Gottero, a short distance above my stream, lies the place with the deepest silence I have ever experienced in Europe. Beyond a bend in the path, the murmur of the water is no longer perceptible, and suddenly nothing can be heard, absolutely nothing, except the soft singing of the blood in my ears.

When there is no wind, as there is now, the silence is so all-encompassing that it seems to me as if my ears were closed with a solid fabric. In the silence, the world bumps against my hearing like a massive body; I hear no sound, but feel the vastness of the world adjacent like the dark, warm flesh of some immense being. It is a physical experience akin to an embrace. Just as the water of the stream embraces me from within when I take a sip of it, the silence in its valley embraces me from without. This experience fills me with an intense happiness that is not easy to describe, the feeling that something is completely real and that I am participating in it. It is an embrace through silence, through the nothingness that greets me.

The stream has a laconic simple name. The people here call it "Rio Gelato," icy river. The fold in the mantle of the mountain through which the Rio Gelato falls to the valley is so steep and narrow that also in July there is almost always shade there. Even in past summers, stiflingly hot for the rather temperate climate of the inner Apennines, it remains cool down there. The light is subdued. It is kept out by the steep walls. The rocks splinter into pointed blocks, to which alders, oaks, cherries and sweet chestnuts cling with wrinkled roots, mixed with hawthorn and sloes, which in March brighten the gorge with the white of their flowers.

The water of Rio Gelato is clear, as if flowing directly from the spring, and reddens the skin of anyone who touches it with icy coldness. The stream bottom consists of round-ground pebbles. Shale and granite, tumbled into shapes the size of marbles, fists, loaves of bread. No algae cloud the flow, no aquatic plants sway back and forth. Purely mineral, the stream seems inorganic, not an animated ecosystem, but a world reduced to its simplest, stillest elements, the atoms from which all that comes later is built. Water

and stone, the liquid and the solid. And the light in the stream gorge is similarly contrasted and reduced: Light and shadow, light and dark, being and nothingness. A beginning from emptiness.

My arrival at this stream is due to a coincidence, an aimless search when I arrived in this landscape many years ago. It was February, the season of black and white, snow and shade. My family and I had decided to spend six months in the inner Apennines. I had gone ahead to clean the narrow house in the core of an old village and to get the missing furniture and household appliances. The house is not very bright inside, as it is bordered on both sides by other buildings. That's why I kept being drawn outside. I searched for light. I slowly drove my car over the narrow roads that had long ago been roughly asphalted, crawled around curves under the sparse roof of winter-bare chestnuts, dodged the carelessly stretched fluttering tape on roadsides that had slid into the valley, turned on the windshield wipers when sudden showers caked the windows with cinder snow.

Everything seemed gray, deserted, dying. In those wintry days in the Italian mountains, I was often a little depressed when I let myself drift through the wintry landscape. What was I actually looking for here?

Whereever the little roads opened up to a side path that seemed suitable for a short hike, I stopped and walked a bit through this quiet, reduced world. The afternoon I discovered my river, I had stopped in an abandoned hamlet. I parked the car under two evergreen oaks, water dripping from their polished leaves. They framed the portal of a baroque church in washed-out pink, with cracks running through it from top to bottom. Almost all the houses were dilapidated, the windows empty, the roofs

sunken. I heard nothing but the rustling of drops on the ground, the soft gurgling of small streams making their way.

I followed the road, which had now become a path, on foot down into the valley. From a distance, I heard water rushing. That's where I was drawn. What was that river hiding in the valley? Groups of wet logs, draped with water-shiny ivy and withered tendrils of woodland vine, blocked my view. I continued down, following the curves of the path into the valley. After a bend, the trail led to a ford. The water came foaming out of a curve to the right, smashed against round boulders, widened into a culvert where I could not continue dry-footed, but where a vehicle would easily be able to pass through the water.

I managed to cross the stream by balancing over the largest boulders, swaying, rowing with my arms, jumping the last bit. I left the lane, which was now climbing uphill again. I followed the river around the bend into its narrow, steep valley instead. Cold air, dampness, smell of stone and wetness welcomed and enveloped me. I worked my way through a thicket of slender, gray trunks. Branches tugged at my clothing. The sound of rushing water filled the valley. At first it seemed undifferentiated, but as I listened more closely, it resolved itself more and more precisely into its individual sound components, a filigree coexistence of countless splashing and gurgling sounds. After listening for a while, it seemed to me that I could hear each individual pebble as an echo sent into the air by the impact of the water on its surface.

I sat down on a cold block close to the shore. Brown foliage between the stones, many leaves already partially decayed, quiet, patient. A fine drizzle began to fill the air. I felt it on my face. It was not strong, rather a kind of



coarse mist, as if the air made it clear that it is no other element than the liquid water of the stream, that it is liquid as well.

I thought about the fact that I, too, could only perceive the water around me because I am equally made of water. I am that embeds itself in water and is flowed through by water. Only through spheres of fluids do I see what lies beyond me: the moisture-wetted surface of the eyes, the gelatinous body, the cellular juices and the tissue secretions of the nerve tracts that lead to the brain, which in turn floats shock-protected in a bowl filled with salty brine. I am water meeting water. The fine bubbles in my lungs are outpouchings of moist skins. The oxygen I breathe enters me through the taut surface of a liquid. The tension of my fingertips, with which I touch the hard stone and which swell softly from the cold wet, is due to the pressure of the water inside their tissue. I am the world looking at itself; an eye that sees itself seeing.

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Over the last few centuries, Western culture, from which I come, has obsessively sought ever new evidence of how different we humans are from the rest of the world. (For this Western culture, humans were ultimately Western, light-skinned people, and actually even just: Western white men). When I sit with Rio Gelato, I know how little separates us from the world. I feel then how much the world contains us. The river teaches me that we are not only a part of this world – that much-invoked "part of the whole", but that we are each this world in wholeness itself. Its water is our flow. The stream below the Apennine peak recognizes me because I share its existence, not symbolically, but in flesh and blood, in water and mineral.

This recognition is not dependent on any spiritual concept. It is grounded in stuff and how it reflects itself. It is based on a communication between the matter in me and the matter outside. This form of perception is probably very old. It was the way humans understood the relationship between themselves and the world during the longest period of our existence on the planet, when they saw themselves as kin to all other members of reality, as related to the cosmos in kinship.

Still today, indigenous cultures experience their relationship to the material reality of the place where they originated as a profound, reciprocal, bodily identity. The animistic perception of being kin to the world provides the backdrop for some situations that have long puzzled the Western mindset. Such as Australian Aborigine Tjilpi Bob Randall of the Yankintatjara trying to explain to a female anthropologist while touching a large boulder with his hand: "This rock is me."<sup>2</sup> Western scholars have tried to classify statements like these in various ways: As a naive fallacy that sees the whole world populated by spirits, as a purely metaphorical way of speaking, as a cultural projection, as an organizing principle borrowed from outside for one's otherwise chaotic thinking. Only today some anthropologists begin to take it for what it is: as the fundamental experience of one's own identity, which shares the body with the world, which emerges with the world from a single creation and which is therefore intimately familiar with this world.

The inability with which anthropological researchers have long confronted the worldviews of people who speak to rivers and experience rocks as their bodies is based on the attitude of separation that emerged in European modernity. It assumes that we humans cannot do anything with the world

"on our own" outside of conceptual notions. While the Aborigine I quoted above, experiences himself through the deep kinship with the mineral body of the earth, in the Western tradition for millennia philosophers have thought the opposite. They were convinced that we are deeply separated from the cosmos. The bigger part of occidental philosophy consists of the attempt to explain the - allegedly problematic - circumstance that the allegedly abstract rational mind of man can perceive anything at all of the rest of the world.

But our senses, our skin, the streams and water veins of our inner being, speak another language. They whisper with the voice of knowledge that is available to us at any time, if we only let ourselves in for it. As soon as we do, water and stone, valleys and mountains, the yellow of autumn and the flowery white of spring welcome us. What the little river teaches me again and again when I visit him, what he whispers to me again and again as soon as I take a sip of water in my mouth, moisten my lips and let it flow through my throat into my body, is the opposite of Western thinking. You may know because you are this world that knows, he says. You may know because you are related. You may know because you are welcome. You may know because you too are water. Your body is an extension of the watershed. Your flesh is part of the network of streams and rivers that flows into the Mediterranean close to the coastal town of La Spezia. You are water, and therefore you are also knowledge. You are yourself a source.

The stories and thoughts of this book revolve around this knowledge. We do not acquire it mentally, but it takes place within our bodies. On the following pages I will try to fathom how profoundly we ourselves are that world that so often is perceived as being separate from us. What happens

to us when we open ourselves to this experience? What does it mean to fully be the world? What does it taste to wholly be its waters? To dissolve ourselves in the waters of the world? What does it mean for us to be welcomed into this whole at all times, to be welcome already and always?

I am not alone in my need to focus my gaze on our kinship with the world. The idea that we humans exist in an environment of inanimate objects is beginning to crumble everywhere. In the last two decades, cultural criticism and science and technology studies have begun to explore the extent to which matter is already capable of action on its own. There, this is called, somewhat technically, "material agentiality." "*Matter matters*", says U.S. physicist and science critic Karen Barad. The Nigerian philosopher and "post-activist" Báýò Akómoláfé argues that not only (white, Western) people, but everyone and everything in this world is gifted with agency. Political ecologist Jane Bennett believes that matter "vibrates with aliveness." British philosopher Timothy Morton argues that the biosphere should be conceived as a "symbiotically real" - and sees humans fully as participants in this symbiosis. The late French sociologist Bruno Latour even suggested that we should think of the Earth itself - under the name of the Greek goddess "Gaia" - as a "political ally."<sup>3</sup>

In this new picture, not only what was previously understood as an object, but also the invisible imaginative forces behind things, acquire agency and even subjectivity. This new vision expands to a revolutionary double perspective: Not only are we - as matter of the world - related to this world in the most intimate way. The world, as "acting matter", is also filled to the brim with feeling, just as we ourselves are. As feeling matter we are virtually the epitome of what this world is about: matter that feels related to all matter, matter that experiences itself as feeling, as an inner

experience. Therefore it is not enough to discover the agentiality of everything. We also need to pay attention to the traces of feeling and self-experience that are distributed within. Everything that has a sensitive, feeling inside is compelled to act, because for such a deeply affected self things do make a difference. Such a self is us. Such a self is also reality, the material, embodied, breathing, flowing world.

This world is a great, comprehensive whole. It is one, and it is the uncountable diversity of individuals. The "One" has an outside, which we experience as bodies, and an inside, in which we also participate, because we experience ourselves inwardly as selves, as subjects with a point of view, in our existential feeling that accompanies our lives. The outside can only exist because it does not belong to one individual alone, but is constantly remixed, because all bodies decay, are incorporated by others, because we build our own bodies from other living flesh.

This standpoint is hard to grasp conceptually, although on the level of our physiology it is constantly enacted. How can I *be* the world, when I am myself and the world is out there? How can the world experience itself in me? We have been trained to dismiss the notion that the world can be home from an early age on. The unfamiliarity, the difficulty of the standpoint I want to pursue probably have more to do with our culturally learned way of thinking about ourselves and the world than with reality itself. As members of a civilization of separation, we constantly think against the testimony of our body, which can only exist by overcoming separation, by creating its own flesh from the carbon of other bodies.

Western thinking put us in a constant state of painful tension. I propose to carefully, slowly try to release this tension, by paying attention to other

sources of knowing that are not encoded in rational control, to elders who are not human. I will circle these sources again and again, coming from different directions. I will listen to those who are not human, but still part of my kin. Who are you? What is your desire? Who am I? What is mine?

This other "you" speaks to me from the glistening trickle of the Rio Gelato, wherever I am. The stream knows me, more than I could ever know myself. He knows me, not in words, concepts and judgments, but from the side of my liquid being. He knows me from a perspective I can't take because I am this perspective, my whole living existence is enfolded in it. Being known by the water is a welcome, a kind of embrace. A reception in the heart of the family to which I belong without already knowing.

I experience Rio Gelato because I am water. He knows me because I flow like him, because I am over and over again reassembled from glistening drops. This shared physicality holds a shared experience. To be water is a form of being, and like all being, this is the experience of felt interiority. Fluidity can only be understood when I can feel it as a "you", when the touch of the wet substance does something to me, makes me shudder, recoil or rejoice. An encounter is something that happens between bodies, but at the same time it is something that happens to them. We meet each other on the outside and on the inside at the same time. Nothing is purely external. Outside happens as an inside.

Our culture's thinking immediately sorts this shared experience into two separated containers (the stream as a thing, the perceiving mind as the ordering power that makes things emerge through concepts in the first place). But in reality the conceptual and the experiential sides can't be separated. I and water meet because we share the common essence of the

liquid. We connect because we are parts of the same whole which has a sensitive outside and an experiential inside. We meet in an emotional space that is brought forth as this live-giving fluid. Reality is not only outside but also an inside, a dimension of experience. And because it is an outside, it is an inside, or rather: it cannot be anything else than an inside, even within the most solid object.

From the very beginning my friendship with Rio Gelato unfolded as a journey into the inside of my skin. What came with the sensation of seeing the water through the water, of encountering the water by experiencing myself as water, was the quiet happiness of being dissolved in this encounter. The water saw me through itself as water. I felt the water through myself, as water. Being seen in this way was not a physical process alone. It was a real encounter. I accepted to become completely permeable, even to melt, and through this I could meet the water.

And at the end of this sweet deliquescence there was a realization: Instead of the annihilation through complete dissolution, I dissolved into a reality in which we always already met each other, in which there was nothing but encounter. The experience of experiencing from an inside was this dissolving into that which I was not as well. My feeling had been surrender from the beginning. This surrender did not yield disintegration, however, but commonality. After the individual bodies had faded away, the remaining world appeared not as emptiness, but as fullness.

My experience of this fullness is the other side of the water. It is the inward aspect of the water, its secret existence as ensouled substance. This soul belongs to the Rio Gelato, to the fine dust of the rain and to the vessels of my body pulsed through with the same liquid. My experience of the water

is not an idea that my body produces with its nervous system when it encounters other objects, representing them as signs or images detached from the experience (in the form of a concept of "mountain stream", or the idea of "drops falling from the sky"). My experience is rather the non-corporeal, inner dimension of these things as themselves, which shows itself when we meet each other. The reality consists of an invisible substance, which is always felt. One way of making itself felt is through balling up to bodies which for a while through space and time until they burst into others and die in them.

Reality consists of the experience that comes with this interpenetration of single bodies, of feeling inside and vulnerable outside. It is the unfolded feeling, the existential fullness of pleasure and pain, while at the same time it is unfolding matter and its sensuous shimmer. We constantly move in both worlds, we are always in both dimensions at the same time, because life is exactly that: the experience of an interiority through the experience of an individual's physicality which is shared with all the elements.

If we listen closely to this life, with all our senses, then both sides show themselves in their inseparable entanglement. We even see with this entanglement if inside and outside. The water on the moist globes of the eyeballs is not just an object, whose impact on our sensory organs we observe. It is rather the experience of a transformation which happens through an encounter. Our experience inevitably contains the encounter, binds the subject to all it is pervaded by. We see water because we are water. We are filled with water, and in the water we perceive, and through us the water becomes the sensitive space able to consistently renew life.



The experience that filled me on the banks of the Rio Gelato at our first encounter, and that always touches me when I return to its pebbles, is that this world that we inhabit together is not closed to us. Because we belong to it, we can tread the path into its interior. Yes, every sensation, every experience, every encounter takes place not only as a physical touch, but at the same time on this inner side. The world is open to us, we belong to it, we are at home in it, not only as material, but with the heart. This is not a projection, but a fundamental experience of life.

The pages of this book trace this experience. They follow it into my own lived involvement, but also into what we know of other living beings, whose existences we profoundly share. of the divided world of living beings, in order to understand this experience more precisely. On the following pages I allow myself to trace in this shared experience of an inner space the silhouette of a whole. It manifests itself in innumerable individuals, and yet is a coherent whole. We can call it the One.

The philosopher Hans Jonas understands this One, which is inside and outside at the same time, as "divinity divesting itself," as the divine who has given itself completely into the world.<sup>4</sup> The Indian sage Radha Mohan Lal, from whom I have learned much, calls it "the absolute truth."<sup>5</sup> The Sufi teacher Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee speaks of the "Beloved."<sup>6</sup> Australian philosopher Freya Mathews says "the one subject."<sup>7</sup> The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, in the second century AD, used the term "groundlessness."<sup>8</sup> For the tantric Dzogchen school of Buddhism, it is "Rigpa", the ground, transparent, luminous and endlessly compassionate. The Dzogchen sage Tulku Urygen describes it as "empty cognizance", boundlessly alive, but not identified with one single self. All this tries to name a reality that has not separated into body and interiority; in which

the physical is a manifestation of the interior and always remains filled by it.

Seen from today's eyes, such a view seems to pertain to long past times. It comes from systems of experience foreign to the West. Our civilization - what the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the "cognitive empire of the West"<sup>9</sup> and the Finnish-Nigerian thinker Minna Salami names the "Europatriarchal perspective"<sup>10</sup> - has long despised the experience that we can know about what and how this whole is to which we belong. This rejection is virtually the essence of the Western worldview: We cannot understand what is outside of us, except mathematically. But also what is in us, remains closed to us, even becomes increasingly incomprehensible with closer scientific investigation. Accordingly, the world is deemed to be an unknowable, strange place. Our senses as well as our imagination, the rational mind judges, lead us to easily to believe in chimeras. Only the quantifying, scientific approach, it is said, is able to make reliable statements - even if these statements then have something oppressively indifferent and strange about them.

Science has disenchanting the world. With this, it claimed to pull a veil of illusions from the reality. But what if the world is in truth an enchanted place? What if its magical nature - its inner aliveness - is not a beautiful wishful thinking, but real, and we are actually able to feel it in our breathing and inner experience in every moment? What if we suffer, if it is taken away from us? If we long for it like a caged bird longs for the sky? And what if we are able to create it ourselves like a toad creates the glittering chains of its eggs, from which its offspring will hatch one day?

For non-Western wisdom traditions and especially for the thinking of animistic cultures already mentioned above, the experience of a coherent whole is not so much a nebulous peripheral area of everyday life experience than its focal point. This pivot centers man in the world in the first place. The world reveals itself to us as a soulful whole as soon as we no longer close ourselves off to this experience. What we in the West call "nature" is the physical manifestation of this whole. It is the way it makes its inner qualities appear physically in the world. In my eyes, this is the reason why most people seek the closeness of physical nature and feel right and healthy there. In nature we return to the presence of the animate whole, let ourselves be received by it and take it into ourselves. The essence of nature is aliveness: the ever-new birth of sentient individuality, which gives itself into other sentient selfhood, dissolves in it and is reborn in another form. Nature means to be self and to be the whole, means above all to be inner experience on the inside of reality. Because we are alive, we are at the center of this reality with each of our movements.

The One from which peel off the diverse shapes which we all form for a while, while we mix into each other, interpenetrate each other and unfold one another in what we call life, is thus not invisible to us. On the contrary. Being "within" the One is perhaps the most profound and at the same time the most commonplace experience we can have. It is the experience of microscopic water droplets in the lungs and cool moisture on the eyes – in their inner form. It is the experience that almost all earlier cultures considered a central element of the world. This world was sacred in its core. It can be experienced in this sacredness, because it physically, experientially, shows itself as such. The world is continuously giving of that life which also builds ourselves. We belong to this whole and can thus recognize its inner, generative core. This core sits in our own center, just as

the water of the mountain streams flows through our own veins. The experience of the life-giving stream of reality, the "Beloved" of the Sufi tradition, is what is most profoundly missing from our world today. That the West has forgotten that we must participate in the fecundity of the living world in order not to let its fruitfulness dry up, is its tragic error.

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I didn't leave until dawn had darkened the gorge nearly completely. I suddenly realized how cold I was. I tried hard not to let my teeth chatter against each other. It was still raining. I followed the driveway upward. It curved through the obscure trees, a faint corridor, only slightly lighter than the forest around. At the base of the opposite mountain range, some tiny scattered lights twinkled like stars. They lay far below. When I walked on, I felt as if I were moving through a space that had no boundaries and no shape distinguishable from me.

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<sup>1</sup> "To arrive at what one does not know, / One must go the way, which is the way of not knowing. / In order to possess what one does not possess, / One must go the way of possessiveness. / To arrive at what one is not, / One must walk the path on which one is not.", Eliot (2015: 37).

<sup>2</sup> Laudine (2009: 158)

<sup>3</sup> Barad (2003); Akomolafe (2017; 2021); Bennett (2010); Morton (2017); Latour (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Jonas (1973)

<sup>5</sup> Chambron (2021)

<sup>6</sup> Vaughan-Lee (2015)

<sup>7</sup> Mathews (2003)

<sup>8</sup> Batchelor (2001)

<sup>9</sup> de Sousa Santos (2018)

<sup>10</sup> Salami (2021)