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Attuning to Generational Relational Wisdom Through Elephants

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Abstract

Painting elephants as a form of inquiry led me on a quest to find connection with not only non-human participants, and the planet itself, but also to grounding myself within Indian history and ancestral memory. On my journey of discovery of human and non-human entities, I experienced elephants as symbolising all living entities, including rocks, water, and minerals alongside humans, the prime predators on this planet and a major evolutionary force. Nested in my search is a consideration of human supremacy as a hegemonic structure which led me to consider other hegemonic structures, such as patriarchy and caste. From a Harappan seal dating back to the second millennium BCE to the exploration of the divine feminine in tantric philosophy (700-1200 CE), to the feminist artist, Carolee Schneemann in the twentieth century, I sought to connect with anti-casteist, anti-patriarchal ideas consonant with ecofeminism. I try to inquire into how elephants matter to me and how painting them helps me understand my own history and thereby equip myself to be humble as a family art therapist attuned to planetary health.

Keywords:

environmental justice,

feminine principle,

mental health,

relationality,

transmaterial worlding,

painting,

elephants

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Citation Link

My interest in painting elephants began a decade ago in a moment of despair over my career and purpose in life. I was in rural Kansas, with a new degree in Marriage and Family therapy, layered atop a doctoral degree and many years of clinical experience in art therapy. I felt I should have “arrived,” but instead, experienced this new beginning as traumatic, as if the Kansas regulatory board in charge of licensing had cancelled me out and pushed me down the longest snake in a game of snakes and ladders.

I am a South Asian, first-generation, upper caste, Hindu, immigrant woman who was living in rural America. I was working with mostly Latina survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) and I, myself, am a survivor of IPV from my first marriage which was arranged. I was practicing family art therapy

in an unlucrative private practice and had a keen interest in finding anti-oppressive ways to practice my clinical work. Within this context, I was feeling tremendously lost when I had a vision of painting 108 elephants that appeared to me with the title, “Chalk and Chains.” It was inexplicable, but I felt compelled to follow through.

What I thought would be a matter of simply representing an animal, ended up as a journey of discovery not only of elephant lives but of planetary health. My friend suggested that I was painting out my depression by painting the elephants’ despair. I believe she was right. Bednarek (2024) said that the language of “ownership” dogs the mental health field, as in “owning” feelings, thoughts, ideas, enclosed within a self, bounded by one’s skin. Rather, she encouraged connection with something greater than oneself as providing healing. I don’t believe I am serving the elephants. Instead, what I am in touch with is a profound sense of helplessness that I am trying to assuage through my pledge to donate a part of the proceeds from selling the paintings toward elephant conservation—even still, this is healing. At the time of this writing, I have completed my project of painting 108 elephants, and this paper is an accounting of some of the discoveries in this process.

Human and Non-Human Kinship

> His circus began in the “forest” where he grew restless
> When the fronds, fruit and nuts got fewer.
> The water in the pond is dry. Where’s the whisper of monsoon?
> He feels the madness welling up from his belly.
> It’s coiling itself around his brain making him *madham.*
>
> *War against Elephants* (Venkateswaran, 2024, p. 69)

Gail Simon and Leah Salter’s (2019) work in introducing the concept of transmaterial worlding invited a move away from a focus on human systems toward systems that include “Human *and* non-human participants – animal, vegetable and mineral” (italics in original, p. 2). I made connections with Thich Nhat Hahn’s (1987) concept of inter-being. Inter-being is a concept of existing in the interface between two entities, whereas, Simon and Salter (2019) emphasise “the continuous process of intra-becoming” (p. 2), the word, “intra” denoting that we all exist on the same plane, minus the artificial separations and differentiations between humans and non-humans. The theory of transmaterial worlding gave me words for sensibilities I experienced in my painting process. As such, “we *are* ecology” (Simon & Salter, 2019, p. 2, italics in original), with all entities living and communicating systemic health and ill-health. In sharing my experience of painting elephants, I hope to show how the concept of transmaterial worlding and the questions that guide it help me ground my inquiry through painting. I ask myself questions such as, “How can we show what matters, how it matters, and to whom it matters?” (p. 11) and “Which voices need to be heard and how can we extend what we can hear and see?” (p. 12).

Recently, there was a report of a group of loggers in Malaysia who had set up camp to fell trees in a remote forest when a herd of elephants attacked them, killing their supervisor (Sheffield, 2025). The attack had occurred in two phases: the elephants initially attacked, injuring the supervisor (the others

had fled), withdrew, and then returned to finish the job. It was as if the elephants had been deliberate, despite announcing themselves long before their arrival. I was curious about the elephants' behaviour. I could not help but see the elephants' actions as resistance, a "reactive (in)vulnerability" (Knudson-Martin, 2024, p. 29) against the stripping away of their forest, their home. I could relate to it from my position as someone who had experienced victimisation where my wish for retaliation had welled up, resulting in my leaving the abusive partnership where my own death or the death of my partner was entirely plausible. Knowing the elephants' immense capacity for memory, I wondered how much rage they might have been carrying in losing their habitat. I remembered the many stories of humans who were/are displaced and often are left with no justice or accountability. The forest department stated they would track and contain the elephants to promote worker safety (Sheffield, 2025), leaving the elephants' perspective unrepresented with no due process. The essential problem of clear-cutting forests, displacing plant and animal species, was left intact.

When reflecting on this story of resistance, I took a relational perspective using the four-part Circle of Care model (Knudson-Martin, 2024) which includes relational attunement, taking accountability, accepting influence, and staying vulnerable. I noticed that we, humans, have not *relationally attuned* to the elephants or nature, have not *taken accountability* for going against the ecological compact with all living entities, have not *accepted* the elephants' or nature's *influence* to uphold systemic health, and have behaved in domineering and *invulnerable* ways. In short, most humans have been reckless and uncaring save for the indigenous peoples who have preserved connection with the natural world. I acknowledge my own layers of shame in my lateness in reckoning with the planet as our shared home.

Painting elephants has put me on a road to figuring out why planetary consciousness is important to me as a therapist. As a therapist, I have been educated to think about my identity in terms of those identity markers where I have power and privilege and those where I don't in relation to societal stratification, invented by humans. I consider the interaction of my identity with clients' identities, and how it shapes my listening of clients' stories as exemplified by Crenshaw's (1989) writing on intersectionality and those by Nieto et al. (2010). Despite this awareness, why did I not consider the environmental story with humans as hegemons to be another important identity marker? Shouldn't I be thinking about supremacy of all kinds? The guiding question for me was, "Where is power located?" This question is hardly new. Yet, family therapy curricula as well as art therapy seem to be in need of expansion and it is my hope that this paper serves to be a part of a paradigm shift.

Painting Elephants as a Research Practice

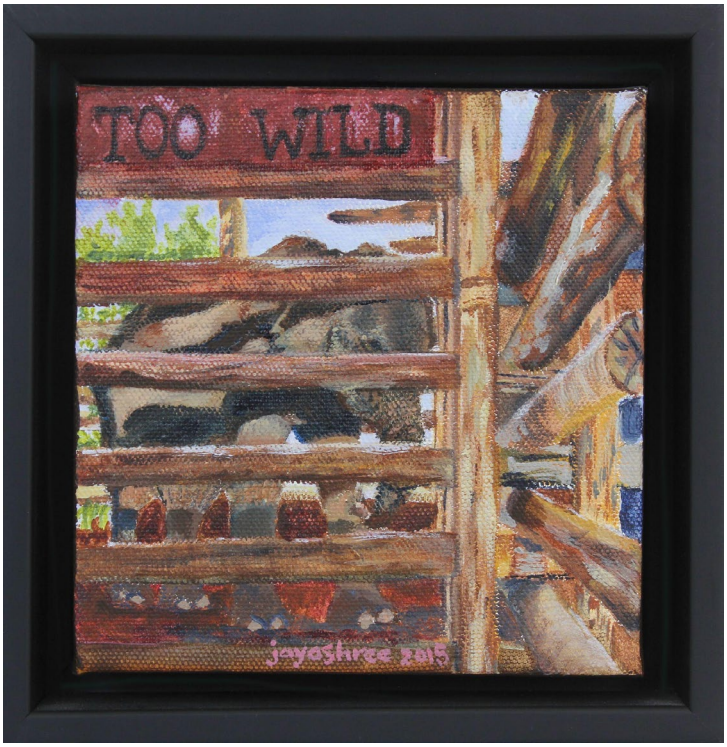
I initially began painting elephants from a naïve position. I was visiting Coorg, India, where I encountered a rehabilitation camp for elephants who were deemed by the guards as "too wild" on account of human-elephant conflict. I painted it once from a reference photograph in 2015 and then again in early 2026 (Figure 1). Returning to a subject made me "see" the desolation of the elephant in its cage, seemingly in service of human development. I recalled Chief Seattle's words that nature cannot be owned (as cited in Shiva, 2005).

Characterising the elephants as "too wild," reminded me of women who were similarly seen as "too wild," such as the apsaras or celestial beings, and goddess Ganga in ancient Indian epics where women led independent lives, completely in charge of their destinies. Wild women, like wolves, Estés (1992)

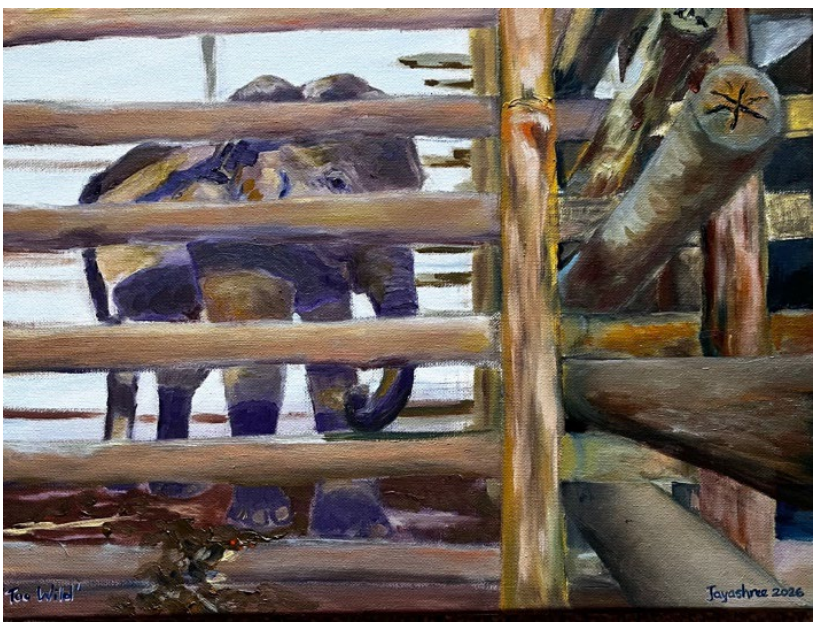
said, were “hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious” (p. 4) when, in fact, “Wild Woman is the health of all women” (p. 10). Instead of characterising elephants as “too wild,” it seemed to me that humans were “not in touch with humanity.” The trip to Coorg was a defining event in my eco-awareness of my relationship with nature (Doherty, 2025). In 2015, painting this picture felt as if the timbers and their shadows were cutting the elephant into pieces.

Figure 1

“Too Wild” (1a Painted in 2015)



“Too Wild” (1b Painted in 2026)



However, that was not my experience in the later painting. I felt that the timbers became more alive, as if I were rendering the dissociation of the cage building authorities and thereby getting in touch with my own capacity for dissociation. The "correct" drawing of the logs in perspective, a Western convention drilled into me by a certain segment of the artworld, took me away from the elephant, making the logs predominate my attention and the painting. It leads me to want to paint another iteration from a different perspective, erasing the logs, somehow freeing the elephant and myself from convention. Don't we, as humans, cut ourselves when we cut elephants out of their habitats or cut them to extract tusks? The elephants could (in some ways) represent any living entity, including rocks, water, and minerals, as Simon and Salter (2019) point out. It seems to be a marker of the loss of our own wisdom.

Initially attuned to their plight, I found pictures of their massacre, read about the smuggling of tusks, loss of habitats, intergenerational trauma, and their mourning rituals. I painted them. Ninety-six elephants are killed every day (Samper, 2016). I felt sadness, anger, numbness, and helplessness. I painted it. According to Moller and Tsavo Trust (2025), since the past 100 years when there were about 10 million elephants in Africa and over 100,000 in Asia, an estimated 415,000 elephants remain in Africa and 40,000 in Asia, a loss largely due to poaching and human-elephant conflict. At this rate, elephants will likely near extinction. Humans are the prime predators on this planet and a major evolutionary force, evidenced by the birth of tuskless offspring resulting from culling tuskers (Jones, 2021). I had been unaware of so many deaths at the hands of humans. The only tool I had was documentation. As I kept painting, I realised that painting elephants also meant that I was learning about ecological peril. The elephants had lost their home; what are humans doing to protect their shared home? What does home even mean, I asked myself. Isn't home fundamental to all species?

What is the History of Climate Change and What Does Home Mean?

I decided to document the history of climate change to explain the trajectory of events to myself. Since 1824, when Fourier described the Greenhouse Effect, a virtuous balance of heat between the sun and the earth, and Callendar connected the increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to global warming (Black, 2013), global warming has accelerated. According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO, 2026), the years 2023-2025 were the three hottest years on record and has already exceeded the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold for global warming. If this becomes a sustained trend, the balance of the natural greenhouse effect would have derailed, and the habitability of the planet jeopardised. The WMO (2026) also cited the period between 2015-2025 as the eleven warmest years on record, a pattern that needs to be taken seriously. The loss of Earth as a shared home, eroding in real time is a loss that is continuously impending and, in some places, has already happened.

When Simon and Salter (2019) discuss "transmaterial systems as communicating systems" (p. 3), I think of wanting to know etymologies of words as a way to travel through history to listen to elephants and the planet. The etymology of the word, "home," in Middle English refers to dwelling or building, in Old English to landed property or estate, and the alternative Sanskrit etymology suggests the word "kshemam" meaning "calm, quiet, safety," referencing one's habitat (Merriam Webster, 2025). The root of the words "economics" and "ecology" comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning home (Shiva, 2005).

As a family art therapist, I am concerned about the family system making its journey from disharmony to harmony while paying attention to how its embeddedness within larger societal systems aids or hinders its search for harmonious functionality. Knudson-Martin (2024) and McDowell et al. (2022) proposed third-order change. They premised that societal voices use people's emotions to crochet societal fabric in gendered and capitalistic patterns (Knudson-Martin, 2024; McDowell et al., 2022). I wish I could take out those stitches and redo them on relational terms that centre relational ethics, mutuality, and reciprocity, constituting third-order change (Knudson-Martin, 2024).

I think of the family as searching for a psychological "home" within micro and macro systems. From an attachment perspective, the Sanskrit meaning "kshemam" seems to correspond to "safe haven," a space or experience where relational attunement is consistent and secure (Siegel, 2020). Yet, when I consider colonisation, casteism, racism, patriarchy, and the like, it would preclude a sense of home. Mullan (2023) stated in this context that home for some people might be "a person, or a church, or a pet before it becomes a place" (p. 94). I had found a home in my current marriage, as elephants do in their communities, such as when bachelors find each other when they are ousted from their families of origin to begin their journey as bull elephants. They grow in relationships.

Joining the loss of Earth as a shared home due to climate change, and the various -isms, including human supremacy or anthropocentrism, I found hope in Haraway's (2015) conceptualisation of kin-making. She wrote, "I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge" (p. 160). To me, this relates to the connections humans can make with each other and between all planetary entities, humans included, that can be "kshemam" or refuge/safe haven. Haraway continued,

> If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species. (p. 161)

I long to be the elephants' sister or mother/aunt to their calves, or friend, attempting to build relational refuge across species and continents. I want to be a good friend.

Remarkably, in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged on, some elephants took the initiative to search for solutions. Consider the herd of Chinese elephants who decided to travel from Southern Yunnan northwards, seemingly in search of food as their region had been experiencing a drought, deforestation, and habitat loss to farming (Wong, 2021). They walked hundreds of miles only to return to their home forests, defeated and hungry. Seeing the picture of the exhausted elephants lying down in the grass, I painted them like robin's eggs in a nest, as if a great mother bird had placed them in a warm nest in a nurturing embrace (Figure 2).

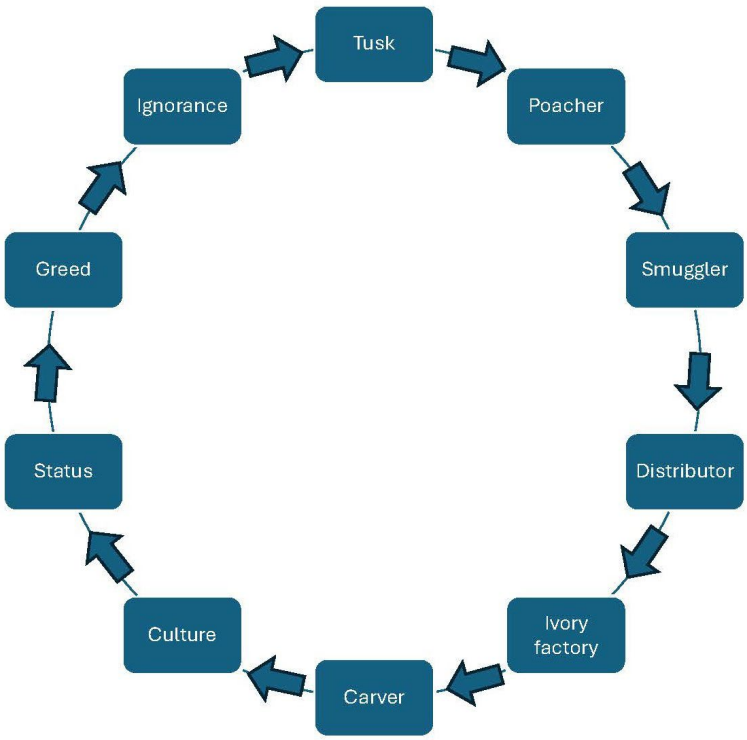
Elsewhere, I had written about my own ecological grief process (George, 2024) where I discussed Albrecht et al.'s (2007) term, solastalgia, the experience of not recognising the environment for what it once used to be because it is no longer. It seemed that the elephants could no longer recognise their original environment, searched to make a change, but were confounded in their efforts. I wanted to mother them, provide for them, create refuge, but came up empty. I could only meet them in my imagination—and even still, I failed to provide them with food in their nest. Even the branch is partial, untethered, which was the original predicament of the elephants. All I had done was to document their trials, after all, even in their nest habitat.

Figure 2 - The Nest

Hegemonic Structures Dismember Connection

In trying to establish the connection between the elephants and humans, I wrote elsewhere about the dismemberment of the elephant and the journey of its tusk (George, 2020; 2024) as a smuggled object to its transformation as ivory. I represent it thus:

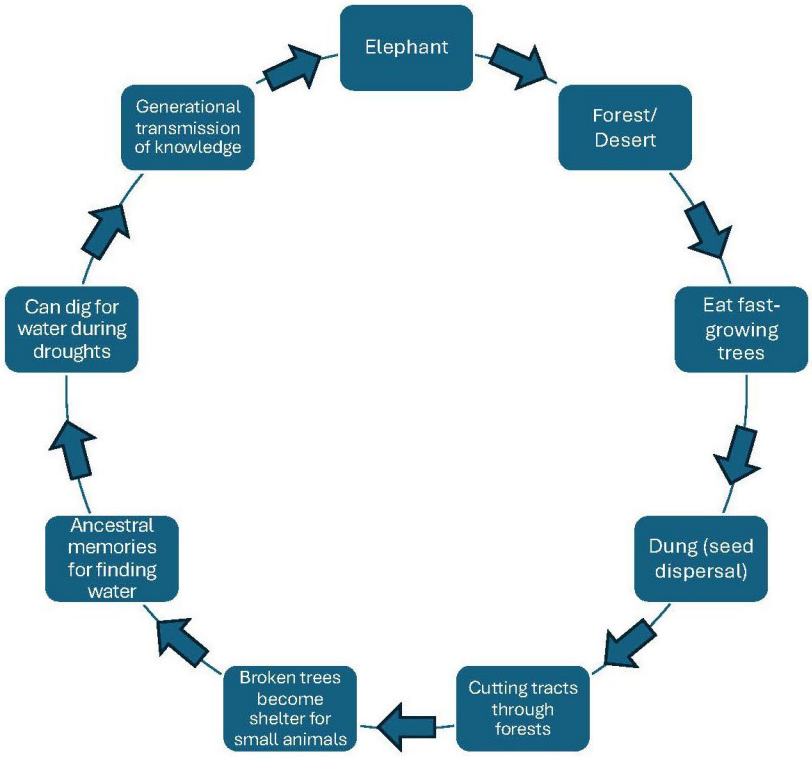
Diagram 1: The Progression of Tusk to Ivory



Documenting it in this way, I could see the circular motion of the negative systemic impact of terrorism where poaching is used to fund terrorism—an inhumane stance. The tusk as Ivory becomes a socio-economic status symbol, aiding and abetting the ivory trade. The tusk as currency is a form of synecdochic representation, or "thingification" (Césaire, 2000, p. 42), whereby oppressors objectify the oppressed and, in doing so, objectify themselves.

It stands in contrast to the following representation where the elephant takes its place as a keystone species that supports the ecosystem--in fact, elephant and ecosystem are one:

Diagram 2: The Elephant as a Part of the Ecosystem



I found resonance with the work of Trinh Minh-ha (2016) who wrote about visibility and invisibility like two sides of the same coin: "…invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle. The two are inseparable" (p. 132). When one only sees the tusk, one misses the whole elephant. When the elephant is whole, it is inseparable from the ecosystem as they are relationally indelibly connected. It would be useful to ask, "What do I see? As a result of seeing, what am I missing or not seeing?" Further, how does one see with all one's senses?

As I kept up with my series, I chanced upon a curious photograph of an art dealer's office that had an elephant foot stool—something I had never encountered! Researching it, I found that big game hunters often send dismembered parts of animals to taxidermists to create trophies, a curious, hideous Victorian-era tradition. The elephant foot is one such item, converted into liqueur services, stools, umbrella stands, or trash cans (Fitzgerald, 1896). I painted one such stool (Figure 3), rendering it as realistically as possible to conjure up the irony and horror of taxidermy. I painted it as a horrific

memorial, haunted by the ghost of the missing elephant. I wanted to delve into the discomfort of an inhumane act that saw animals as expendable, a symbol of human supremacy and depravity.

Figure 3 - No More Bidding

Human supremacy as a hegemonic structure led me to consider other hegemonic structures, such as patriarchy and caste. This engagement coincided with a shift in my materials use. A friend had introduced me to cyanotype as a form of photographic printing process. What I loved about this process was the participation of the sun, with results that seemed unpredictable in my inexperienced hands. This experimentation also coincided with my deeper engagement with the literature on caste and my search through Indian history for anti-caste and anti-patriarchal moments.

Tapping into Generational Wisdom in Indian History

As an upper-caste Hindu woman, I have been deeply interested in knowing the origins of the caste system, and the indelible parallels between caste and race and my own process of awakening to it about which I have written elsewhere (George and Bakre, 2026). The creation of a hierarchical, endogamous caste system was a part of the Brahminical Aryan tradition from 1500 BCE (Arora, 2021; Thapar, 1966; Soundararajan, 2022) that divided people into four castes and innumerable sub-castes. The four castes in hierarchical order from top to bottom are, Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Shudra (labourer) and those who were deemed “avarna” or sub-human. It was a division of people in what Ambedkar called “an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale

of contempt" (as cited in Roy, 2016, p. 30) that is alive and well today. Superior upper castes systematically discriminate and brutalise the lower castes or Dalits, and the Adivasis (indigenous individuals): a system that was created and executed by one's own nation against one's own peoples, not by a foreign coloniser (George & Bakre, 2026). Casteism is the supreme precursor to colonisation by at least 2000 years (Soundararajan, 2022). It feels important to me to keep understanding history to break the hold of fundamentalism and oppression to the extent I can.

In journeying back through Indian history, I sought to find examples of anti-caste and anti-patriarchal societies, in the process of "joining dots" as a systemic activity (Simon & Salter, 2019, p. 7). I found that the Indus Valley civilisation or Harappa culture from the second millennium BCE (Arora, 2021; Thapar, 1966) and tantric philosophy dating between 700 and 1200 CE (Khanna (1979), a practice centred on the goddess, to be such exemplars. The deep thread of continuity between the Harappa Culture and tantric philosophy appears to be the sacred feminine: the mother goddess culture (Saxena, 2016). According to Khanna (1979), heterodox tantrism "marked one of the most distinct and revolutionary phases of Indian religious history" (p. 10). It joined yogic techniques, visualisation, and yantras or geometric designs in ritualised formats to enter deepened states of consciousness in spiritual practice.

Mother Goddess and Schneeman

My search led me to the digital archives that house the report of the 1924 discovery of Harappan culture. I found a seal that depicted a nude female figure, upside down, legs apart, with a plant issuing from her womb, seen to evidence the cult of the mother goddess (Marshall, 1931). This image seems to be an early precursor to the tantric Kali and other yantras depicting the synthetic idea of Shakti or power that is recognised as feminine (Khanna, 1979; Saxena, 2016). The gestalt of this image reminded me of the artist Carolee Schneemann whose work changed the elite, Western art world in powerful ways. In 1975, she performed her groundbreaking piece, *Interior Scrolls,* where she pulled a scroll from her vagina and read aloud the text she had written on it. In an interview with Moreland (2015), Schneemann said of the performance:

> I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture's terror of my making overt what it wished to suppress fueled the image; it was essential to demonstrate this lived action about 'vulvic space' against the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meaning. (para 3)

Schneemann herself had been interested in researching vulvas, "carved, painted and sculpted for hundreds and hundreds of years before Christianity suppressed it," (Moreland, 2015, para 9). In researching Upper Palaeolithic female figurines, many of whom appeared to depict pregnancy, LeRoy (1996) hypothesised that they were a form of self-portrait, sculpted by women, representing a self-view that only women could be privy to in their foreshortened expressions of their experience. It was a view that has received many critiques by art historians that appear at the end of the article.

I sketched the Indus Valley seal, marvelling at the very tiny figure that was a part of a "larger" seal. I wondered if it were just the size of my thumbnail. It was a sparse depiction, utterly to the point and unabashed. Then, I sketched from a photograph of Carolee Schneemann in performance. In one instant, I had travelled 4000 years from a reverence of the female form to the need to fight to revere femininity.

Schneemann had wanted her body to be the text, not the object of the male gaze. Silzer (2021) wrote of the facsimile of Schneeman's book, *Parts of a Body House Book* that was arranged like rooms in a house:

> …we're compelled to see the body as both a literary text and a physical scaffolding for the self… "When you enter the Body House you walk south and north for a long time; you come to an open circular structure—a staircase of ribs, smooth and shiny and white." (para 2).

Interestingly, in a striking similarity, around the tenth century CE, a few hypaethral temples were constructed that were round, open-air structures with 64 goddesses or yogini sculptures arranged within the inner periphery, with the male Bhairava, a form of Shiva, in the centre. These temple structures stand in contrast to the predominantly phallic structures of both North and South Indian Hindu architecture (Dehejia, 1986). Schneeman seems to me to be continuous with the ideas of goddesses from the Upper Palaeolithic, Harappan, and Tantric times all the way into modernity.

I placed my sketches in the dark onto fabric coated with a photosensitive solution. I placed a circular piece of paper around the sketches, as if to contain them. Then it occurred to me that I could add a rectangular piece of paper to the bottom of the circle and house an elephant matriarch within it. Now the configuration seemed to me like a female symbol. It was a way for me to connect history and the connections between humans and non-humans alike. I saw that ancient history, the fight for women's rights, and elephants who teach us about the importance of ancestral memory are connected and continue to pulsate even now. I placed the composition in the sun and waited for them to converse, resulting in Figure 4. The sun had risen to watch over the seal carver, had risen on the day Schneeman performed *Interior Scrolls*, continues to bear witness to the elephants' plight day after day, and had risen to see through my cyanotype print. I embroidered some of the details for effect.

Figure 4 - The Body as Text

Kali Yantra

Human sexuality in all its forms, same-sex, heterosexual, and polyamorous were represented in erotic temple sculptures between 950 and 1250 CE in Central India (Arora, 2021). This was refreshing for me to get reintroduced to as a therapist. As an art student in India, I had learned that the sculptures depicted a "shedding" of one's sexual desires as one sought unity with the great god Shiva in the inner sanctum. Not surprising since our textbook was written by a Roman Catholic nun. Instead, according to tantric philosophy, sexuality was seen as a pathway to the divine that derived from a mix of folk beliefs, animalistic cults, and rituals that were marginal to Vedic Brahminism (Arora, 2021; Dehejia, 1986). The people preferred devotion to a personal god. In the face of fundamentalist Hindu propaganda rampant in India, the reminder of these origins was illuminating to me as these traditions had co-existed with casteism before aspects of them had become co-opted.

I further read that tantrism was open to all castes and to women and centred on the worship of the mother goddess or Shakti (Saxena, 2016; Thapar, 1966). Arora (2021) also pointed to the fact that the elite Vedic Brahminism had not yet incorporated the various traditions that were already present, all of which would later form the "soup" called Hinduism. These same traditions also had an impact on Buddhism that incorporated the regional deities that appear in Vajrayana Buddhism.

Tantrism posited the fundamental unity of all beings and gave the tools to connect the psychological to the spiritual, the individual to the cosmic (Johari, 1986). Yantras are a part of this tradition, geometric mandalas that depict the congruence and symmetrical unfolding centred on the midpoint or bindu, symbolising all creation. The yantra acts as a mirror for each person to both enter into one's own universe and step out to enjoy the mysteries of the universe one beholds. Therefore, the yantras are both roadways to spiritual or cosmic experiences as well as "psychological symbols corresponding to inner states of human consciousness" (Khanna, 1979, p. 12). It was this very tradition that Jung had been exposed to as documented in the Red Book (Feuerstein, 2018).

The power of the yantra is in its representation of Shakti or dynamic power, often conceptualised as the divine feminine, inseparable from the static forces conceptualised as the male principle. As an archetypal unit, the yantra is brought to life through meditation and mantras or chants, awakening the feminine principle, whereby the initiate harnesses their own power (Johari, 1986; Khanna, 1979).

I drew the Sri Chakra yantra as a daily practice, learning the design, appreciating the geometry of nine intersecting triangles even in the free-hand drawings. I was familiar with mandalas, and kolams, the matrilineal tradition of labyrinthine drawings made of rice flour in Southern India. Additionally, mandalas are seemingly ubiquitous in art therapy literature (Jung, 1968; Kellogg, 1977; Kellogg, 2015) and known to be a centring force, culturally appropriated from Indian sources (Goerdt & Woo, 2026). Having read the many sources on yantras, I was aware that I was uninitiated. How could I paint a yantra that was out-of-step with tradition and would not replicate the cultural appropriation that was already present? Was I invoking the terrible energy of the end of time that Kali symbolises? Was I giving in to superstition? Was I prepared to deal with death?

I consulted with Neela Saxena (personal communication, December 11, 2025), an author with vast knowledge of tantrism and who was initiated into the practice. She encouraged me to follow my artistic instincts, setting me free. This relational aspect was more alive to me in creating the Kali Yantra (Figure 5) than the lore that surrounded the yantra. I had drawn the Kali yantra following careful measurement with a compass, but the downward pointing triangle was much too small, resulting in

my adding a larger downward pointing triangular enclosure with circumambulating elephants. On a superficial level, I might have been painting a geometric figure, a triangle, however, the painting process was nevertheless profound, attuning me to the uterine lining in the red paint. It was about painting the vulvic space as Schneemann had done and the countless goddess practitioners. The slimy algal green painted me into deep forests that I could almost smell, and the pitch black of the cosmos was softened by the white elephants. I had grown up listening to stories of Kali, also known as Durga, being softened by her son, the elephant headed Ganesha. It made the elephants even more important in this painting. I had been transported.

Figure 5 - Kali Yantra, interpreted

Peering into history taught me that ideas about gender, sexuality and religion were more fluid than one is led to believe by fundamentalists and those who are allergic to diversity of any kind, including bio-diversity. In the tantric tradition, as I understand it, the feminine principle is not to be mistaken as the sex or gendered meanings associated with masculine and feminine (Khanna, 1979; Saxena, 2016). In fact, male and female binaries are to be eschewed as the power is in the composite. These energies are present in all and within the cosmos which Jung (1968) borrowed to create the concept of the union of opposites (Feuerstein, 2018). The synthesis is represented as the downward-facing triangle (Shakti) and the upward-facing triangle (Purusha) (Johari, 1986; Khanna, 1979) forming a hexagonal star: another type of kinship.

These seemingly Hindu ideas are also present in the Buddhist tradition. According to Saxena (2016), even the abject in Western philosophy is given a divine configuration, as in goddesses of pollution, filth, ugliness, and death. All caste and gender identifications dissolve: “anyone claiming to be narrowly ‘Hindu’ may worship Kali but cannot be a Kali practitioner” (p. 17).

Memories Pressed into a Fold

Several years ago, my sister and I had the opportunity to visit a woman who had dialogued, negotiated, and slowly worked to have temple authorities in Southern India release a few of their elephants (they had been abused) to be restored to health. One of the elephants, with a large, pink gash on her side, was being bathed by her mahout. I created a pop-up book depicting the poem (Figure 6), Pachyderm Refugee (Venkateswaran, 2024, p. 74) describing this event on the cover:

…tying her to the floor of a temple stall. Weep, as the men hose her/…Her knees are reverse L-shaped as she offers herself to treatment./Heavy with grief, you kneel, your palms pressed together.

Figure 6 Pachyderm Refugee

6a: Cover Image

6b: Pop-Up Image

The memories lay folded within, needing something to open them up. I imagined how the elephant might miss its wildness, of being with its elephant family, eating jackfruit from the trees, and enjoying its forest dwelling. I drew, painted, and cut out the various scenes on thick paper and assembled them such that they popped up into a geometric forest scene that could be viewed along 360 degrees once the card was opened. (A film version of this work is available on YouTube. I wanted the paper strips to depict the interconnected matrix of a forest as a metaphor for the concepts of ecofeminism as "interconnections of subjugations: of the planet, of women, and of colonised people everywhere

(Ruether, 1992)" (Bell et al., 2021, p. 2; see also Kimmerer, 2013), as well as their hidden dreams and aspirations.

Many authors (Doherty, 2025; Kalmus, 2024; Killian, 2021) have listed the myriad changes in the environment globally and locally. The trajectory toward destruction is clear and present. Notation of its deleterious effects on mental health has been undeniable (Doherty, 2025; George, 2024; Laszloffy, 2019a & 2019b; Longman & Shaw, 2025). Rao (2012) observed that it is the women from lower caste designations who are dealing with poverty, the ones who stood to lose the most, were the ones resisting and protesting environmental degradation but were often hidden from view, just like the memories of the elephants.

The human rampage against nature, the wish to urbanise at all costs in service of corporate greed cuts elephants, animals, rock, mineral, and humans in ways that will ultimately spell collective doom. We *are* ecology (Simon and Salter, 2019, p. 2; italics in original)—if we destroy the elephants' home, we will ultimately destroy our own home, and based on the etymology of the word "home," our own economy.

Conclusion

The art process had established for me a method of inquiry that helped me link ideas that had been seemingly disparate. The elephants had, in fact, shown me the connections of all entities that constitute ecology. Through this research, I learned that as a family art therapist, the system is an animate process with histories that deserve to be seen and learned from. The Harappan seal, the tantric goddesses, yantras, Carolee Schneeman, the elephants of Africa and Asia, and us, along with the rivers, rocks, sun, trees, ants—all entities, deserve to persist as a counterpoint to the increased digitisation and urbanisation that is our contemporary world.

Longman and Shaw (2025) cited persuasive evidence demonstrating compromised reproductive, immune, cognitive, and physical health as a result of industrialisation. The race toward artificial intelligence, greed for raw earth minerals, oil and other material, and urbanisation underscore their hypothesis that humans are mismatched for living in urban, industrialised environments. I can see how in the face of terror, shame, helplessness, fight, flight, my dreams and aspirations cleave to the shadows, becoming artifacts of memory. I might become a captive of AI, might even occupy a rehabilitative environment getting a spa bath, while my dreams lie pressed within a fold. All my cross-species kin might similarly lay hidden in the fold along with our collective dreams. How do we, collectively, paint ourselves out of the fold and into the sun?

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