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CASE STUDY

Prayer as Pluriversal Praxis

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Abstract

What it means to create a world in which "many worlds fit," as the Zapatistas declared, has increasingly been taken up across the humanities and social sciences, introduced by decolonial theorists. This article focuses on some of the practices that allow for the enaction of the pluriverse: prayer and attachments to sacred space. I focus on a prayer camp organized by the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest to the south of Winnipeg, showing that broadly construed notions of prayer can be understood as a pluriversal methodology wherein worlds are navigated through shared—yet still positionally aware—attachments to place. In the prayer camp, prayer—as plea/appeal, practice, action, communication, or commitment—is comfortable with divergent cosmological perspectives, rooted in (un)common attachments to sacred space: both in shared goals of protecting the space and honoring its legacy but also through an engagement with an "uncommon commoning" of that which is sacred and/or otherworldly. I argue that the sacred is an integral part of coalition building within the space; in turn, coalition building can also serve to reinvigorate connections to sacred space and worlds.

Keywords: decoloniality; environment; pluriverse; prayer; religion

In 2020, concerned community members gathered in prayer to protect one of Winnipeg's only remaining riparian forests from residential development. Over the next four years, residents formed the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest.[1] They petitioned local officials to halt demolition of the forest and to reconsider its value as a site of biodiversity, and they emphasized the importance of maintaining access to the forest's sweat lodges and to honor the remains of children from a former orphanage located on the premises. Then, in December 2024, community members started a sacred fire that they supported for nearly four months until the Honorable Premier Wab Kinew announced that the Province of Manitoba (Ancestral Lands of the Anishinaabe and home of the Red River Métis, Treaty #1 Territory) would expropriate the Lemay Forest to create a new provincial park. Prayers with and around the sacred fire for the preservation of the forest comprised appeals to ancestors and sacred entities, offered both communally and through individual pleas. Those prayers, as this essay argues, should be taken seriously in terms of both their political engagement and the relationships that they helped to build.

[1] The Coalition to Save Lemay Forest 2025.

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What Saved the Lemay Forest? Although some might describe what occurred as a "protest," coalition members have rejected this label, emphasizing that there was no blockade to enter the forest and that the sacred fire was lit outside of the "property" to avoid "trespassing." Instead, they emphasize the central role of prayer. In addition to media attention on the movement, the expropriation announcement came after months of incessant prayer around the sacred fire by actors with varying cosmologies and backgrounds. Diane (a Métis land defender instrumental in the movement to save the forest) reflects, "when we have people come together in ceremony, we tell them, please pray, pray to your God, whoever you believe in. We're very new to Truth and Reconciliation. And what that path looks like is sitting with community and doing that together. We're creating that space. So, it's prayers. It's intentions. It's, all day, we're praying."

The people involved in the movement reject the label of "protestors," emphasizing instead the centrality of prayer in land protection and coalition building. Through prayers with and around the sacred fire, they appealed to more-than-human others for help to save the forest. Although diverse in their spiritual or religious commitments, community members involved in the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest found common ground in sharing sacred space, and praying, together. The space, I argue, is a pluriversal one, wherein many worlds are navigated through prayer, which necessitates an openness to diverse ways of being and knowing. This article explores the relationship between prayer, coalition building, and pluriversal methodology, arguing that practices of prayer worked to both protect the forest and strengthen community building.

The pluriverse is a framework of inquiry derived from the Zapatista mandate to "create a world in which many worlds fit."[2] As a decolonial movement originating in Mexico in the 1990s, the Zapatista mandate links material change to ontological (and cosmological) diversity. Over the last two decades, pluriversal theorizing has been increasingly taken up across the humanities and social sciences as a means by which to destabilize hierarchies found in Eurocentric ways of being and knowing by insisting that decolonization must consist of making space for the diverse ways of being in and knowing the world.[3] What this looks like in practice—holding the possibility of recognizing multiple realities while also retaining normative decolonial commitments—can be more challenging, as it is often through matters of ontology and cosmology that "questions of difference" are at their most pervasive.[4] Prayer, as this article argues, provides embodied ways of navigating those questions of difference.

This article suggests that focusing on practices such as prayer allows us to see how the pluriverse is enacted in spaces where we might expect to see tensions in ways of being (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of understanding the universe or the cosmos (cosmology). If we are to understand decoloniality as predicated on navigating these pervasive differences in being, knowing, and understanding so fundamental to political questions of difference, I suggest focusing on living spiritual and religious practices rather than top-down theological guidelines.[5] Prayer, in the prayer camp, is a means by which to navigate those many worlds and points of access to them, as it is comprised of embodied practices that are comfortable with questions of difference: prayers do not necessarily have

[2] Zúñiga 2025.
[3] Escobar 2007; Law 2015; Mignolo 2011, 2018.
[4] FitzGerald 2022.
[5] Zúñiga 2025.

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to "match" or adhere to the same religious or spiritual philosophies to matter politically within the space for worldbuilding.

As part of a larger research project about prayer, I have conducted around 20 open-ended interpretive interviews with Manitoba-based settlers and Indigenous participants of anti-extractivist prayer camps organized for land and water defense, solidarity protests among settler Christians in Canadian banks, and participant observation at various Christian churches and Camp Morningstar, an Anishinaabe-led prayer camp organized against silica sands mining near the Manigotagan River and the lands of Hollow Water First Nation. Prayer has continued to come up as an important means to challenge the interrelated and ongoing legacies of colonial and environmental violence, despite the fact that prayer is understood and utilized in diverse ways by land defenders and allies. I focus here on the prayer camp organized by the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest; however, the themes that I identify within this example can be found in the other prayer camps.

To approach prayer as coalition building offers direct interventions into Indigenous Humanities, emphasizing the inseparability of spiritual and political engagement. Additionally, this article emphasizes the importance of learning *from* activists/land and water defenders as Public Humanities scholarship: through sustained relationship building with research collaborators from which this project draws insight, I insist that describing this case in its own terms means emphasizing the central tenets of *prayer* as political action rather than defaulting to liberal categorizations of civic "protest."[6] Within this practical ethic, I have shared drafts with collaborators in the spirit of co-creation and accountability to recognize the collective in knowledge production.

I first contextualize the prayer camp organized by the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest as part of a broader project focused on spiritual connection and possibility in and around the Winnipeg area. Next, I situate the prayers for the Lemay Forest within a conceptual discussion on the pluriverse. Ultimately, I argue that *prayer* as a practice rooted in sacred space makes possible distinct pluriversal possibilities through holding in constant the individual/uncommon/private and ontologically diverse elements of prayer within shared practice.

1. The Lemay Forest and its politico-spiritual significance

The Lemay Forest movement is part of a larger trend of acts of land and water protection that have gained international attention as they multiply.[7] In the United States and Canada, such protests of resistance to pipelines, hydroelectric dams, and mining projects are often Indigenous-led and garner a host of allies from different backgrounds. While these protectors received many expressions of support, they have also been framed as "violent" or even "terroristic" by the news media and criminalized by the government. As a matter of fact, repression of anti-extraction nature defenders has grown, and reports revealed oil and gas companies' deployment of private surveillance companies in addition to military and police forces.[8] Throughout the world, land and water protectors are experiencing physical repression, gender-based violence, and even death.[9] Of these defenders, Indigenous people

[6] McCoy et al. 2025; Wilson and Bulaitis 2025.
[7] Ulmanu et al. 2017.
[8] Ulmanu et al. 2017.
[9] Global Witness 2025.

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represent nearly a third of those killed annually, despite the fact that they comprise only 5% of the global population.[10]

The 2016–2017 movement to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline (or #NoDAPL) is a case in point. While these movements for land and water protection against an oil pipeline gained most public attention when it was repressed by police and military forces, the Indigenous-led movement originated with a youth camp with prayer around a sacred fire to protect ancestral burial grounds. The spiritual and religious dimensions of such movements can benefit from further attention as sites of political ontological encounter. For example, led by the Standing Rock Sioux, the movement prompted both international media attention and drew in a large and diverse body of supporters. Kyle Powys Whyte has described the movement as being "really about ceremony, prayer, and water protection," indicating the centrality of spiritual expression and connection within the movement, a sentiment that has been largely shared by interlocutors within the Lemay Forest movement.[11]

Like other camps organized for land and water protection, the movement to save the Lemay Forest garnered a coalition of diverse supporters with layered interests in protecting the forest. The space where the Lemay Forest stands is entangled in layers of dispossession where colonial encounter overlaps with industrial development.[12] After his death, the home of Joseph Lemay (Manitoban businessman and politician), built on the site in the 1870s, was donated via a local church along with surrounding land to les Soeurs de Misericorde (Sisters of the Misericordia) who expanded on and utilized the space as an orphanage and home for unwed mothers called the Asile Ritchot Orphanage from 1904 to 1948.[13] It was then utilized as a seminary before becoming a center for behavioral health in 1970, which it remains to this day.[14] In 2020, the surrounding forest came under threat by a developer who sought to clear-cut the area for commercial building, a fact that pained nearby residents and Métis community members.

In addition to concerns for protecting the biodiversity of the forest and the sweat lodges constructed there, many members of the coalition were concerned by the fact that "anywhere from 1,288 and 2,300 children died in the orphanage in those years and likely the majority of those were buried in common graves in the cemetery" based on records produced by Sisters of the Misericordia accessed by local university archivists.[15] According to registers from the Société historique de St-Boniface, most of the children buried were likely from lower-income families from a range of ethnic and national backgrounds, including First Nations and Métis. Motivations for honoring the remains of all of those children, it should be noted, follow recent discoveries of mass graves on former residential school premises throughout Canada.[16]

For community members, motivations for protecting the forest encompass protecting the plant and animal life itself, preserving access to the sweat lodges in the forest, and, importantly, honoring the remains of those buried in the forest. In 2024, the sacred fire was lit to protect the forest, to be in ceremony, and to grieve the remains of the children

[10] Picq 2025.
[11] Whyte 2017.
[12] The Coalition to Save Lemay Forest 2025.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Manitoba Historical Society 2025.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Austen and Bracken 2024.

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buried in the forest. In 2025, after nearly five years of petitions and appeals to halt demolition of the forest and nearly four months after the sacred fire was lit, the Honorable Premier Wab Kinew announced that the province would expropriate the Lemay Forest for the purpose of creating a new provincial park.[17] Although members of the coalition share concerns about what this new park will look like in practice and how the remains of the children and their mothers will be preserved and honored, the decision seems generally to be understood by members of the coalition as a step in the right direction.

Prior to the expropriation announcement, coalition members were limited in their access to the forest, at risk of "trespassing" on what was considered private property. Because of this, the coalition gathered on nearby public land close to the forest. The sacred fire and many of the other prayers technically occurred outside of the recognized boundaries of the forest itself. But because of the transcendent capacity of these sacred communications and prayers —the intention and ability to call in ancestors and to pray—Diane told me that the fire was lit so that they could be as close as possible to the grounds as they called in ancestors with fire, drumming, rattles, and singing.

Members of the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest share, perhaps obviously, a commitment to protect the forest. The movement, which was organized in 2020 by a group of community members concerned with the environment, gained significant support from Métis community members who were concerned about the children buried on the premises, the health of the forest, and access to sweat lodges on the grounds. Prayer and broader connections to sacred land are inseparable from the goals of the prayer camp and the overall atmosphere of trust and relationship building around the sacred fire. Focusing on the notion of prayer, rather than "protest" or other forms of civic activism (as these types of movements are often categorized), allows us to take seriously the less visible ways in which community members are protecting the space, building community, and committing to new futures from the ground up. This produces interesting questions about the role of prayer and religious difference in "environmental" efforts, wherein other realities and worlds are necessarily made known and sometimes navigated or experienced by participants who may or may not share those cosmological understandings of the universe.[18] As such, I propose to approach the prayers for the Lemay Forest coalition through the concept of the *pluriverse*, which insists that there is not one single reality but are instead multiple ways to be and know (or, a world of many worlds).

2. The pluriverse, religiopolitical encounter, and the question of difference in practice

The *pluriverse*, or perhaps better described as a means by which to destabilize "one-world world" structures that marginalize and/or erase other worlds, has been explored through social scientific and humanistic inquiry for some time.[19] Rooted in the Zapatista declaration of creating "a world in which many worlds fit," pluriversal theory and praxis are explicitly committed to the decolonial movement based on the presupposition that ontological,

[17] Searle 2025.

[18] I put "environment" in quotation marks here, because the concept of "environment" is not necessarily shared by those whose ontology and/or cosmology understands Land as composed of agential and/or sacred relations inseparable from the human world—for an excellent discussion on this, see Watts (2013) and Kanngieser and Todd (2020).

[19] Blaney and Tickner 2017; Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Escobar 2018; FitzGerald 2022, 2023; Hutchings 2019; Law 2015; Mignolo 2007; Querejazu 2022, 2024; Reiter 2018; Rojas 2016; Scauso 2020; Zúñiga 2025.

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epistemic, and material violence are deeply entangled.[20] Because decoloniality, then, must engage with questions of cosmological and ontological difference, I suggest turning to the ways in which questions of difference are negotiated through ongoing practices, tensions, and sharing space. As I show through the case of the Lemay Forest, the prayer camp entailed wrestling with questions of positionality and the legacies of colonialism, centered around prayers and the sacred fire: pluriversal praxis was enacted here.

Lemay Forest land defenders have reflected on what it means to inhabit different worlds for common goals of conservation: Gisheekandug Ikwè (Cedar Woman, also known as Cedar) reflects, "feel your shame, cry your white tears, [it's] your responsibility to do the work, not for me to teach you. But come to me and pass me tobacco, I'll sit with you and share. Absolutely. And that's what's happening at the fire. We're feasting together. We're learning about each other. We're learning about Catholicism, Christianity, Judaism, all of these different people, see? It's beautiful when you come around that fire. Because fire is that peace within us, too. It's spirit." The sacred fire is a space for "and's." There is grief *and* hope; there is guilt *and* beauty; there is divergence *and* connection, much of which is navigated through and alongside prayerful commitments to the fire and to the forest itself. Cedar does not suggest that coalition members leave their personal religious commitments at the door; rather, those differences (among others) are part of the work of building community around the sacred fire.

Land defenders have described their interactions within the space as inseparable from spiritual life, expression, and practice: prayer is a means by which to grieve, ask for help, and connect to the space. Prayer is also a means by which to connect with ancestors and to commit to protecting the forest through the keeping of the sacred fire. The pluriverse, I contend, is enacted here through prayer and attachments to sacred space: cosmologies vary but are relationally entangled through common prayer. I suggest that more research might attend to the ways in which certain practices, such as prayer—which is simultaneously both an everyday practice *and*, in this case, a refusal beyond the "politics as usual" described by de la Cadena—are reflective of the pluriversal decolonial commitment to make possible a "world of many worlds."[21]

The pluriverse, as a point of inquiry, provides a means for holding in constant the realities of multiple worlds and worlding practices, which means moving beyond simple depictions of "cultural difference" that prioritize the settler political imaginary and reduce other ways of knowing to deviations from that political imaginary. For example, Lemay Forest defenders describe calling in ancestors for protection. Understanding this interaction as reflective of a world, rather than a belief, is precisely part of the aims of the pluriversal project: "belief" defaults to a "Truth" found in dominant worlds/ontologies/cosmologies (in this case, the Western "scientific" ontology that, at best, understands the notion of "calling in ancestors" as a metaphor or more pessimistically, nonsensical) wherein alternate worlds are marginalized or less reliable than dominant worlds. Among the questions that the pluriverse is interested in, we might how we might hold space and enact care for multiple realities, especially while retaining normative commitments to decoloniality?[22]

[20] Zúñiga 2025, 267.

[21] Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010, 337; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Escobar 2007; FitzGerald 2022, 2023; Klein Schaarsberg 2024; Mignolo 2018; Querejazu 2022, 2024; Zúñiga 2025.

[22] FitzGerald 2022, 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017.

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Turning to practice—and in this case, prayer specifically—allows us to see the ways in which different worlds are navigated in grassroots movements. For instance, Métis coalition members describe receiving teachings in the sweat lodges on the grounds of the Lemay Forest, indicating further interest in protecting the space as sacred. Other Indigenous and settler coalition members describe other instances of praying and being in the forest and especially describe the sacredness of the fire itself and its lasting impact on coalition members who are trying to sort out what "Truth and Reconciliation" means in practice. The children's remains, believed to be located on the grounds, are grieved by all within the space, but might create different emotional reactions among coalition members in the legacy of residential schools.

As we see through the case of the Lemay Forest, protecting "the environment" is not only about protecting land. Although this is the common factor in what brought together a diverse coalition, grappling with the historical legacy of the space itself—and the relationships produced under colonialism—is inseparable from the goals of broader land protection. Creating a world "where many worlds fit"—enacting pluriversal methods—was necessarily part of what it meant to navigate those legacies and relationships, which happened through prayer and sharing ceremony. Cat (settler member of the Coalition), for example, has told me that she believes everyone would be better off if they were to share in ceremony with Indigenous neighbors, as it cultivated a space for gratitude, connection to the forest, and connection to each other.

Those connections do not erase all questions of "difference," but rather point to ways of navigating and enacting worlds in a shared material reality.[23] Broadening the scope of pluriversal analysis, I contend, allows for further penetration into what "is" and is not, to borrow from Klein Schaarsberg, and offers breadth and depth to the study of politics, hybridity, and practice in world-navigation and worldbuilding. As Indigenous Studies and pluriversal scholarship have pointed out, research aimed at mitigating environmental and/or climate harm without grappling with the complex ways in which communities understand "the environment" around them already holds within it problems for environmental and epistemic justice.[24] As such, there has been significant overlap between research interested in environmental health and justice and research that probes the "question of difference" in pluriversal thought, much of which focuses on South American Indigenous cosmologies.

As Schaarsberg points out, "it is generally uncomplicated (for 'Northern' researchers) to consider mountains to have spirits when they are placed in faraway places, yet it becomes a lot more difficult to consider different realities closer to home. Mountain spirits might have political agency in the Andes, but an 'energy of peace flowing through the whole of Amsterdam' that contemplative activists experience as having political significance is 'crazy', as some of my academic colleagues have remarked when I presented my fieldwork at conferences or workshops."[25] In a similar vein, I suggest that pluriversal research might be further enriched by reflecting more deeply on the practices that enact the pluriverse. In North American contexts, for example, Indigenous and Christian traditions are often entangled, which researchers have discussed in terms of the tactics needed to survive colonization and the complexities of syncretic knowledges and what that means for

[23] Klein Schaarsberg 2024.

[24] Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2010; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Kanngieser and Todd 2020; Liboiron 2021; Watts, 2013, 2020.

[25] Klein Schaarsberg 2024, 439.

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ontological justice and security.[26] As Shani argues, exploring cosmological relational encounter (rather than geo-cultural) can help to chart more pluriversal pathways, "for cosmologies are living and interact with other cosmologies in a pluriverse. They frequently collide, become enmeshed and entangled."[27] The movement to save the Lemay Forest is a case in point: *living* cosmologies are entangled around the sacred fire through practices of prayer.

It is precisely these collisions and entanglements that can make pluriversal scholarship—and the notion that the pluriverse is comprised of "more than one [world] and less than many" so "thorny."[28] In North American contexts, the historical and contemporary influence (and everyday prioritization of, despite official commitments to "secular" policies) of Christianity is ever-present.[29] Both metaphorically and sometimes literally, Christianity is looming in the background and influential to daily life and practice: specific to this case, the legacy of the Asile Ritchot Orphanage is reflective of settler Christian ideals about the heteropatriarchal family structure, which disrupted other ways in which Indigenous peoples historically made kin.[30] The violence of Christianity against Indigenous populations should not be understated: throughout the colonial world, Christianity is undoubtedly implicated in the violence that has suppressed these diverse ways of being and knowing. Inseparable from global Christian missionization were colonial political projects of land theft.[31]

Although structural Christian influence can remain violent, the layers of variability in the ways in which religion is practiced are often acknowledged by interlocutors. For instance, a number of settler interlocutors for this larger project have discussed what reparations look like in practice as informed by their broader Christian spiritual commitments.[32] This variability is also evidenced by a body of work that encourages us to think about the people's religious practice (which is always in friction with other forces) rather than top-down dogmatic religious doctrine.[33] Religious and spiritual practices are highly variable, as is evidenced by a wide body of scholarship and geographic regions.[34] As such, focusing on practices such as prayer shed light on the ways in which cosmological difference is being negotiated and the pluriverse is already being enacted.

In focusing on the role of prayer in solidarity efforts and as a means of sharing common sacred space, fieldwork reflections have emphasized that Indigenous and Christian spiritual practices are not always discrete but overlap in complex ways, as research engaging with questions of syncretism and hybridity has shown.[35] Even when participants subscribe to more strictly Christian or strictly Indigenous spiritual traditions and practices, they have indicated that prayer can be a binding force legible to varied traditions and as a form of spiritual action.

[26] Bradford and Horton 2017; Deloria 1972; Weaver 1998.
[27] Shani 2021, 311.
[28] Blaser 2018, 47; FitzGerald 2022, 2.
[29] Asad 2003; Calhoun et al. 2011; Casanova 2009; Wilson 2018.
[30] Barker 2017; Driskill et al. 2011; Simpson 2020.
[31] Bradford and Horton 2017; Heinrichs 2019.
[32] Westfaul forthcoming.
[33] Lynch 2009; McNally 2000; Omer 2020.
[34] Cone 2011; Deloria 1972; Luhrmann 2012; Lynch 2009; Mahmood 2006; McNally 2000; Omer 2020; Schwarz 2018; Wilson 2014.
[35] See, for example, Anzaldúa, Cantú, and Hurtado 2012; Bradford and Horton 2017; de la Cadena 2010, 2018; Heinrichs 2019; Lynch, 2000, 2020; McNally 2000; Tomlinson 2020.

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Prayer is relationally navigated within this space: coalition members seem to follow the guidance of First Nations/Indigenous elders and community members in connecting to ancestors, the sacred fire, and to sacred land. Prayer, in some contexts, might offer something special to worldbuilding projects based on a general humility that it entails across spiritual traditions.[36] Prayer, too, can allow for an ontological pause, simultaneous contemplative reflection that also seeks to inspire sociopolitical change, not unlike the "contemplactivism" that Schaarsberg describes, and embodied experiences that allow for different types of community building than traditional dialogue.[37]

Prayer, for Lemay coalition members, is simultaneously silent and personal, thought about in the mind and enacted through embodied practices. It is both grief and plea. Through offerings to the sacred fire, conversations and prayers spoken/sung/thought/drummed around it, connections are made with fellow coalition members and with the space itself. I show in the next section that prayer (broadly defined) allows for multiplicities in being and knowing, still with the capacity to strengthen community bonds with each other and with sacred space.

3. Prayer as pluriversal praxis: Navigating worlds around the sacred fire

The Lemay Forest is a marker of the disparate ontological, yet deeply interconnected, worlds imbricated in the settler-colonial project: ranging from the settler Christian influence over the Asile Ritchot orphanage formerly located in the forest to the destruction of the forest itself by the developer, who clearcut trees that the coalition members mentioned praying with and for; trees that might have held artifacts associated with the children and women buried in the forest.

In praying for the forest and for the children buried on the premises, land defenders challenge how we understand political action. Taking prayer and sacred acts seriously necessarily entails taking seriously the presence of more-than-human actors within the space, in addition to taking seriously the ways in which the pluriverse is enacted among coalition members. In the same way that the sacred fire and other prayers challenge the bounds of physical space, prayer is also not easily categorized as strictly an action/practice. While it can *be* action or practice, prayer is reflective of a broader understanding of nonduality that is not necessarily so easily identified in much of Western thought: Diane, for instance, has described being with the sacred fire as "it's all prayers... when we offer tobacco to the fire, we are literally taking it with our left hand, because it's closer to our heart. It helps us connect to that fire." Although recognized firekeepers maintain the fire, other participants are encouraged to connect to the fire and to pray. Being connected to the ongoing sacred fire is a commitment to the protection of the forest through the help of ancestors and sacred figures. Although such a practice is rooted in Indigenous spiritual traditions, Diane emphasizes that the sacred fire is not just for one person, "if you look at the profit of the lighting of the eighth fire, it doesn't just speak of First Nations people. It speaks of First Nations people, Indigenous people, bringing our knowledge in turn, creating unity amongst all. So, we have everybody [at the sacred fire]." Gathering at the prayer camp necessarily also entails an inhabitation of shared sacred space and an engagement with the ontologies, cosmologies, worlds, and prophecies of others.

[36] Westfaul forthcoming.
[37] de la Cadena 2010; Klein Schaarsberg 2024; Schwarz 2018.

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Connecting to the sacred fire is a commitment to the space, comprised of prayers, and prayer itself. The prayers that occur with and around the sacred fire are still specific: sharing sacred space does not erase all "problems of difference," as I expand on in the following section. For some participants, the prayers might entail grieving for the children and women of Asile Ritchot, grieving the loss of plant and animal life in the forest due to habitat destruction, and pleas for help.

Accessing and communing with the sacred across and in-between differing cosmologies points to an enactment of the pluriverse: it is *with* and *through* their differing worlds that prayer camp participants navigate the sacred together. The common and communal act of prayer is entangled in uncommon OtherWorlds (those OtherWorlds are attached to personal, individual, communal/familial, and historical difference). Prayer is allowed to be entrenched in differing cosmologies, yet still shares physical and metaphysical space and practice. Communal prayer, then, is both connected to and transcendent of the physical space and sacred fire; it is both practiced within community and also very personal, specific, and individualized.

Settler and other non-Indigenous participants might have different understandings of the Lemay Forest: they might be interested in protecting the pileated woodpecker or the broader biodiversity of the forest, or hold sentimental attachments to the space as one where their children play, or perhaps care about enacting a solidarity with Indigenous community members who know or are connected to the space differently.[38] There is, of course, a specificity inherent to solidarity: attention to the privileges that we inhabit is a necessary requisite to dismantling harmful structures.[39]

While some teachings and knowledge of the forest might be known and experienced differently, depending on who one is, *prayer* within the camp itself is exemplary of a much murkier process of navigating the worlds and realities present within the space. Participants identifying as Indigenous and settler, for example, mentioned learning from and with other prayer camp participants of varied religious/spiritual backgrounds. One settler participant indicated, half-jokingly, for instance, that they did not want to "pray for the developer," but did so reluctantly at the urging of Indigenous spiritual leaders at the site. Although the construction of the sacred fire is indebted to and grounded in Indigenous spiritual traditions, Diane emphasized that prayer camp participants were urged to "pray to whatever God you believe in."

The sacred fire was lit both to protect the forest and, as Diane tells me, to be in ceremony, to grieve and feel the children, which is why sweat lodges were built in the forest in the first place. Cedar similarly mentioned, "you can still hear them playing, if you listen closely enough," adding that prayer camp participants offered to the children onesies, toys, and anything else that they may not have had. The quantitative estimates of children and women buried in the forest are staggering, but the numbers are only part of the story: Diane told me, "it *hurts.*"

These evocations shared by Cedar and Diane are poignant reminders of the different worlds seen and known by interlocutors, traumas that are not experienced or otherwise known by settler interlocutors (or myself, a settler researcher), although such recollections shared

[38] For an excellent discussion on what it means to care for other worlds, see FitzGerald 2022.
[39] Harper-Shipman et al. 2021; Picq 2025.

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with us might offer a glimpse into our varied experiences. Interlocutors suggested that being together around the sacred fire is a microcosm of what "truth and reconciliation" can look like. Diane, for instance, told news media, "reconciliation isn't just about recognizing the children that are in that ground, it's about honoring this whole forest," indicating the multiplicitous nature of what it means to redress colonial harm.[40]

Blaser and de la Cadena urge us to think with the "uncommons" as "a condition that disrupts (yet does not replace) the idea of 'the world' as shared ground: an idea that appears as the condition of possibility for the common good and of commons."[41] The uncommons, for Blaser and de la Cadena, is a crucial point of reckoning en route to a solid commons. For instance, knowing the spirits of the forest—or Marisol de la Cadena's related conception of *earth beings*—that are unknown to others in a commoning project might be an example of "the uncommons."[42] The commons would emphasize the shared goals of disparate knowers, whereas the uncommons makes visible incommensurable ways of knowing. As such, the uncommons and the commons are in relation; a solid commons must necessarily make visible that which is uncommon.

Michelle Becka traces the compatibility of pluriversal thought directly with the Christian conception of the "common good," reflecting more specifically on Catholic social teaching.[43] Becka, too, emphasizes that commons are made, not simply given—and that the common good is necessarily both relational and particular in a way that resembles (for the author) solidarity, adding that "commoning projects can be places of perception and places of learning. They allow for relationality—the relationship to others and the non-human world—to be experienced; they are fields of experimentation."[44]

The portrait of the commoning project that Becka draws, in many ways, resembles the relationality described to me by prayer camp participants: learning and unlearning, rooted deeply in experience and experientiality, and trust building.[45] Participants were working toward commoning projects—that is, common goals and discourse—with the acknowledgment of the ways in which their lives' experiences and knowledges might always remain *uncommon.* However, if we are to take seriously the more-than-human in prayer, as the pluriverse suggests that we should, we must also take into consideration what prayer as practice must and can mean for a commoning project (with the acknowledgment of relational trust, spirit, and beauty around the sacred fire described by interlocutors).

What, then, do we make of prayer, which is simultaneously uncommon and common, known and unknown, individualized and communal all at once? Given the centrality of spirituality and prayer surrounding the movement to save the Lemay Forest, I asked interlocutors what religious representation looked like within the space. While Diane and Cedar told me that there were productive conversations around the sacred fire among people from varied religious backgrounds about their religion/spirituality, a settler interlocutor responded, "there's people from all walks of life. Some are Christians, some are Catholic…but that doesn't even really come up. It's just heartfelt gratitude for standing up." It is not simply an interest in "differences of belief" that prompted my question here but rather the

[40] APTN News 2025.
[41] de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 186.
[42] de la Cadena 2010.
[43] Becka 2024, in Karl et al. 2024.
[44] Becka 2024, in Karl et al. 2024, 303.
[45] Becka 2024, in Karl et al. 2024.

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cosmological and ontological cleavages that often entail such "spiritual" differences (even so, I do not view the "religious" categories mentioned as static or monolithic). Although religious or spiritual backgrounds might not be discussed at length between all members of the coalition, they still prayed together in multiple ways: through singing and drumming, offering tobacco to the fire, or "silent prayers" as this interlocutor described, that ask for the protection of the forest, the people protecting it, and the person who has violated and threatened them.

This interlocutor's comment indicates a coexistence of personal, silent prayer and Indigenous-led prayer practices. The "differences" found across religious/non-religious/spiritual backgrounds are not necessarily always discussed, although they sometimes are. There is a commoning found certainly in protecting the forest itself—of which asking for help through prayer is an integral part. The internal workings of how one prays or to "whom" might never be fully known and is not necessarily desired to be fully known or understood by others in the prayer camp. Rather, there is a "heartfelt gratitude for standing up" that is deeply inseparable from the ties to the space and to protecting "sacred land."

There is certainly an uncommonness to how the sacred is known in and through the forest. For example, utilizing sweat lodges in the forest and praying by and with the trees, as an Anishinaabe participant recounts to news media, is steeped in Indigenous spiritual traditions and cosmologies.[46] Likewise, the grief surrounding the unmarked graves from Asile Ritchot is likely felt in unique ways by Indigenous participants in the aftermath of residential schooling (to which some of the coalition members have expressed personal and familial ties) and ongoing discoveries linked to residential schools.

Cat (settler) mentioned that, around the sacred fire, she was taught the significance of the sacred fire, of offering tobacco, of praying to ancestors, alongside hearing personal experiences about the traumas imbricated in the settler-colonial project. Cat spoke later about attending a sweat lodge in the forest, describing it as "very powerful."[47] I am not suggesting that this interlocutor knew every part of the worlds of Indigenous coalition members: as she and Cedar both mentioned, there was a good deal of learning that occurred both in terms of histories and spiritual traditions.

As Blaser and de la Cadena write, "to paraphrase Helen Verran (2013), a commons thus constituted will paradoxically involve learning to refuse the colonizing reduction to a shared category, and accepting that we (those involved in a commoning) may not be metaphysically committed to a common world but rather to going on together in divergence."[48] However, I think that to suggest that those worlds are completely discrete or inaccessible to others does a disservice to the ways in which interlocutors themselves are describing the sacred space and the prayerful practices existing within and through it. Critics might rightfully fear the universalizing impulse of cultural appropriation. To engage in the spiritual practices of others (and particularly, marginalized others), universally speaking, would not be appropriate in every context. My focus on the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest is not designed to be replicated, although I suspect that some foci might resonate in similar contexts, even when the practices might differ. It is, I suggest, because of the internal and coalitional commitments to trust and community building, truth and reconciliation, that we can understand these prayers as a decolonial, pluriversal, and political engagement.

[46] APTN News 2025.
[47] APTN News 2025.
[48] de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 192.

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4. Conclusion

The Lemay Forest has been described by news media as a site of "cultural significance." Pluriversal critics have noted that reducing Indigenous knowledges to mere "cultural significance" lends itself to prioritizing some (settler) realities as more "True" or reliable than others, reducing Indigenous knowledges of the space to "belief" or "cultural practice."[49] The language of the pluriverse would emphasize that the shared physical space can be *known* in different ways, dependent on variability in knowledge systems: for instance, Diane mentions that her sister was gifted teachings in a sweat lodge within the forest. Such teachings are specific to place and to the cosmologies known by Diane and her sister.

The case of the Lemay Forest—the prayers that comprise it and the negotiation of worlds that practices of prayer entail alongside other forms of action and protection—challenges binaries regarding what prayer is as both a practice *and* attached deeply to the space of the sacred fire and the forest itself. Prayer is possibly uncommon in how and to what extent the knowledges surrounding the sacred fire (and other iterations of prayer within the space) are known. But it is a commoning project in that participants around the sacred fire are welcome to diverse ways of being and knowing when participants engage in prayer: "pray[ing] to whatever God you believe in" is welcome right alongside offering tobacco to the sacred fire, to engaging in other types of sacred expressions and practices, and to sharing sacred space more generally.

In the same way that prayers around the sacred fire challenge binaries regarding what prayer is, it also challenges preconceived notions about what prayer does. Coalition members are open to and celebratory of other ways of knowing and praying, some spiritual traditions become communally enacted, and others remain private but still with the goals of land protection. The post-secular turn has inspired a re-enchantment and recognition of diverse ways of being and knowing; the pluriverse has prompted engagement with questions of difference often viewed as incommensurable. The Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest, with its insistence on the centrality and accessibility of prayer as both entangled in space and practice, points us to pathways of thinking about how the pluriverse is enacted and what coalition building means as we navigate questions of difference in practice.

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[49] FitzGerald 2023; Harvey 2013; Law 2015.

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