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The Ancestral Strengths of My Ukrainian Family Through the Lens of Ecofeminism: A Collaborative Arts-Based Phenomenological Project

Marta B. Stefanyshyn
University of West Georgia, United States of America

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Abstract

In this article, I will explore the lived experience of being connected to the cultural strengths of the ancestors in the context of ecofeminism, specifically the works of Betty Roszak's (1995) essay "The Spirit of the Goddess" and Lesya Ukrainka's (1911/2018) poetic play "The Forest Song." Roszak and Ukrainka explore the union between the ancestors and the individual, and how this integration brings us closer to the values propounded by ecofeminism, such as cooperation and care. I will present a collaborative arts-based phenomenological project as an example of the lived experience of being connected to ancestral strengths—here, of Ukrainian culture. I will elaborate on how this connection helps us deal with life tasks and adversities. Individual themes extracted from short anecdotes and art pieces demonstrate the co-existence of family heritage and individuality within a person, and the overarching existential themes highlight the universal essence of the phenomenon of being connected to ancestral strengths. The chapter will conclude with showing how uncovered existential themes in this project emphasize the importance of cherishing generational inheritance as well as nurturing our own and each other's assets as a way

of healing collective traumas and forming strong communities, societies, and ecosystems where we dwell—the grails of both ecofeminism and care ethic.

Introduction

Family, family – from father to son, from mother to daughter I will pass the goodness.
Family, family, this is all of Ukraine, with deep roots, with high branches!

—Performed by Nazariy Yaremchuk, *Family*

Родина, родина – від батька до сина, від матері доні добро передам.

Родина, родина, це вся Україна, з глибоким корінням, з високим гіллям!

—У виконанні Назарія Яремчука, *Родина*

Being raised in a Ukrainian family and spending all my childhood summers in my grandparents' village, I felt that nature was my home. I draw my strength from nature and frequently rely on its lessons. The discoveries of this arts-based phenomenological project reveal these lessons as interdependence, rootedness, resourcefulness, wholeness, and embodied existence. My project shows that our lived experience becomes enriched when we connect with the wisdom of our ancestors and the land they inhabited. I contextualize my project within the ecofeminist theory, which provides a perspective on human relationships with land and place (Fitkin, 2020). Ecofeminism offers systemic solutions and social practices “to develop empathetic relationships with humans, more-than-humans, and the lived environment while cultivating a sense of personal responsibility to contribute to a sustainable future. [...] Recognizing the power in using an ethic of care as a vehicle to exercise ecofeminist theory...” (Fitkin, 2020, pp. 10, 59). Ecofeminism also provides education “for relearning of how to inhabit a space without the oppression and destruction of other communities, human or otherwise” (Fitkin, 2020, p. 9).

Whereas exploration of cultural inheritance is complex, including the study of carryover of generational hardships and traumas, this chapter focuses on the value of embracing our cultural goodness, and how it can nourish us, giving us belonging and strength in our life journeys. By no means generational trauma is being ignored or silenced in this project, rather it aims to create an opening for healing through reconnecting, which is an empowering experience. Trauma researcher and psychiatrist Judith Herman (1992) says, “The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor” (p. 133). Hence, strengthening, bearing witness, and standing in solidarity with people who deal with traumatic impacts is an intention of this arts-based phenomenological project. Shared narratives and art emphasize how ancestors' accumulated wisdom dwells in a person and becomes a stronghold in times of

need including immigration, forceful relocation, and facing the war. These examples do not claim that the lived experience of drawing strengths from cultural inheritance is the same for everyone; however, they show one meaningful way of honoring our ancestors and our homeland, acknowledging and relying on their gifts to us. Consistent with phenomenology's philosophy, the lived experience of even one person informs about the essential nature of the studied experience for the entire humanity (Gupta, 2018; Van Manen, 1997/2015).

Let me highlight the parallels between the work of phenomenologists, who are tying individual experiences with the collective, ecofeminists, who reestablish an interconnection between humans and ecosystems, care ethicists, who validate relational support, and the contributions of liberation psychologists, who recognize a person's experience within the public arena. Liberation psychology calls for citizens to abandon being passive bystanders and instead become active witnesses of sociopolitical events, because such witnessing disturbs social amnesia and aids the efforts for healing and preventing inflicted collective traumas (Gupta, 2018). Gupta (2018) quotes Watkins and Shulman (2008): "It is only from such witness and the actions that arise from it that the dissociations within individuals, as well as between self and other, on the levels of family and community, can be mended" (p. 79, as cited in Gupta, p. 41). Even though my arts-based phenomenological project is primarily situated within the framework of ecofeminism, I am also linking its goals to liberation psychology, because I am writing about Ukrainian people and Ukrainian land, where presently killings, torture, rape, abductions of children, violent burglarizing of civilians, and mass destruction are happening every day. Liberation psychology urges the witnesses of unjust sociopolitical crimes not to be silent, but to take a stance of "moral commitment to truth-telling without evasion or disguise" (Herman, 1992, p. 135). Breaking the silence and advocating for justice can be done in numerous ways, including through emancipatory arts-based projects. Gupta (2018) writes, "Art helps traumatic injustices achieve public witness because art can actually be seen and witnessed. Art is also easily spreadable across culture, inviting public witness from the wider society" (p. 41). Art reverses "the amputation of seeing" by revealing the brutalities as they were lived but are too difficult to tell. It also acknowledges the traumatic fragmentation of bodies and consciousness" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, as cited in Gupta, 2018, p. 41). Through art mourning of losses becomes possible, traumatic rage can be re-channeled, and a renewed sense of power can be ignited (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The art pieces and anecdotes, that my sister and I contributed aim at igniting personal empowerment through reconnection to ancestral strengths and facilitating public awareness of Ukrainian culture. My arts-based phenomenological project calls for the collective responsibility to name genocide of the nation for what it is and actively resist the pre-contemplated ethnic cleansing and ecological destruction of the country. Firestone (2022) says, "Yet hope lies in the act of witnessing. When we find ways to wake up from the numbing effects of death's indifference, when we testify to evil and bear witness to

others, we are reversing the process of genocide's inhumanity" (p. 66). Activism that condemns violence and propagates restoration of justice does not need to happen until after the cruel annihilation of people and land, rather it is more authentic and courageous to take a committed moral stance against the attacks as they are happening. Numerous generous joint efforts, from various social platforms, have already been initiated in response to the war in Ukraine, and arts-based phenomenological study in psychology is another contributing vehicle for raising critical consciousness of oppression and collective healing.

Here, I use *ancestral strengths* synonymously with cultural goodness and wealth, positive qualities, and knowledge of our forebearers. I use *ancestors* as a term that primarily pertains to generational lineage; however, I also use it broadly to encompass a nation, community, kinship group, family, etc., considering the readers' preferences about what ancestors mean to them. I use the term *strength* from a theoretical orientation of positive psychology, where strength is defined as a characteristic observed in a person, or in a group of people, across situations, and across time (Park & Peterson, 2009). Positive psychology extensively studies *character strengths* such as grit, love, hope, bravery, kindness, spirituality, and others; it considers them psychological ingredients, in other words, processes and mechanisms that lead to the embodiment of broad universal virtues such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Homiak (2019) include a historical overview of character strengths in various societies. Aristotle, for instance, viewed the development of moral character as a community praxis: when people habituate their honorable attitudes and deeds in common experiences of daily life (Homiak, 2019, as cited in Stefanyshyn, 2024). Overall, positive psychology, as built on a foundation of humanistic psychology, advocates for abandoning a disease model of addressing human needs and instead focusing on what is right with people and that which makes human conditions better. Peterson and Seligman write: "We are adamant that human strengths are not secondary, derivative, illusory, epiphenomenal, parasitic upon the negative or otherwise suspect [...] character strengths are the bedrock of human condition..." (pp. x, 4).

Considering the framework of positive psychology, I summarize ancestral strengths as positive traits of a cultural group, developed over time and in the context of historical events and the natural environment where the group dwells. This set of common valuable traits is stable and consistent but not determined, as everyone within a group chooses to form themselves according to their own will and determination (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The descendants can reconnect to the customs of their ancestors' embodied living on the land and access the strengths of their ancestral group as their cultural inheritance. Such reconnection can be done in different ways including traveling to the sites, studying the language, historical events, traditions, ecology, literature, family storytelling, folk, cultural humor, and personal

memories. Carlson, et al. (2022) share the narratives of Indigenous Polynesian youth (rangatahi Maori), who live in Auckland, New Zealand (Tamaki Makaurau, Aotearoa) as they navigate a life of well-being and health. Twenty study participants narrate their holistic indigenous philosophy on healthy living (hauora) which includes embodying the shared values of their ancestors. One participant eloquently described their lived experience of connection to the ancestral strengths as “it’s like breathing your ancestors into life” (Carlos, et al., 2022, p. 1). The researchers explain how the Western conception of well-being, which focuses on illness and disease, does not address Maori’s health needs (Durie 2006; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019, as cited in Carlson, et al., 2022). Whereas strengths-based and holistic approach, which includes connection to the natural environment, circle of relationships, and ancestral knowledge, helps them access physical, mental, and spiritual health, live a good life worth living, and cope with various challenges including poverty, identity crises, group belonging, etc. (Carlson, et al., 2022). In my project, I explore the lived experience of being connected to the ancestral strengths of the Ukrainian cultural background. I share my sister’s and my own anecdotes and art as examples of how connection to the land and cultural traditions has helped us deal with immigration, forceful displacement from the homeland, reintegration, and primal and vicarious trauma from the war. I hope that these examples give voice and solace to families in similar circumstances and to persons who seek empowerment and courage to deal with life circumstances by reconnecting to their ancestral roots. Dialoging through personal anecdotes and art pieces becomes a practice of feminist care ethics. Intimate care for one person’s story connects us to “an affective solidarity and felt sense of justice” (Thompson, 2015, p. 432). Thompson (2015) summarizes, “Care ethics, then, suggests we can learn about seeking justice and a practice that urges a fairer world from relationships where we are called to care for or have experienced the care of some other: where our interdependence and reciprocal needs are highlighted (p. 434).

Ancestral Strength as Poeticized in Literature

The lives of the Ukrainian people, a historically agrarian nation, have always been entwined with nature. This is reflected in the classical works of Ukrainian activists such as Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) and Ivan Franko (1856-1915), as well as the artworks of present-day visual artists such as Olga Haydamaka. Ukrainian literature is full of descriptions of natural phenomena such as changing seasons alongside the descriptions of daily jobs like raising crops, laboring, cooking, dressing, etc. National folklore also has stories about the supernatural spirit world of nature, which meaningfully interacts with humans and their destinies.

One such literature piece is a poetic play, “The Forest Song,” written by Lesya Ukrainka in 1911, a Ukrainian poet, writer, and civil and feminist activist (Ukrainka, 1911/2018). The story is about how Mavka, a female forest nymph, fell in love with a human man Lukash. She turned into a human to be with him, but, unfortunately, soon discovered that such vices as

greed, deceit, and cruelty corrupt people's minds. In the end, Mavka turns into the weeping willow, which later burns. Enveloped in fire, she becomes liberated because human experience and love for Lukash gave her the heart and the soul. She asks Lukash to play his flute for her one more time: "O, play, o play, give voice unto my heart. This all that now remains of me! You gave to me a soul as the sharp knife gives to the willow twig a tender voice" (Ukrainka, 1911/2018, p. 258).

Stories like "The Forest Song" show that the ancestral inheritance of the Ukrainian nation lies in a grounded yet soulful connection to the natural world. Historically, Ukrainian culture pays respect to the elders and matriarchy. It cherishes nature as a strong life-giving and life-affirming Mother. Similarly, in her essay "The Spirit of the Goddess," Betty Roszack (1995) poeticizes ancestral strengths by rediscovering examples from traditional women's literature, the "old wives" tales, and grandmother's stories. Roszak says, "What stories do we all have to tell? We ponder our ancestors; the themes played out in our heritage and our heredity become the serious meaning in the old stories. If we listen to the generations of spirit, we become firmly grounded. We know who we are and where we come from" (p. 296).

The Problem of Disconnection from Nature

Ecofeminism and ecopsychology agree that much of human suffering stems from disconnection from nature. Michael Cohen (1993) explains that there is a big difference between how nature works and the way society conditions us to think. The conditioned message is that to survive we must dominate each other and nature. This way of living eventually leads to ruptured painful relationships, isolation, loneliness, stress, lack of emotional nourishment, and craving for support (Cohen, 1993). Moreover, people have been estranged from nature by imprisoning ourselves inside overprotective indoor spaces. Cohen writes:

Studies show that out of habit, internal and external authority forces compel the average American to spend over 95 percent of his or her life indoors [...] people born and raised in a closet have and cause problems resulting from traumatic sensory deprivation. Hurt and unspirited, even when liberated from their confines closeted people fearfully cling to their closeted ways. (p. 283)

Contrary to the propagation of the culture of dominance and isolation ecofeminism as well as care ethics prioritizes a relational way of conducting life. Sociopolitical ethicists and activists encourage us to engage in collaborative practices that build up society (Leget et al., 2019). Thus, the well-being of an individual drastically improves as everyone is involved in "maintaining, continuing, and repairing a life-sustaining web" of relationships (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Aligning with Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher, some

speak of care as “everything that is done (rather than everything that ‘we’ do) to maintain, continue, and re-pair ‘the world’ so that all (rather than ‘we’) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes... all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (modified from Tronto, 1993, p. 103) (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017, p. 161).

Moreover, care ethics, as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, proposes altruistic praxes based on studies of “lived experiences, practices of care, and the way society is organized” (Leget et al., 2019, p. 23). Leget et al. (2019) emphasize that care practices are relevant beyond the domains of gender; nevertheless, there is a need for more in-depth exploration of the matriarchal cultures that teach us about the ecological and social embeddedness of common life.

We have much to gain from reconnecting with the social organization of our ancestors, who were not alienated from their ecosystem and each other as we are today. Roszak (1995) says, “What ecofeminism and ecopsychology have to offer is just this promise of connection: the inner with the Outer, the self with the Other, the ordinary with the sacred, the person with the planet” (p. 300). The phenomenological art project, which I present in this chapter, is designed to foster such a re-connection to Mother Earth, our matriarchal histories, the wisdom of our ancestors, their embodied way of living in nature, and the strength that comes with it. As a phenomenological inquiry, this project is a study of a lived experience that informs the possibility of re-connection through the practices of everyday living.

Collaborative Arts-Based Phenomenological Project

I'll draw the day when I fly, and the day when I sing,
That day! That day!

—Okean Elzy, *That Day*

Я намалюю той день, де літаю і той день, де співаю я,
Той день! Той день!

—Океан Ельзи, *Той День*

Aspiring to connect with the strengths of my own family as a cherished resource, I designed a small collaborative project, for which my sister and I volunteered to share our memories when we were in contact with our ancestral strengths. Our two accounts serve as examples of embodying character strengths that are both ancestral and individual. In other words, I tried to answer a question: “*What is the lived experience of being connected to ancestral strengths?*” I situate my project under the umbrella of arts-based phenomenological research, an innovative approach to qualitative inquiry, coined by Gupta and Zieske (2024):

Arts-based phenomenological research [should] be considered the umbrella methodology for any qualitative research study that seeks to introduce phenomenological research as art and art as phenomenological research. Arts-based phenomenological research methodology celebrates the seamless marriage of phenomenology and art, working together for the shared purpose of producing rich, sensual, descriptive knowledge about lived experience.” (Gupta & Zieske, 2024, p. 7)

Arts-based phenomenological research incorporates artistic creation as part of data collection, data interpretation, or research findings, and illustrates meaningful human experiences as “both specific and universal, implicit and explicit, felt and rational” (Gupta, 2019, p. 4). Gupta and Zieske (2024) position arts-based phenomenological research as a derivative of Van Manen’s approach to hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological research, which is strongly inspired by art and aesthetics. Van Manen (1997/2015) writes, “Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts—texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar.” (p. 74). Van Manen (1997/2015) also calls for phenomenological descriptions to be artistic and poeticizing: “incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (Van Manen, 1997, as cited in Gupta & Zieske, 2024, p. 6; as cited in Stefanyshyn, 2024, p. 49). Heidegger (1950) explained that aesthetic knowing is authentic because it grasps the primordial experience without intellectual distortions such that artwork reveals the essential truth of the being to its viewers (as cited in Gupta & Zieske, 2024). Gupta & Zieske also place the methodology within Merleau-Ponty’s view of art as an excellent expression of lived experience: “He comprehended art as an “amplification of our sensual perception” and wrote about “artists’ heightened perceptual acuity of the world which they share with others through their creations” (Quinn, 2009, as cited in Gupta & Zieske, 2024, p. 4; as cited in Stefanyshyn, 2024, p. 50).

Campbell, et al. (2024) write that aesthetics of care is “taking seriously all sensory aspects of an experience” (p. 17). When I was introduced to this phrase in my peer-review group for this special issue on the intersection of art and care, I immediately saw it as a common value for arts-based phenomenology, aesthetics of care, and ecofeminism. These three branches advocate for *embodied participatory living* in the world, which is possible through the engagement of sense perceptions (Campbell, et al., 2024; Cohen, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Thompson, 2015). Embodied participatory living is also a collective endeavor that stimulates “affective solidarity between people” (Campbell, et al., 2024, p. 437). Aesthetics of care, specifically, invites for reciprocity of sensory impressions felt in the moment, which creates a dialogue between the artists and the viewers while sharing a conjoint experience. Such virtuosity of care does not glorify public display of self-honored skill but facilitates an intimate felt sense exchange between people. The true aesthetic value is located in-between

people and in co-created moments (Campbell, et al., 2024). Collaborative arts-based projects offer a working model where partnership, mutual support, and relational cohesion can flourish. Participation in such projects requires commitment to deep and extended processes, and therefore has the power “to overcome widespread social indifference” (Campbell, et al., 2024, p. 437).

In my project, I use an arts-based phenomenological method to share the experience of being connected to ancestral strengths in a collaborative, solidarity-enhancing way. I apply hermeneutic-phenomenological research steps outlined by Max Van Manen (1997/2015) with modification to the sixth step: (1) turning to the phenomenon with commitment; (2) investigating lived experience; (3) discovering and reflecting on essential themes; (4) act of writing and rewriting; (5) considering parts and whole; and (6) including participants’ drawings. The last step is performed according to arts-based phenomenological research models proposed by Gupta and Zieske (2024) and as aligned with Van Manen’s theoretical orientation. Specifically, I used the art produced by my sister and myself as an enhancement of phenomenological themes extracted from our anecdotes. Such artistic enhancement of themes creates an *illuminating effect* on the studied subjective experience because art reveals that which is unnoticed or unspoken (Baron & Eisner, 2012; Gupta & Zieske, 2024). In addition, I used our art as a contribution to liberation psychology’s movement of healing sociopolitical trauma through harnessing indigenous knowledge, praxes, and strengths. Gupta says that art which represents the voices of non-Western populations contributes to Indigenous Research Methodologies and to “psychology’s movement towards epistemic justice and knowledge democracy” (Gupta & Zieske, 2024, p. 21).

It is important to mention that even though I followed the standardized phenomenological procedures, this project is not a presentation of a formal research study. The University of West Georgia's IRB considers arts-based phenomenological research projects that do not anonymize participants' identities, and do not claim generalizable scientific knowledge, to be collaborative art/humanities projects rather than scientific research; thus, they do not require IRB approval for projects of this nature. Phenomenological methods are only used in my project to highlight the intricacies of the individual and human experience of being connected to ancestral strengths. I discuss the themes extracted from the shared experiences from an ecofeminism perspective while finding thematic relevance to care ethics and care aesthetics. My broad goal as an author and an artist is to engage the readers in an intuitive dialogue, evoking their own embodied relationship to the strengths of their ancestors.

The Process of the Ancestral Strengths Project

Van Manen’s approach studies the lived experience in a moment of time, a vivid meaningful event. His method includes asking participants to write an anecdote, a personal narrative

memory, and describe it with rich details (Gupta, 2018). Following this model, I asked the two participants in this project, my sister and me: “*Describe a moment from life when you were connected to your ancestral strengths.*” In addition to the anecdotes, each of us produced a painting of the event, which visually enhanced the perspective of our experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Gupta & Zieske, 2024; Stefanyshyn, 2024). No interviews were conducted, except for the oral sharing about the symbolism of the paintings. The themes of the experience were extracted from anecdotes and paintings.

Identifying Individual Themes

When I interpreted the collected data, I identified and described the meaningful themes of each person’s individual experience. First, I identified the meaning units in the sentences of the anecdotes. I used Van Manen’s line-by-line approach, where I looked at every single sentence and asked “What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (Van Manen, 1997/2015, pp. 92, 93). Second, I listed the selected meaning units in a separate document and “coded” each meaning unit one by one, by giving it a label. A label is a short name, typically of one to three words that grasp the meaning of each unit. Third, I grouped these codes (labels), according to the shared meanings, into four thematic categories. The emerging themes reveal what it is like for someone to live through this or that human experience, including their core feelings, embodied sensations, and assigned meanings.

Identifying Overarching Existential Themes

After writing about individual themes, I identified common overarching themes across all participants’ descriptions. Together these existential themes co-constitute the essence of the lived experience of being connected to ancestral strengths and represent only one meaningful perspective on this experience. Van Manen calls overarching existential themes *essential* because without them the studied experience would not be as such (Van Manen, 1997/2015). I listed the names of all the individual themes and then grouped them according to their shared meaning. Three broad phenomenological insights about the experience of being connected to ancestral strengths emerged: such experience stems from interconnected rootedness, resourceful wholeness, and embodied beingness in nature. Finally, I presented the written summary of elicited essential themes using an expressive and evocative, yet common language.

Introduction to Participants and Individualized Data Interpretation

The two participants of this project are my elder sister Oksana, 52 years old, and myself, 37 years old. Both of us voluntarily agreed not to conceal our true names and identities. Oksana and I are Ukrainian women. I came to the US in 2003 when my parents won a green card

lottery which allowed us to immigrate. At that time, I was 17 years old, still wrestling with my identity, and acculturation added another complexity to my identity formation. Looking back, I see immigration as a blessing because it formed my character, expanded my consciousness to be more inclusive, built my self-esteem about navigating unfamiliar territories, deepened my relationships with parents who also strived to adjust, and allowed me to build new heartfelt friendships. Yet, my adaptation journey was not easy: it was long and often arduous, and I frequently felt displaced and disconnected, at times, to the point of exhaustion and despair. Perhaps integration into a new society did not have to be so strenuous since I was lucky to have new opportunities and meet caring people who open-handedly extended their support. Nevertheless, old generational scripts were still playing out in my present life, such as a script of working too hard at the detriment of health, holding tight to the kinship group when the time was pressing for separation and others. Moreover, for years I carried a confusing felt sense that I could not voice because there was no content, just the visceral feeling that I am bearing “an experience that feels beyond the human ability to grasp” from my past generations (Firestone, 2022, p. 51). Only years later, I have learned that ancestral hardships and ancestral strengths, are passed to the offspring up to several future generations (Firestone, 2022). In addition to daily tasks of acculturation into the US living, I also embarked on the journey of re-owning the history of my lineage. While I did my best to address generational strains, my focus was on becoming closely familiar with and rooted in my ancestral strengths and values. During difficult times, I remembered the love of my entire family, the village where we united, and the family’s stories. I told myself that I could overcome and achieve just about anything because I knew the history of the Ukrainian nation that survived the raids of Mongol-Tatar Yoke, burnings of the land, mass killings of people, enslavement, and sex trading of women to foreign countries. I have heard first-hand accounts of my grandparents and life stories of their grand-grandparents who survived devastations brought about by wars, brutally orchestrated famines, forceful deportations to Siberia, repressions with unlawful involuntary servitude, enslavement, and destitute—all of it has happened in my own family just two generations back and to the families of millions of Ukrainians. I knew how my grandmother’s father Ivan, who was a tall, dark-haired, physically strong man, died in 1933 from a man-made famine, the Holodomor engineered by the Soviet regime, and his eight children were left without a father; I knew how my mother’s mother Evdokia at the age of 16 years old was captured to be taken as a slave girl to Germany and how she bravely escaped in life-threatening conditions six times, the last one by jumping of the sleigh and hiding in the snow, freezing for hours; I knew how my father’s mother Efrasyna made porridge for the whole family from a few wheat ears that she found at night on the field where she went against the regime’s order, risking her life; I knew how my grandparents had to tie their small toddlers to the table leg unattended, while they were toiling on the fields from the sunrise to the sundown for the benefit of feudalism and later Soviet regime systems. Yet, living through all this, my ancestors preserved true love in their hearts and passed it to

their children through their embodied beingness: the kindness and peace in their soothing voices, the gentle care in their touch, and the acceptance and reassurance in their gaze. I witnessed my grandparents and their community as people who embodied wisdom despite the worst of historical events of their time: their actions were honorable and grounded in the faith in God, they had an intelligence of common sense, and they took care of each other and the nature, possessing an innate knowledge about interconnectedness. Despite historical ordeals, the Ukrainian nation remained optimistic, cheerful, and welcoming; this is reflected in the traditions of hospitality and celebrating life together with folk dance, music, and singing. Also, the nation remained free-spirited and strong-willed, willing to unite and protect its sovereignty. I come back to the knowledge, feeling, action, and embodied expression of my ancestors' strengths again and again when dealing with any life circumstances, including adaptation to living away from my native land. Eventually, I have found a sense of belonging in the US, and now, through this project and through acknowledging the strengths of Ukrainian roots, I hope to offer any support to my fellow Ukrainians who are going through the hardships caused by the war and displacement from home.

My sister Oksana came to the US in October 2023 as a parolee refugee after the war in Ukraine started in February 2022. Her relocation was forceful; she fled Ukraine in the middle of the night with her sixteen-year-old son. That night they witnessed the agony of thousands of people walking across the Ukrainian-Polish border, freezing their limbs. Some children were lost on the road, crying hysterically and their mothers frantically searching. Others were sobbing from despair and grief. Husbands and sons over 18 years old were left behind, and not allowed to leave the country because of military duty. Relatives and elders were left behind as well. Nobody knew the magnitude of the war explosion to come, and if they would ever see their loved ones again. After a temporary stay in Poland, Oksana and her son relocated to the US, hosted by our parents and me. Moving was not her choice: she loved living in Ukraine and was happily immersed in her native culture, steadily carrying on with her daily life. Moreover, she passionately loved Ukrainian ethnicity: the language, the people, and the customs, and could not even imagine uprooting herself to relocate to a different country. The hour the war started, the life Oksana had built for herself changed instantly. Even though my sister was glad and grateful to stay with her family in the US, the trauma from the war eruption was unavoidable. The feelings of loss of a peaceful life in her hometown, indignation at the warfare aggressors, uncertainty about the future, and fear for the rest of her family in Ukraine complicated her adjustment to the current living conditions; the impacts of war echoed for our whole family. The trauma of the present war was likely to overlap with the residue of ancestral suffering from the past. It has only been ten months of living in the US where my sister is gradually reclaiming her grounding. Once, she shared with me that contemplating the strengths of our lineage and the good memories with grandparents helps her regain her strength. At the time of this conversation, I was starting to write this

chapter, and I saw an opportunity for my sister and myself to contribute our personal artwork and anecdotes of connecting to our ancestral roots as an empowering and uniting act. In addition, we have always shared a common interest in art including painting. It occurred to me, that producing art pieces together to highlight our narrated experiences would be a bonding and palliative aesthetic care practice. The quote from Thompson's (2015) article *Towards an Aesthetics of Care* highlights the restorative cure of artmaking from a feminist care ethics perspective: "...the relations that emerge in many art projects can be understood as forms of affective solidarity and mutual regard that, in turn, could be powerful counterweights to the exclusions and disregard in a careless society" (p. 430).

My sister and I came to the US at different ages and amidst very different circumstances. For the past twenty years, we were living on two different continents, and leading drastically different lifestyles. Yet, we share the same ancestral roots, the connection to the family land, traditions, and cherished memories. Participating in this project was a touching, bonding, and warm experience for us, as we recalled our childhood and warm family gatherings. Through this aesthetic care practice, I also intended to enhance my own care capacity as a host for my sister and her son. During their stay, I tried to suspend my ideas about the adaptation process, and instead care with regards to my relatives' needs, feelings, and choices. I must admit that such sensitive attunement was not always easy; nevertheless, my own immigration experience, though under very different conditions, allowed me to feel the vulnerability of being "different," and, as explained by Johansson & Wickstrom (2023), promoted elements of feminist care ethics such as relationality and respect of agency. Johansson and Wickstrom write, "Hence, instead of promoting practices of 'care taking' through, for instance, a certain institutional position, caring through one's own embodied senses of vulnerability may promote equal intersubjective relationships grounded in caring and feeling with rather than for others" (p. 320). Tronto (2013) adds, "Responsibility for care emerges through the embodied recognition of the needs of others rather than from duties or principles" (Tronto, 1993, as cited in Johansson & Wickstrom, 2023, p. 320). Thompson (2015) shares his personal experience of a long-term hosting of a colleague who survived a violent incident, and how his hosting experience both drew upon and enriched the understanding of feminist care ethics insights:

Care ethics values real attachments between individuals and groups...These close relationships become the source of a morality that starts from valuing certain dispositions of the other, whether it be love, affection, or trust, and then viewing positive caring relations as a source for concepts of justice that might be relevant beyond the interpersonal (p. 434)

Below I include hermeneutic phenomenological interpretations of my sister's and mine lived experiences via three sections. First, I include summaries of our narrative memories of when

we felt connected to the strengths of our ancestors. Second, I include our paintings to highlight our lived experiences. Third, I include the themes that co-constitute each shared experience of connection to the Ukrainian ancestral strengths.

OKSANA'S LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING CONNECTED TO HER ANCESTRAL STRENGTHS

Oksana's Memory of Her Ancestral Strengths: Anecdote Title — “Working Together”

The night of crossing the border when fleeing to war from Ukraine was the most difficult night of Oksana's life. Later, in Poland, away from home and family, she felt unanchored, uncertain, and desperate. Then, the memory of her ancestors emerged unexpectedly. It is a hot summer day in the village of her grandparents: Oksana is 30 years old, she is buoyant and healthy, standing on the edge of the hayloft with the pitchfork. From the ground, her grandparents stretch the hay stocks to her, and Oksana's job is loading and spreading them evenly inside the hayloft. Her sense perception intensifies, she inhales pleasantly intoxicating herbs and notices the rays of sunlight everywhere. Oksana's body is in pain from hard physical labor; however, she feels strength and well-being. She sees her cheerful mother and children running in the yard from the hayloft. Now, Oksana intentionally draws her strengths from the memory of when she was working together with her grandparents.

Oksana's Artistic Expression of Her Connection to Her Ancestral Strengths:



Figure 1. A Sunny Day.

Note: A painting made by O. B. Stefanyshyn, 2023. Copyright permission granted for this project.

This painting depicts Oksana’s view from the hayloft: nature, the hay, the pitchfork, and the sunrays. When sharing about the drawing Oksana says, “I see the sunshine everywhere: on the trees, in the golden hues of the hay, in the beam of light that comes through the chinks, and I feel it inside.” The painting is made with acrylics and an overlay of chalk pastel.



Figure 2. Flow and Fulfillment.

Note: A painting by O. B. Stefanyshyn, 2023. Copyright permission granted for this project.

Oksana is standing in nature. She is a conduit between Sky and Earth: “She receives spiritual energy from above and sends it to Earth. She also sends Earth’s energy above. The person is a mixture of these two energies, but they are not an empty vessel. They are processing, learning from experience, and giving back to Sky and Earth. Also, all beings on Earth are interconnected and communicate with each other.” The painting is made with acrylics.

Themes of Oksana’s Experience of Being Connected to Her Ancestral Strengths

Grounding

For Oksana, the lived experience of being connected to the ancestral strengths is a grounding experience. The war threatened her secure life in her hometown Lviv. A forceful separation from home was a disembodied experience: “I felt myself detached from the ground and not having something to lean on, as if I did not have the arms and legs.” In foreign countries, Oksana felt prolonged weakness. She describes, “I had a burning sensation in my chest, fogginess in my brain, it was difficult to breathe, and this was day after day after day.” Though physically away from her roots, she found grounding through the memory of her

ancestors. Painting #2 illustrates this: Oksana is standing firmly on the land of her ancestors, drawing her energy from the very core of Earth and the Heavens. She is in the very center and connected to all beings. Embedded in a place where she belongs, Oksana is strong and open to life.

Spontaneous Resource

Oksana's strength emerges at the hardest of times: "Somehow, spontaneously, this day started to surface by itself from my memory." She was suddenly reliving being in her grandparents' homestead, strong and full of life, surrounded by her loving family and nature. The terrors of war were so impactful that Oksana could not find strength through willpower alone: "I tried to pull myself together, regain composure; it did not work too well." Oksana experienced the power of inner resilience as a grace. Through the memory, she embraced her embodied rootedness and set it for herself as a paragon of a stable and resourceful state. She says, "Now, I consciously come back to it in difficult moments, and it helps me feel the presence of my body and the connection to the earth." Her art pieces, too, show resourcefulness through the depiction of nature's abundance: a bright sky, blooming flowers in the grass, and a river.

Hard Physical Work

For Oksana, the connection to her ancestral strength stems from physical work. The industriousness of previous generations forged the nation's endurance and developed each person's grip. Oksana says, "My grandpa works very fast: he is a strong man, strengthened through hard work." Admiring her grandfather, Oksana tries to keep up when loading the hay:

I am given a pitchfork, and I climb the ladder to the hayloft. Soon, I start feeling pain in my arms, legs, and back...However, instead of tiredness and exhaustion, I feel enormous strength as if my grandpa, and grandma who joined him, are giving me not the hay, but strings of energy and strength.

The remembrance of physical sturdiness and steadfast labor that her generations did in the countryside, strengthened Oksana's spirit at the time of need. She depicts it through trees, greenery, and mountains; pitchfork is the symbolic link between Oksana and her ancestors.

Radiance and Delight of Nature

Being connected to ancestral strength is the experience of radiance and delighting in nature for Oksana. She says, "I am filled with these strengths, and I radiate them outwards." Loading the hay Oksana feels invigorated and glowing: "I continue working, living, enjoying my body, my strength, buoyancy, and the light that dwells inside of me." She views how the sun illuminates the trees and how the sun rays are beaming inside the hayloft: "Small rays of

sunlight come through the chinks, creating laser beam patterns.” Sensually, Oksana is delighting in nature surrounding her: the light, the smells, and the touch of the hay. She says, “Some hay is so warm from the sun that it is even hard to breathe, and the smell of dried herbs is pleasantly intoxicating.” The radiance and delight of nature are also central in her artwork. In Painting #1, we see the sunlight depicted as yellow overglow, creating a feeling of immersion in sunshine.

MARTA’S LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING CONNECTED TO HER ANCESTRAL STRENGTHS

Marta’s Memory of Her Ancestral Strengths: Anecdote Title — “Ancestral Song”

It was the evening of a Ukrainian concert in Atlanta in June 2022. A famous singer, Oksana Bilozir, came on a tour supporting people afflicted by war. For years her songs celebrate the magnificence of Ukrainian land, people, and culture. At the concert, we are singing along with pride. We are united as a family against a brutal attack, raising the bravery of the nation. Oksana sings a song that cherishes a Ukrainian woman, and I feel the soulful merit of all the women in my lineage. I see the loving sparkling eyes of my beautiful mother. The singer is wearing a traditional handmade dress, highlighting the artistry of Ukrainian embroidery—the meticulous creations of Ukrainian women. Another song is honoring the role of a father. I connect to these words with all my heart, knowing that a strength modeled by my father is my core. With gratitude, I hold the many gifts of my ancestors as a treasure, which I aspire to grow and share.

Marta’s Artistic Expression of Her Connection to the Ancestral Strengths:



Figure 3. Humans-Tress.

Note: A painting by M. B. Stefanyshyn, 2023, for this project.

In her painting, Marta depicts the concert's setting where the trees symbolize the people in the audience. All the trees are "wearing" embroidered traditional clothes. The performer, Oksana Bilozir, is a tree with "large flowers on her bright yellow dress." Marta depicts herself as a tree with a fruit of snowball viburnum, a symbol of Ukrainian nationhood and independence. Her parents are the two trees on her right, and the rest of the trees are her community. The painting is made with watercolors.

Themes of Marta's Experience of Being Connected to Her Ancestral Strengths

Rooted Togetherness

For Marta, the experience of connection to her ancestral strengths is the experience of collective rootedness. She feels this at the concert where the Ukrainian community of Atlanta unites with the mission to support their countrymen. Marta describes, "There is an atmosphere of warmth and unity between the people: our hearts are open, though bleeding from the terror which happens in our motherland." The theme of rooted togetherness is highlighted in Marta's painting. Each person in the audience is symbolically depicted as a tree and the roots of all trees are intertwined. The trees are old and have wide trunks, which represents the Ukrainian culture as ancient and longstanding. The mores of affinity and love between people make Ukrainians unbreakable, even when their security is threatened. Through togetherness, Marta

experiences the connection to her ancestral strengths.

Celebration of Ukrainian Songful Language

Being connected to ancestral strengths stems from connecting to Marta's native language. The beauty of Ukrainian songs is very close to her heart. Some songs are upbeat, joyful, and humorous, reflecting the Ukrainian buoyant spirit, and some are slow, drawn-out, and melancholy, reflecting the people's depth. Different plots of the songs are about Ukrainian history, everyday life on the land, family traditions, love, separation, and the fight for independence. Symbols from nature are almost always present in the songs. At the concert, the community of Ukrainians in Atlanta sings together, and this becomes the experience of uplift and empowerment in the face of war: "Celebrating the magnificence of Ukrainian land, people, and culture." Marta's painting includes the elements from national songs, such as the blossoms of flowers and viburnum, and the flowing river. The overall mood of the painting is like a melodious song through which Marta feels a connection to her ancestral strengths.

Celebration of Ukrainian Womanhood

Connecting to ancestral strength also means connecting to the power of Ukrainian femininity. Marta says, "I am blessed to be a Ukrainian woman." She describes this empowering connection as an embodied experience: "I am feeling a sense of dignity settling in my hips, a sense of respect in my mind, and an overall sensation of self-esteem with which my body moves, today to this concert's music." Ukrainian convention is respecting and revering a woman, who historically had rights and a voice in her kin group. The song goes: "The people say that I am like a flower, and my words flow like a river; they say my soul is singing like a flute, but I am just a Ukrainian girl." Other women in the audience are proudly celebrating their cultural femininity as well. Marta notices how her mother's beauty is shining through her loving eyes. The singer praises the talent of Ukrainian women skilled in hand-made embroidery. In the painting, "humans-trees" are embellished with embroidery as well. This emphasizes the "natural yet regal" femininity of a Ukrainian woman and her closeness to Mother Nature.

Treasuring the Essence of Ancestral Strengths

When connecting to ancestral strengths, Marta experiences certain qualities: "the gifts of an open heart, simplicity, common sense, perseverance and devotion, talent, beauty, etc." Together these gifts seem to have a particular scent, an essence of Ukrainian strengths. Marta associates this essence with her father's character. Traditionally, in Ukrainian households, a father and a mother collaborate: creating an atmosphere of warmth, security, prosperity, care, and joy in the home. Listening to the song that honors the role of a Father, Marta says, "I connect to these words with all my heart, knowing that 'my father's song' is truly the essence

of who I am, my core, and my strength.” She cherishes this strength as an invaluable resource, a treasure that she “aspires to preserve, grow, and share in the world.” In the painting, her father is a tree with a strong trunk on her right. Marta painted all the trees as imbued with the essence of her ancestral strength: their leaves have the shape of hearts, their trunks and roots are strong, and their blossoms are beautiful.

Introduction to Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenological Description

Van Manen (1990) says that to unearth the “essence” of a particular human experience is to answer the question “What is it like for human beings to live through this phenomenon?” (as cited in Gupta, 2018, p. 58). With this question in mind, I differentiated three overarching existential themes that together constitute the human experience of being connected to ancestral strengths: the experience of interconnected rootedness, the experience of resourceful wholeness, and the experience of embodied beingness in nature. Though only two people participated in this project, these three phenomenological insights are one meaningful way through which the studied phenomena could be understood. This project also suggests the direction for future research on people’s connection to their ancestral strength.

Overarching Existential Themes

Interconnected Rootedness

Both participants in this collaborative phenomenological art project perceived a connection to their ancestral strengths as the experience of interconnected rootedness. Oksana and Marta describe interconnected rootedness as belonging to their family, the Ukrainian community, and all the living beings on Earth. Shared anecdotes and created art show that rooting and interconnectedness are impossible without each other. In her Painting #2, Oksana depicts herself firmly standing on the ground, and her “roots” are reaching toward the core of Earth, the Sky, and everything alive. In Marta’s painting, the experience of interconnected rootedness is pronounced as a central symbolic element, the intertwining roots of the “humans-trees.” Contributed anecdotes and paintings point out that one meaningful aspect of being connected to ancestral strengths is the feeling of embeddedness: being relationally rooted.

Resourceful Wholeness

This project shows that when someone connects to their ancestral strengths, they tap into the well of invaluable resources and an accompanying feeling of wholeness. These resources are “treasures” earned through the hard work of the previous generations. Oksana names her Painting#2 “Flow and Fulfillment,” signifying that being filled with resources is a fulfilling, wholesome state. This painting also expresses wholeness as a union between matter and spirit:

“The person is a mixture of these two energies (spiritual and earthy).” In Marta’s anecdote, she names the resources that she taps into when connecting with her ancestral strength: “open heart, simplicity, common sense, perseverance and devotion, talent and beauty, etc.” She describes that together these gifts create a holistic abundant essence of Ukrainian ancestral strengths.

Embodied Beingness in Nature

Connection to ancestral strengths is the connection to the embodied existence in the natural world. Until recent advances in science and technology, people lived in close contact with nature for ages. Their everyday living greatly depended on nature; therefore, they were sensitively attuned to nature's flows and cycles. The embodied way of being is a great strength of the Ukrainian people, where many still live on the land. Oksana describes, “This strength, this energy flows into every muscle and every cell of my body as if I become buoyant and glowing.” Marta describes her embodied beingness as it relates to her femininity. She also relates to her ancestors through the songs that celebrate the beauty of nature and living beings: “People say that I am like a flower, and my words flow like a river...” and then: “This song of my father is my only essence. It is like a dream made of dew, and it blossoms like viburnum. It is flying like a flock of birds over Ukraine.” Embodied beingness in nature is central to the experience of being connected to the ancestors’ strengths for Oksana and Marta.

Discussion

Remember a garden near the house, where you dreamed when you were young,
And where father read to you before bed, and you sat by the fire with him...

—Okean Elzy, *A Moment*

Пригадай той садок коло хати, де плекав свої мрії малим,
Де читав перед сном тобі тато, а ти сидів коло вогнища з ним...

—Океан Ельзи, *Мить*

Reclamation of Ancestral Strengths

Unpacking the notion of ancestral strengths and their reclamation inevitably involved the discussion about healing ancestral traumas. Increasingly an awareness of the long-term consequences of massive social violence and injuries done to the planet has been studied from the perspective of humanity’s collective trauma. Terminologies such as historical, cultural, multigenerational, intergenerational, and ancestral trauma have become prevalent in recent years (Firestone, 2022). In her pioneer book “International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies” Yael Danieli (1998) explores the effects of collective trauma throughout the world including the atomic bomb in Japan, the Holocaust, genocide in Cambodia, Indigenous

populations in North America, abduction and enslavement of millions of Africans, and centuries of savage domination of women around the world (as cited in Firestone, 2022). Ecofeminism, care ethics, liberation, and ethnic psychologies, as well as other scientific and humanitarian movements, are calling for a necessary recognition and healing of collective historical trauma, which, if unhealed, continues being transmitted to future generations. Answering the call, a growing volume of literature discusses a reclamation of ancestral strengths and corresponding indigenous cultural practices as a form of healing (Firestone, 2022). Peter Levine (1997), a founder of trauma healing modality through somatic experiencing, writes, “Trauma is about broken connections...with the body/self, family, friends, community, nature, and spirit. Healing trauma is about restoring these connections (as cited in Firestone, 2022, p. 14).

Lillian Comas-Diaz's (2006) work in LatinX communities shows how re-owning ancestral strengths is essential to healing from a sociopolitical trauma in psychotherapy. She positions feminist and ethnic psychology as praxes of resiliency. The author discusses the strengths of Latino communities as being interwoven in ancestral beliefs and practices of spirituality, telling of the tales, and cultural sayings. The strengths of Latino people are inseparable from their ethnic practices, which is also true for other cultural groups. Since all persons are situated in one or the other culture, Comas-Diaz (2012) urges the integration of ethnic psychology into mainstream psychology. Shayla Lawson (2024), a decolonial feminist activist, writes about reconnection to the power of Black cultural roots through ethnic storytelling: “We don’t just need the summary version of diasporic experience, we need every story” (“Blackness Beyond America” section). Lawson discusses Black women’s resilience practices throughout the history of oppression and displacement:

Black Women live, create and build with the future in mind, because the present has no place for us. In order to stay alive, we have to imagine ourselves in a future where we not only survive but thrive. A place where we are understood. A place where we still exist. This is a tall order in the world but this is the way we make the present work for us, every day, and it’s the reason I’m most proud of us. (as cited in Rivers, 2021, “Everyday I’m Hustlin” section)

Healing sociopolitical trauma through community and ancestral strengths-based work is also discussed by Rabbi Tirzah Firestone (2022) in her book “Wounds into Wisdom.” Born into a family of Holocaust survivors, Firestone (2022) shares her first-hand experience of intergenerational trauma. She writes, “Many of us feel the echoes of our ancestors’ lives vibrating in us today” (Firestone, 2022, p. xix). The author describes examples of indigenous healing practices such as sacred ceremonies, rituals, witnessing of pain, compassionate listening, and other participatory communal acts that become a “container” for suffering by

establishing safe boundaries around the mourning process (Firestone, 2022, p. 52). Firestone shares how she witnessed the profound dignity of Indigenous elders in Canada who performed sacred ceremonies at the burial grounds of their murdered children. The author interviewed many marginalized groups who were grappling with the unfinished business of the trauma done to their ancestors and shared what she learned about their restorative cultural practices.

Native healing practices of Ukrainian communities include memorial events in honor of the nation's history and heroes. There, tragic poems are recited, and sorrowful songs are sung with the full expression of feelings. However, such performances are not depressive; on the contrary, in a contained way, they allow the audience to embrace their shared story, delve into the depth of their souls, and then reemerge, standing strong and united. Interpersonal Neurobiology therapist Bonnie Badenoch (2008) explains that integration of autobiographical narratives in a way that allows emotional contact with their meaning, without being either dissociated or overwhelmed, is therapeutic. It rejuvenates our mind and body by literally reshaping the neuropathways in the brain toward wholeness. What happens in the brain is the integration of limbic-based emotional memories with the meaning-making prefrontal cortex—allowing us to develop “a sense of meaning about our pathway through life” (p. 31). Badenoch summarizes, “In therapy, one of the processes that indicate progress is a gradually expanding narrative that is able to hold more and more of the intergenerational experiences of one's family with compassion and wisdom” (p. 31). Ethnic community gatherings become a practice of harnessing ancestral strengths to face the present courageously. Firestone writes, “Knowing what our forebears went through helps us better understand and have compassion for our family legacies and our own self. Once we are cognizant of our history, we can better choose positive responses to our trauma legacies” (p. 49).

Being familiar with ethnic history is crucial in healing intergenerational trauma; nevertheless, we must be cautious against the tendencies to pathologize and overgeneralize, because all cultural traumas are not monolithic. Freeing ourselves from generational afflictions involves the examination of present family patterns and family traits from which we operate (Danieli, 1998, as cited in Firestone, 2022). Firestone (2022) emphasizes that besides inherited shadows of war such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD terror attacks, Jews of the present generation also possess strengths such as resiliency, resourcefulness, determination, adaptability, loyalty to community, focus on faith and education—all these traits were cultivated over generations of hardship. Firestone quotes Rachel Yehuda, a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience:

The Jewish culture and religion have understood that children bear the burdens of their parents' legacy. [...] It's a cultural fact. It's a biological fact. Everyone is born with a unique set of genes. The task is to refine from these traits the best self that we can have and not get distracted by the traits that are weaker. Build up the traits that are stronger.

We all have the same job to do.” (pp. 208, 209)

Sorting through the ancestral legacy of trauma and resiliency is also the responsibility of organized societal institutions established to ensure care to the citizens. There is an urgent need for acknowledgment of intergenerational trauma as an existing phenomenon, training of quality care professionals, and providing financial assistance for the treatment. At present, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), for example, does not recognize intergeneration trauma as a diagnosis for which treatment can be provided and reimbursed by medical insurance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Meanwhile, the symptoms of ethnic trauma closely correspond to those of individual post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including hyperarousal, emotional numbing, reoccurring nightmares, shame, social dysfunction, and compulsion to reenact traumatic injuries (Firestone, 2022). The field of epigenetics provides supporting evidence about the possibility of traumatic events to create “biological/cellular memory” which can be passed on to the next generations and reemerge under stress. Second and even third generation trauma survivors often report traumatic symptoms even though they themselves have never been exposed to trauma directly. Firestone explains, “. . .because they are working with events that are physically removed from their lived experience, it is often like groping in the dark for clues” (p. 80). The realness of trauma symptoms must be taken seriously regardless of whether a person was exposed to or witnessed a traumatic event first-hand or not. Healing intergenerational traumatic distress is a large-scale undertaking; however, the prospect of such healing is realistic and promising. It is not only trauma that has its way of being “viscerally inscribed” in the nervous system through all our senses, but the strengths of our ancestors also make the same embedded imprint within us (Firestone, 2022, p. 14). Firestone concludes:

But we receive more than our forebears’ painful legacies. We also receive the capacity to reshape the trajectory of our own lives. We can choose to work with our “givens” to override the negative effects of our painful legacies and maximize our strengths. We can transform the imprint of our ancestors’ trauma (pp. 200, 201)

Through studying collective trauma and its mechanisms we understand that it is impossible to hurt someone without inflicting injury on ourselves and the entire web of living beings at the same time, and that justification for aggression does not negate this natural law. Research of collective shock and its spreading waves as well as the study of collective strengths once again reveal that every being is a part of one living organism on this planet. Therefore, the reclamation of cultural inheritance and wholesome ancestral practices helps us shed the illusion of separateness and individualistic isolation and offers global healing to humanity. True and lasting healing is based upon the deeply internalized existential realization that people are interconnected, inherently resourceful, and belong to the natural world.

Ecofeminism for Interconnectedness and Rootedness

Nature shows us that all life forms are interdependent and each being is sacred. Roszak (1995) quotes Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist and physicist: “An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of cooperation, and mutual care and love” (p. 299). Cohen (1993) also expresses that we are unified through the spirit of love, which is “the true fabric” of the world (p. 280). He says that humans inherit this fabric biologically; therefore, we feel a natural affinity with other beings:

Integrated Ecology views our lives and nature as Us...Us is our own and every other person’s true inner nature bound to Us, the natural world, God’s unadulterated nature. [...] We feel upset when we feel any part of Us, for we feel that hurt. (Cohen, 1993, p. 281)

In her fairy drama, *Ukrainka* (1911/2018) allegorically shows the connection between people and all beings, and how our souls feel for each other. When Mavka turns into a weeping willow, she says, “...And to me here shall many seek, both rich and poor, the joyful and the sad. Their griefs I’ll mourn, their joys shall make me glad—to everyone my soul shall gently speak” (p. 259). *Ukrainka* also relates that everything in nature is in constant communication. We see this in the dialogue between Mavka and Lukash. He says, “I never knew that trees could talk like that. I thought they were but speechless growing things.” To this Mavka answers, “In all the forest there is nothing mute” (p. 185). Cohen adds, “It (Integrated Ecology) recognizes that we will not teach the natural world to speak English, so it makes sense for us to learn nature’s unspoken language. In each of us that language consists of good natural feelings” (p. 284).

Due to the interdependence between organisms, an individual being can grow roots only when cooperating and interacting with the ecosystem where it dwells. Cohen (1993) emphasizes that humans did not create Earth, but rather arose from the natural world that was already in existence. He writes, “The word *human* has its roots in *humus*, a fertile forest soil” (p. 281). The fertility of the earth and the ecosystem allowed humans to come into existence and take root on this planet. Roszak (1995) says, “There is an emphasis on the importance of place, rootedness, and growing things. Living in one’s place becomes an element in a religion of ecological wholeness” (p. 296). Being rooted in a place is a collective experience: we ground each other, and our roots become intertwined. Through unavoidable interaction, “constantly, the natural world becomes us, we become it (Cohen, 1993, p. 281).

Ecofeminism for Resourcefulness and Wholeness

Ecofeminism also discusses such existential qualities of nature as its abundance and wholeness. Unfortunately, in search of wholeness dominating groups mistakenly turned towards controlling nature and aggrandizing affluence instead of participating in the shared earth community (Adams, 2010). However, if the shift from exploitative towards participatory consciousness is made, abundant nature generously provides for our true needs. The problem of human greed despite the bounties of nature is uncovered allegorically by Ukrainka (1911/2018) in “The Forest Song.” The author describes Lukash’s mother who is constantly ungrateful for anything that Mavka does, even though Mavka helped with building the house and raising ample crops. Lukash replied in Mavka’s defense:

There’s nothing that she does that pleases you. When we put up the house, was it not she who brought the wood? And who was it who helped you with the garden, helped you saw the fields? Did ever you get harvest like this year’s? The lovely flowers she has planted there. Beneath the window, what a pretty sight! (p. 212)

“The Forest Song” shows the theme of wholeness in the union of the spirit and the matter, the “feminine” and the “masculine,” and the collective and individual. Roszak (1995) summarizes that modern ecofeminism's vision of aspired human identity is one of wholeness, meaning that seemingly opposite forces reside harmoniously within a person: strengths as rationality, self-confidence, intelligence, and power alongside nurturance, healing, compassion, and intuition. To achieve that, Roszak advocates that every woman is allowed to express what has been called “the masculine” in hers, and every man to embrace what has been called “the feminine” in his nature. Roszak specifically uncovers the theme of the interrelatedness of ancestral and individual consciousness. She says that each person understands ancestry through the prism of their own meaningful experience. Metaphorically, the author names an individual “a phoenix,” who grows in the process of life and continuously, within themselves, the inheritance of past generations and a renewed perspective. Roszak says, “Each morning the phoenix is born again and something fresh arises from the past.” (p. 296). She adds, “The ancestors can speak through the phoenix, making new words for each generation” (p. 296). Lessons from the past are essential; they are instinctual and come to the surface when needed. Roszak quotes Martha Graham: “The ancestors are always with us. They speak through our blood” (p. 289). Inherited wisdom becomes even more potent when we are conscious of it. Therefore, reclaimed integration of opposites such as the spirit and the matter, the masculine and the feminine, and the ancestral and the individual bring about resourceful and wholesome living.

Ecofeminism for Embodied Beingness in Nature

Rozak (1995) says that ecofeminism teaches us thinking that is not strictly objective or detached, but participatory and through encounter, “a thinking through the body” (p. 299).

Cohen (1993) writes that, since the time of Aristotle, we find accounts of how people discover the world through our five senses. Cohen argues that there are 53 distinct natural senses and feelings, including “hunger, thirst, compassion, nurturing, sex, language, place, gravity, electromagnetism, form, camouflaging, motion, direction, distance, season, fatigue, trust, consciousness, aesthetic, community, and belonging to a larger whole” (p. 286). The author explains that due to lifestyles that estrange us from nature, such as spending most of the time indoors and with electronics, we lose touch with our natural senses; as a result, we experience emptiness and deadening of the self instead of fulfillment and aliveness. To recover the pleasure from embodied beingness “we must learn to validate, strengthen, and heal each natural sensation and feeling” (p. 287). Cohen writes, “The fulfillment of natural senses in congress produces responsibly balanced good feelings. In contrast, single sense fulfillment alone, or general non-fulfillment, produces frustrated desires for responsible sensory satisfaction” (p. 287). Cohen explains how natural senses through fulfillment ensure our survival:

When we feel natural sensations, we sense the global life community, including the mineral kingdom, nurturing and balancing its flow in and through us. That flow is an emotion called survival. When the flow through us stops, we die. [...] For survival seek, enjoy, and follow natural attractions that now call you. Gain their fulfillment, attain the stability of Us again. (pp. 289, 290)

Care aesthetics, too, advocates for the recovery of pleasure from embodied relational living and offers responsible outlets to do so. Campbell, et al. (2024) say, “The aesthetics of care seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realized in human relations fostered in art projects” (p. 436). While some care praxes might be fleeting, participation in nature-immersive activities and enduring art projects awaken and stronghold our natural sensory involvement with the job. Preparation, execution, and exhibition of co-created art projects promote convivial and festive feelings as well as “sensory quality of the process and outcome that cannot be disaggregated from the collective effort” (p. 438). Roszak (1995) also speaks of the recovery of a felt sense of inter-reliant co-existence through ecological care practice: “Earth’s body and our bodies are intimately connected, and the restoration of health to the one is intimately connected to the restoration of health to the other (p. 296).

From an ecofeminism perspective, Roszak (1995) points out that the many forms of nature are all alive, they have feelings, motivations, purposes, activities, preferences, and various forms of communication. Therefore, alongside interdependence and reciprocity, the embodied beingness in nature implies that living beings have autonomy and agency. The agency is a key notion in feminist care ethics, where the agentic strength of a person or a group is acknowledged and encouraged. Johansson’s and Wickstrom’s (2023) research illustrates how

the embodied aspect of agentic strength emerges out of feelings of vulnerability, existential openness to pain, loneliness, and feelings of inferiority—all of which eventually contribute to “generative strength for change” (p. 324). Johansson and Wickstrom summarize, “Care ethics that emerge from a sense of being ‘different’ may contribute to a form of ethical agency grounded in compassion and the possibility to connect with others” (p. 327). Firestone (2022) also speaks of the reclamation of agency as a movement from fatality toward taking passionate embodied action. However, she warns against rushing into “knee-jerk” reactions: “A sense of victimhood justifies extreme actions. It creates a sense of righteousness” (p. 174). Therefore, extreme actions, that lack patient self-awareness and integration of wounded feelings, might perpetuate division between people and even violence. Firestone says, “Simply put, agency is not reactive” (p. 180). From this position of non-reactivity, the personal embodiment of agency can find an expression in reaching beyond individual suffering to the suffering of others, preventing the transmission of collective trauma in the world (Firestone, 2022). Firestone (2022) describes how embodied beingness in the world includes agentic action:

But we have a choice about the outcome of our story. We can bemoan our fate as victims of history. Or we can recognize our pain and follow the circumstances of our lives not unforeseen directions and new meanings. We can ask: What does this terrible wound inspire me to do that I would never have thought to do otherwise? (p. 201)

Embodied beingness in nature is also advocated by feminist spirituality, which invites to revive the vision that matter is imbued with spirit (Roszak, 1995). Therefore, the embodied living with all its ordinary functions and movements are to be revered and celebrated:

All the bodily functions, including sexuality and childbearing, are sacred. The biological cycles of life and death, of change and renewal, are seen as inherently spiritual events. Body and nature are not to be transcendent, but are to be lived in, experienced, and honored as integral parts of our spiritual understanding” (Roszak, 1995, p. 295).

In “The Forest Song”, Ukrainka (1911/2018) demonstrates the joys and struggles of embodied living through Mavka’s character. Born as a magnificent princess-nymph of the forest, she renounced her privileges and became an ordinary woman because she wanted to experience embodied human love. As a human, she went through many sorrows and indignations, but upon returning to her forest family she could now describe the love of a woman for a man. She chose metaphors from nature to share her invaluable embodied experience, comparing herself to a birch who fell in love with the spring breeze:

That breeze of spring was tender, gentle, mind. It was his singing that brought out her

leaves. His fondling caused her glorious crown to spread, and his caresses dumped her hair with dew. Yes, yes...it truly was the breeze of spring. How could she help but love him and none else? (p. 231).

The personage of Mavka, as an allegory of a soul who has human experience on Earth, uncovers the joys and sorrows of embodied human living. The Spirit is both disappointed and enriched in the process of becoming human and intersecting with the human world. Mavka's soul is transformed by passing through human experience, highlighting the complex notion of unification of body, mind, and spirit in the narrative of everyday living. Borrowing from Cohen (1993), perhaps Mavka's journey can be viewed as a metaphor for the process of human re-spiriting: regaining sensory aliveness, rediscovery of agency within interdependent co-existence, and repairing humanity's caring relationship with the natural world.

Moreover, the symbolic meaning of Mavka moving into a human condition full of trials and tribulations and then returning to the spirit world wiser and anew is similar to the spiritual enrichment of the Ukrainian nation after withstanding countless darkest days in history. Lesya Ukrainka's "The Forest Song" pronounces the ultimate value of embodied human life amidst all worldly circumstances. Her poetic play expresses that human suffering on Earth can be a vehicle for transformation and resurrection.

Conclusion

Exhausted by wars, but not broken by anyone—may my land blossom!
Wasted by famine, but not conquered—may your nightingale's song echo over the
Dnipro River!

—Okean Elzy, *Sailboat*

Війнами втомлена, та ніким не зломлена—розквітай, земле ти моя!
Голодом морена, але не покорена—най звучить над Дніпром твоя пісня солов'я!

—Океан Ельзи, *Човен*

The experience of connection to our ancestral strengths teaches us that power can be secured through ways congruent with nature's laws. Such ways are not of dominance and isolation, but of embracing the interconnectedness of all beings, preserving the abundance of natural resources, and living the embodied lifestyles. These three insights, about the quality of dwelling in the world, were unearthed from my project. They contribute to the heartfelt vision of a society that fully embraces the values of care ethics. Visse and Abma (2018) write, "In all societies and institutions, large and small, we find forces that can strengthen or destroy their fabric" (p. 2). Raising children and building communities with the instilled philosophy of care, gives a promise of restoring humanity to our natural state of wholeness (Cohen, 1993).

Empowerment through relational care is proven to reduce such problems as posttraumatic stress disorders, dependencies, violence, prejudice, crime, learning difficulties, depression, anxiety, relationship issues, and loneliness (Cohen, 1993). As a leader of interactive group activities in nature, Cohen summarizes his observation of re-gained well-being for the participants: “Repressed inborn feelings of love, balance, and understanding, blossom into awareness. Natural self-respect, responsibility, and sanity crystallize new personal integrity” (p.285).

The similarities in aspirations for the betterment of the world between care ethics and ecofeminism are evident. Ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of re-owning a life-creating and life-enhancing feminine power, which Roszak (1995) metaphorically calls the Goddess. Roszak says, “The Goddess becomes the great metaphor for the source of life [...] the strong nurturing presence of the mother, not necessary in a literal sense, but as a creator of arts, healing, agriculture, crafts, pottery, weaving, and so forth” (p. 296). The author assures that the power of creativity, which is implicit in nature, is much stronger than the power of domination. She says that each of us can reconnect with this creative force, re-visiting it in the ways of living of our ancestors, and this will restore not only the individuals but the society:

Let us imagine a posttraditional, postmechanistic, postdualistic philosophy where the place and experience of humans in the world will change qualitatively from the uniform reactions of lonely, indifferent individuals to patience, receptivity, and the multifarious; from aggression, isolation, and alienation to equality, cooperation, and involvement with the process of nature; from grandiosity, closure, and control to celebration of the ordinary; from domination and hierarchy to a holistic community of compassionate persons. (pp. 298, 299)

The arts-based project presented in this chapter is one example of the best customs of the ancestral community, here the lineage of the Ukrainian nation. As collaborative participants in this project, my sister and I, the heirs of Ukrainian culture, had a chance to draw from the foundational powers of our ancestors. The memories, a cornerstone of our resilience, came: the village where we spent our summers, the melodic songs we sang together, the laughter, and the caring love we felt from being embraced and included in the family. Years later, by virtue of my ancestors, I feel a belonging to one family of humanity and to nature. The strengths of my ancestors are living within me, empowering my strivings to be a positive force in the world, to practice care, and to lead a meaningful life of well-being.

Exploring the individual lived experiences shared in my project, we see how Ukrainian society honors the elements of its matriarchal roots, nature, and human relationships. Future art and care projects might undertake more in-depth research on matriarchal and patriarchal

cultures, and the co-existence between the two within civilizations (Kennett et al., 2017; Kis, 2012; Rubchak, 2009). Future research can explore the ancestral inheritance of other nations in the context of their history, customs, and land territoriality. There is an urgent call for the continuation of the decolonial and liberation movements through the reclamation of cultural and environmental rights. Ultimately, social structures must be rebuilt based on the united veracious dedication to caring for all living beings. There is a need for comprehensive research on intergenerational traumas of ethnic groups and suitable native treatment modalities. Detailed exploration is needed of how the embodiment of strengths helps individuals within communities in daily living. Further studies are necessary to gain insight into the sensorial aspect of the embodiment of strengths. Various arts-based elements, such as poetry, sculpture, and performance arts, can be explored as an enhancement of felt sense understanding about the lived experience of being connected to the cultural ancestral strengths.

In summary, my collaborative arts-based phenomenological project focuses on understanding the lived experience of being connected to generational goodness, using narratives and art of Ukrainian culture. I situated these examples in the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, drawing links to liberation psychology, care ethics, and care aesthetics. The discoveries of my project suggest that connection to ancestral strengths both stems from and is accompanied by the embodiment of interconnected rootedness, resourcefulness and wholeness, and embodied beingness in nature. In addition, this project sheds light on how the family of Ukrainians finds strength in supporting each other, knowing that when we unite in love we are mighty together. This study gives respect to the people of Ukraine for their strength to hold agency, exercise willpower, and remain viscerally connected and faithful to their Motherland. Narratives and paintings demonstrate that Ukrainians earned respect by forging their character in long and honest toil on the land, by carrying their spiritedness through the immense trials of history, and by courageously defending their cultural sovereignty, freedom, and independence. A national Ukrainian singer Oksana Bilozir proclaims in her historical song “A Ukrainian Woman:” “...not once I was beaten, killed, and forcefully taken to the foreign land, but I was not overpowered, I was reborn from my tears, because I was born a Ukrainian.” It is my fortune and honor to intimately know the goodness of my Ukrainian ancestors, and through ancestral connection to celebrate the beauty and power of a unique Ukrainian culture.

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About the Author

Marta Stefanyshyn

I was born and raised in the ancient city of Lviv, the center of Ukrainian cultural heritage. I spent summers in a village where the community is interdependent with nature. When I was 17, my family and I immigrated to the United States where I became a citizen. I made the most of America's educational opportunities and graduated with Master's and Educational Specialist degrees in Professional Counseling from Georgia State University in 2011 and 2012. Since then, I have worked as a licensed therapist in various settings and with diverse populations. Following my passion for studying humanistic psychology further, I enrolled in the Consciousness and Society doctoral program at The University of West Georgia, and in 2024 completed an arts-based phenomenological dissertation about how people embody their character strengths in social situations. Today, I continue practicing therapy, privileged to accompany persons on our entwined life journeys of potential realization.

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