

THE WAY OF THE MOUNTAIN: POWDER SNOW, DOLORES LACHAPELLE,
AND A SEARCH FOR “THE ANSWERS”

by
Clare Wolz Menzel

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DEDICATION

For northeast hardpack. And the orchard, and the field.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: SKIER ON FIRE	1
“It Comes to Me from Them”: Historiography, Methods, and Archival Collections	7
Tool No. 1: Hybridity	12
Tool No. 2: Vital Materiality	16
Tool No. 3: Neo-Materialism.....	19
Joy is a Lover Receiving What She Loves	24
2. THE MISEDUCATION OF DOLORES LACHAPELLE: CHILDHOOD PLACES AND CULTURE	30
Progress Means Emancipation from Nature	33
“My Life was Saved and Given Direction”	39
“The Beginning of the Problem”	56
3. THE DIPSY DOODLE WILL GET IN YOUR HAIR: ENCOUNTERING POWDER SNOW	59
A Means, Not Merely a Metaphor: How She Let It Ski Her	61
“Discouraged, Disgusted, Disconsolate”	65
“One of the Few Sub-Cultures in Modern Industrial Society Still Open”	76
Ticket to the Doodle Homeland.....	81
4. LACHAPELLE “REBORN UNDER THE SNOW”	84
Avalanche Country, USA	87
“Do You Think It’s Ready for Us Yet?”	94
The Day the Snow Was Not Ready	100
Yielding.....	108
5. EPILOGUE: THINKING IS DOING AND DOING IS THINKING	112
Areas for Future Work	119
REFERENCES CITED.....	125

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Moon Rises Above Kendall Mountain and the town of Silverton.....	2
2. Dolores LaChapelle, unknown date and location	8
3. Compendium.....	25
4. Possibly the First Mention of Deep Powder Snow in LaChapelle's Writing.....	55
5. LaChapelle University of Denver Graduation Portrait	57
6. Mr. and Mrs. LaChapelle on their Wedding Day	83
7. LaChapelle Family at Alta	88
8. Diagram from Peruvian Gulch Incident Report.....	104
9. LaChapelle Passes Time in the Hospital Playing Guitar	107
10. LaChapelle, Silverton, 1986	115
11. Clouds Gather Above Eldorado Lake	117

ABSTRACT

Longstanding narratives in Europe and the United States about progress as emancipation from nature construct perceptions of separation between humans and everything else. This separation justifies human mastery of and control over nature, leading to environmental exploitation as well as individual experiences of alienation from place. Dolores LaChapelle, author of *Deep Powder Snow: 40 Years of Ecstatic Skiing, Avalanches, and Earth Wisdom*, countered dominant Eurocentric and anthropocentric ascendancy with knowledge that she argued came from her experiences as a powder snow skier in the western United States during the twentieth century.

Using theories of neo-materialism and vital materiality, this study examines relational, more-than-human agency that produced cultural identity and embodied ethical knowledge. In particular, it focuses on LaChapelle's encounters and relationships with mountain places, and transformations in her thinking that occurred after she learned to ski powder in Aspen, Colorado, from 1947-1950, as well as after she experienced a large avalanche in Alta, Utah in 1963. This study argues that LaChapelle is an overlooked, original thinker about the agency and ethical standing of non-human beings in the material world.

INTRODUCTION

SKIER ON FIRE

Dolores LaChapelle died on January 21, 2007, at home in her bed in Silverton, Colorado, a former mining town at 9,318 feet in the San Juan Mountains. On the night of her passing, a caretaker sat by the west window, watching the trajectory of Venus move along the silhouetted shoulder of Sultan Mountain. The giant red planet rolling down the mountainside looked “like a skier on fire,” he said. It reminded him of the woman lying in bed in the next room, whose entire way of being and thinking was ignited by skiing.¹

LaChapelle was a strong-willed, blunt old woman—but she always had been that way, never one to hold back a critical opinion. She liked to wear her hair in two long braids, a signature style along with jeans and a flannel that hung baggy on her thin, wiry frame. She passed at 80, the result of complications from a longstanding heart condition. Shortly before her death, she and her son, David, discussed the physical toll of living at such a high altitude. They agreed that she was likely shortening her life, but she chose to trade bodily health for moral health in her final months. Leaving would “would not have been true to the ethic that has informed her life,” David said.²

¹ David Grimes (friend of David LaChapelle) in discussion with author, December 2021.

² David LaChapelle, “The Totality of a Lifetime. Dolores LaChapelle: July 4, 1926 – January 21, 2007,” LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.



Figure 1: Moon Rises Above Kendall Mountain and the town of Silverton, author's photo.

LaChapelle was an expert powder skier, as well as a theorist about place and relationship. An independent scholar and self-described generalist, she tended to roam intellectually across centuries, around the globe, and over disciplinary boundaries. In 1976, when she was 50, she published her first book, then wrote five more in the following 25 years. Her last came only five years before she died. Her wide-ranging work has gained her scattered recognition. A few know her for her practical interpretations of German philosopher Martin Heidegger.³ Many know her

³ Dolores LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, (Los Angeles: The Guild of Tutors Press, 1978), 80-86; Dolores LaChapelle "The Blue Mountains are Constantly Walking," *Ecophilosophy* 4 (May 1982). Accessed through International Society for Environmental Ethics Special Collections. <https://iseethics.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/sessions-george-ecophilosophy-newsletter-4-may-1982.pdf>. Annotated version, 1981, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

as a teacher of nature ritual and Tai Chi.⁴ Others have come across her book about the early environmental vision of English novelist D.H. Lawrence.⁵

Most scholars who know her are familiar with her involvement in the 20th Century U.S. radical environmental movement. The movement had its direct-action activists, but it also had its eco-philosophers, who developed guiding ethical frameworks.⁶ In the late 1970s, LaChapelle began collaborating with a cohort from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences who laid some of this theoretical groundwork. Through deep ecology and bioregionalism, they argued that humans have obligations to support and respect the self-realization of all beings, with an idea of selfhood that applied to beings like powder snow.

But even more than scholars or environmentalists, skiers seem to remember LaChapelle most enthusiastically and fondly as the “godmother of powder skiing.”⁷ They know her for her 1993 *Deep Powder Snow: 40 Years of Ecstatic Skiing, Avalanches, and Earth Wisdom*.⁸ She printed the 100-page book small enough to fit snugly in the pocket of a ski jacket. Memoir interwoven with theory, *Deep Powder Snow* is about how powder skiing gave LaChapelle a path

⁴ Dolores LaChapelle, *Return to Mountain Tai Chi Between Heaven and Earth* (Christchurch, NZ: Hazard Publishing, 2002).

⁵ Dolores LaChapelle, *D.H. Lawrence: Future Primitive*, (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1996).

⁶ For context and background on deep ecology and radical environmentalism, see: Keith Makoto Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Dolores LaChapelle, *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex, and Rapture of the Deep: Concerning Deep Ecology and Celebrating Life* (Durango, CO: Kivakí Press, 1988), 12-15.

⁷ In 2004, LaChapelle received the History-Maker Award presented at the University of Utah J. Willard Marriott Library Ski Archives Ski Affair.

⁸ Dolores LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow: 40 Years of Ecstatic Skiing, Avalanches, and Earth Wisdom*, (Durango, CO: Kivakí Press, 1993).

of cultural resistance against the dominant European and American desire for power over nature. This out-of-print book, a cult classic, has been revisited almost annually in ski media over recent years.⁹

LaChapelle wrote from Silverton, an isolated town in the alpine headwaters of the Animas River. Yet she wrote from these margins ambitiously and broadly. She addressed her philosophical work to “all of us who are heirs to European thought,”¹⁰ people like her who came from cultures that emphasized separation from nature, control over land, and conquest of place. For this audience, this conqueror’s attitude was, in her mind, the primary obstacle to living in right relationship with more-than-human communities. She urged her readers to stop letting their own will run rampant on the land. In order to live validly, she argued, one must endeavor to respect the will of others there.

For LaChapelle, knowing *how*—making this ethical ideal concrete—involved relationship with place. She thought of this as the emotional bond that comes from sustained, habitual awareness of and participation in more-than-human goings-on. As she wrote in *Deep Powder Snow*, “I know of nothing which teaches one to live validly as quickly as powder snow.”¹¹ By this, she meant that skiing revealed snow and the mountains and gravity as beings, and the patterns they expressed showed her how to fit in with them. Her work is about skiing, but

⁹ Michael Israelson, “Powder Prophecies with Dolores LaChapelle,” *The Ski Journal* 11.4, January 2018; Sam Morse, “Deep Powder Snow: The Philosophy of Dolores LaChapelle,” *Teton Gravity Research*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.tetongravity.com/story/culture/deep-powder-snow-the-philosophy-of-dolores-lachapelle>; Paddy O’Connell, “Searching For Dolores LaChapelle,” *Freeskier*, 2020, <https://freeskier.com/stories/searching-for-dolores-lachapelle>; Heather Hansman, *Powder Days: Ski Bums, Ski Towns, and the Future of Chasing Snow* (Toronto: Hanover Square Press, 2021).

¹⁰ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 83.

¹¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 70.

it is not just about skiing. She wrote, “I am not saying that skiing is necessarily a valid goal... Living in a particular place in a real relationship with the earth and the sky and the living beings around you... is a valid goal.”¹² Her work is about building committed relationships within place-based ethical communities that include non-human beings.

But this study surveys neither LaChapelle’s complete works, nor her entire life. It is not only about LaChapelle—it is also about the generation of knowledge that was only partly hers: co-authored, relational, ethical, embodied, and place-based knowledge. This project is about how knowledge like that comes to be found in the writings of a contemplative, high-altitude ski/scholar bum.¹³

My tight focus on LaChapelle is a narrative choice, not an ontological one. It does not make the production of knowledge, or the product of that process, any more hers. We simply get a view of it from her perspective. She was the embodied site where physical and environmental knowledge became identity, intellectual ideas, and cultural expression.¹⁴

LaChapelle spent decades trying to prove that through skiing, she began to find her way out of a moral system that undervalued and subjugated non-human nature. She argued that she

¹² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 16.

¹³ Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 173-176.

¹⁴ Environmental historians have identified the body as one of the most hybrid of spaces, as literally the place where culture and nature meet. This scholarship often focuses on health, wellness, and justice. See Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See also more recent scholarship challenging the ableist limitations of universalized conceptions of the body: Rose Ashley, “Bodies, Public Land, and Belonging: The Story of Disability in Yellowstone National Park,” (Masters Thesis, Montana State University, 2022).

learned something about her obligations to a more-than-human community. This is a bold claim—to some, perhaps, simply unbelievable. It is tempting to dive straight into her later theoretical work to see how her argument unfolds. There is much to absorb, appreciate, and critically engage with there. But this later work is not necessary for accessing her vital contributions. In fact, if you begin with her theories, you miss something important. The story of how she figured out how to learn from her “*world* of powder snow skiing” is its own illustration of her ideas.¹⁵

What is easy to miss about LaChapelle—but what is also right in front of us—is that *how* and *why* she thought is just as important as *what* she thought. All her later work on relational, environmental ethics was grounded in knowledge that came from her experiences with powder snow and avalanches in the interior American West, or Mountain West. She skied at Colorado and Utah ski areas, as well as in the backcountry, for 50 years, from the late 1940s to the early 1990s.

When she moved through the smoothest, deepest powder, she was delighted with the way it seemed that the snow, terrain, and gravity guided her movements. If she gave in to these beings, they physically showed her where to go. The more she skied, the better she understood how to conform to and flow with a snowy, mountainous place.¹⁶ This ongoing encounter got LaChapelle thinking about how she might give away control to, rather than exert it on, the non-human forces and things that were part of skiing: a pleasurable, full-bodied experience that

¹⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 45.

¹⁶ Flow is a well-studied topic, especially by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009). See LaChapelle’s use of his work on play and experience, *Earth Wisdom*, 122.

became a core part of who she was. Through sustained, yielding interaction, LaChapelle's relationships with mountain beings became the central philosophical and spiritual presence in her life.

LaChapelle's life and work must be recovered in their fullness, so that a wider audience might know about her, her ideas, and her ways of learning. She called her method the "Way of the Mountain," and this way holds broad appeal. At my most optimistic, I believe her approach to engaging and bonding with place will be helpful in adapting compassionately to our increasingly unstable climate. It will, I hope, help recreationists in today's American West and beyond live out alternatives to the consumerist, aggressive, and performative habits of modern mountain places. I hope her "way" may be useful to anyone born into a culture of control and conquest, who is wondering why they are experiencing alienation from a nature set apart.

"It Comes To Me From Them": Historiography, Methods, and Archival Collections

While opening Christmas presents in Silverton in 1983, LaChapelle, 57, dashed over to her typewriter to get an idea down on paper. "About me staying here," she titled it, writing,

People wonder why I stay here—loss of academic/intellectual contact. That's not where it's at anymore. Now we need learning from nature itself—we cannot [sic] isolate ourselves like Proust in a cork-lined room... no longer can wisdom come out of the mind of man alone. I live in the mountains and it comes to me from them.¹⁷

¹⁷ Dolores LaChapelle, "about me staying here," December 25, 1983 in untitled black compendium, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.



Figure 2: Dolores LaChapelle, unknown date and location. LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

It comes to me from them. The knowledge she presented in her books was not something she believed that she generated on her own. Rather, it was given to her by the various beings she encountered as a skier. Snow, terrain, and gravity were her teachers, and she became their student by skiing. She was literal, clear, consistent, and committed to this point. She wrote about it tenaciously for decades. Her knowledge *about* her knowledge may be her most significant contribution. “The mountains... taught me things that our dominant culture lost long ago,” she wrote in her introduction to *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex, Rapture of the Deep: Concerning Deep*

Ecology and Celebrating Life, her 1988 deep ecology manual and reference book.¹⁸ She did not only think about these material things, these beings. She thought with them, through them, and for them.

LaChapelle majored in history as an undergraduate at the University of Denver, in Colorado, during World War II, and found it an uninspiring course of study. “Took me a long time to find out that history was the beginning of the problem not the answer,” she wrote in 1988.¹⁹ Looking back on the state of this Western academic discipline, it is no wonder she went in a different direction. Since her time, there have been significant developments in history methods. Historians today use environmental and neo-material theories of relational and distributed causality to recognize that the power to induce historical change is not an exclusively human capacity.

Traditionally, however, historians in the Western academy construed the production of identity, knowledge, and culture as a strictly human endeavor. “The very term ‘history’ includes an implicit qualifier... ‘human history,’” historian Sarah Maza writes in *Thinking About History*, a compact synthesis of the discipline, its development, and its driving questions.²⁰ In 1946, the year before LaChapelle graduated from DU, British philosopher R.G. Collingwood published *The Idea of History*, a treatise dealing with the proper domain of historical inquiry. History is not the mere retelling of a sequence of events, it is a method of re-thinking the thoughts of people living through those events by reading documents and sifting through ideas for an intelligible

¹⁸ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

¹⁹ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

²⁰ Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 83-117.

interpretation. That which does not think—in this specific sense of leaving behind records of thought—is causally unimportant in the unfolding of history, Collingwood asserted.²¹

Today, people from many different fields, from postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty to neo-materialist historian Timothy LeCain, refer to Collingwood as a textbook example of the wedge between human and natural history.²² But the division goes back further, to European Renaissance-era ideas that man is the main character. This humanist view conceptualizes agency as the human capacity to produce historical change: With direct intention, people shape the progression of history to their needs and desires. Everything else is used in the service of this human destiny, simply passive, ahistorical, acted *upon*. Non-humans might cause things to happen, and they might limit, complicate, or support human action, but these goings-on are merely mechanical, and of no historic consequence. Whatever the justification—divine creation, an immortal soul, language, or the rational mind—man is important and singular. As Maza put it, “the burden of choice made for man’s greatness, his ability to bend the world to his will”²³ meant he bore the mantle of history on his shoulder.

LaChapelle’s written works present knowledge that historians in decades past would have construed as entirely human in authorship. Today, Collingwood-style thinking about agency “often still prevails, albeit more as an unexamined axiom than as a reasoned position” LeCain writes.²⁴ But to evaluate LaChapelle’s ideas now with a humanist theory of historical agency

²¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 210-219.

²² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 197-222; Timothy J. LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²³ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 85.

²⁴ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 12.

would be absurd. We would be unable to see the very thing this study asks about: how she and the mountain beings of snow, terrain, and gravity interacted over 50 years, and how that series of encounters became relationships that produced ethical knowledge. Today, LaChapelle would be in good company among historians who reject the conventional Western academic view of human history as self-contained and separate from nature.

One of environmental history's key contributions to the discipline has been recognizing, articulating, and developing the agentic or causal power of the nonhuman world. As revolutionary as this idea was for the Euro-American academic perspective when it emerged in the late twentieth century, it was not a novel idea in general. The idea that the non-human world wields this kind of historical and cultural power is common and often central, though not universal, in many non-Western intellectual traditions. The story of how history, as a discipline, fell in line with this tradition is interesting and complex, and much more thoroughly attended to elsewhere.²⁵ In broad strokes, environmental history in the Western academy has undergone two important phases of disciplinary development.

The first emerged along the modern popular environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These histories challenged standard narratives of triumphalist progress over nature with a new, declensionist view of history: stories where human progress led to degradation and ruin of the environment. "Long the barely noticed backdrop to human activity, the natural world initially entered history as the vulnerable object of human hubris and greed," Maza writes.²⁶ By 1990, the

²⁵ Paul Sutter, "The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History," *The Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 2013), 94-119; Maza, "The History of What?" in *Thinking About History*, 83-117; LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 23-66; Linda Nash, "The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?" *Environmental History* 10, no. 1 (January 2005).

²⁶ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 109.

field began to mature beyond its early political aims, as a second generation tackled what was becoming a fundamental analytical challenge: the constitutions of nature and culture.²⁷

Scholars realized they needed greater precision when analyzing these concepts, otherwise their work would simply reproduce the longstanding wedge between human and natural histories. As descriptive abstractions, nature and culture gather enormous and diverse groupings of things into two sweeping and distinct categories: all human phenomena, all non-human phenomena. Environmental historians agreed that organizing all the things in the world this way was limited. But what was the alternative? There were no easy answers, and thus complicating nature has animated ongoing discourse for environmental history, the kind of sticky question that generates decades of work. Nature is “not a settled category but was contested terrain,” as Sutter writes.²⁸

From this rich contested terrain, three theoretical innovations have emerged that help us understand the type of co-created, more-than-human knowledge that LaChapelle was interested in. Hybridity, vibrant materiality, and neo-materialism are the three tools I use to reconstruct the relationships and agency in her intellectual story.

Tool No. 1: Hybridity

First, “hybridity” challenges the polarity and essentialism of nature and culture.²⁹ Hybridity acknowledges that human and non-human influences are always present in the unfolding of history. This approach has been widely adapted as an alternative to the old

²⁷ Sutter, “The World with Us,” 94.

²⁸ Sutter, “The World with US,” 95.

²⁹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993).

paradigm. “If I had to tersely sum up the drift of American environmental historiography since 1990, I would say, simply, that all environments are hybrid,” historian Paul Sutter writes.³⁰ This hybrid turn creates the space for me to examine both the human culture in her material world of powder snow, and the non-human agency in her ideas.

For the first task, I could not have done this study without ski history and the histories of tourism and recreational industry in Colorado and Utah.³¹ This work establishes how her ski places were culturally created and scripted. It shows the extent to which experience and place were commodified beneath her feet, especially after World War II. She fits into these histories like a puzzle piece. She lived in the eye of the storm during a time of dynamic, rapid, and well-studied change.

LaChapelle seemed to be in the right places at the right times. She was a child in Denver when army surplus skis flooded gear stores in the 1930s. She moved to Aspen in 1947, soon after the introduction of both the world’s longest chairlift and a new technique for skiing powder snow. This was the end of the so-called “quiet years” between mining and skiing. She left Aspen in 1950, just as the post-World War II transformations gained momentum. She couldn’t have timed Alta better, arriving in 1952 as snow rangers were harnessing avalanche country for ski area development, but years before a second, bigger resort popped up next door in 1971. In 1975, she took refuge in Silverton, a town guarded by avalanches, and watched as skiing’s ravenous

³⁰ Sutter, “The World with Us,” 96.

³¹ For Colorado, see Hal Rothman, *Devils Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1998); William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013); Coleman, *Ski Style*; for Utah, see Mette Flynt, “Becoming America’s Ski City: Place and Identity on the Wasatch Front,” (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2018);

consumerism went corporate and mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s. As the sport developed into an American pastime and then into an industry, LaChapelle perfectly threaded the needle of the era's tensions and contradictions between access and development, always dancing away from change remaking the mountains.³²

LaChapelle did not gain knowledge in untouched natural spaces. Her experiences as a skier in the twentieth-century United States were enabled and shaped in undeniable, important ways by culture. Her own physical pleasure and emotional bonds with snow pulled her to the slopes, but she only found herself skiing because of human efforts to assemble what has grown into, today, a multi-billion industrial recreation industry.³³ Skiers like her tend to overlook or minimize human influence on spaces where they interact with nature.³⁴ In the 1980s, she wrote, "that's where I learned all I know—from nature direct,"³⁵ with "direct" meaning, in some way, untouched. Cultural construction literally becomes part of the land. It is not like a veil draped on top of reality for somebody like LaChapelle to peek underneath. A skier descending a slope could "believe they were 'in synchrony with the mountains and the snow,' embraced by a 'natural' landscape that, if they were to stop and look around, flashed 'man-made' like a neon sign," historian Annie Gilbert Coleman writes.³⁶ LaChapelle's narrow focus on the non-human

³² Mette Flynt gestures toward this argument about LaChapelle's timing. Flynt, "Becoming America's Ski City," 118.

³³ Elizabeth Burakowski and Rebecca Hill, "Economic Contributions of Winter Sports in a Changing Climate," Protect Our Winters, Boulder, CO, USA. Feb. 23, 2018.

³⁴ For an argument about this type of oversight as a critical "paradox" in skiing, see Alex Miller, "Spent a Little Time on the Mountain: Backcountry Ski Touring in Utah and Colorado," (Masters Thesis, Colorado State University, 2021).

³⁵ Dolores LaChapelle to Stephanie Leonard and Ruth Leveton, March 18, 1982, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

³⁶ Coleman, *Ski Style*, 128.

may be due to her position of anti-anthropocentrism—a deliberate de-centering of the human in the story—nevertheless, it is a weakness.

Much has been made of the rapidness and completeness with which consumer culture and commodification remade ski landscape and the physical experience of skiing. But maybe the change was not so totalizing. Intense human involvement on a constructed landscape did not sap the non-human beings of their causal power, something LaChapelle affirmed. While various stakeholders in United States ski country began relating to snow and slope as commodities and experiences to own, she began relating to them as beings and sources of ethical knowledge. Her life and work express the possibility for intimate relationships with non-human nature, even if the landscape is neither pristine nor wild. I hope to add to this previous scholarship on skiing, tourism, and recreational industry in the American West, but I pivot in an opposite, hopefully complementary, direction. Instead of examining how people constructed places, I am interested in how the place constructed LaChapelle, too.

Luckily, hybridity flows both ways. Sutter notes that it allows scholars “to find cultural traces in what they thought was the natural but also to find the natural thriving in places swamped by human activity.”³⁷ This study does not focus on the createdness of LaChapelle’s landscapes as much as it considers knowledge created through the engagement of a skier, snow, terrain, and gravity. Historians developed hybridity as a lens for looking at places, not ideas, but there are few places more swamped by human activity than the realm of ethical thought that LaChapelle engaged. The view that ethics are the product of pure human reason might be one of the most impenetrably human in the Western psyche. This study asks whether we can see,

³⁷ Sutter, “The World with Us,” 96.

through LaChapelle's story, humans, powder snow, and other beings creating hybrid ethical knowledge.

Tool No. 2: Vital Materiality and Assemblages

This study relies on a particular theory of agency. Along with other historians, I embrace “vital materiality,” developed by political ecologist Jane Bennett in her 2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.³⁸ As with hybridity, this is not a novel idea, and Bennett draws on a lineage including Baruch Spinoza, Henry David Thoreau, Bruno Latour, and others. She rejects the idea that “dull matter” sits in the background of human history.³⁹ She suggests that agency is not a human trait, nor is it even the possession of individual bodies. This has been a key misconception all along. Instead, agency is an event. Agency *happens* when heterogeneous bodies gather in “assemblages,” enhancing their individual power through relational and collective, if not coordinated, action. Moments of agency begin and end. They happen somewhere, in a place. People bond to places because participating in the assemblages there make them who they are.⁴⁰

When I write that something is generated or produced, the passive voice does not conceal the actor, it gestures to the complexity of action. Bennett rejects the “the default grammar of agency.”⁴¹ The job of an environmental historian is not to see humanlike agency in non-human

³⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)

³⁹ Bennett, vii.

⁴⁰ For more on the placed-based nature of assemblages, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). For more discussion of the human experience of place as sensory and cultural, see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

⁴¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 119.

actors, but to see the diverse distribution of agency. The mechanics of how assemblages assemble might be described scientifically, such as by physics, biology, geology, ecology, or psychology. They can also be described historically. Like scientists, historians are interested in times or places with assemblages that are especially generative, curious, or impactful. This is true with LaChapelle.

She described her place as her “*world of powder snow*.”⁴² The term inspired by Heidegger’s worlding of worlds, may be a term only she used, so this study will also discuss an overlapping place, “avalanche country,” a more commonly used term today. It is a relevant container for the assemblages she participated in, as well as an exciting place to ski and study. Humans respond in myriad ways to this place: LaChapelle’s household alone—she and her husband, early avalanche researcher Edward R. LaChapelle—produced both scientific and ethical strategies for navigating this precarious but rewarding assemblage.⁴³

Avalanche country is a place shared globally among numerous parties, including recreational users of the backcountry, avalanche professionals, scientific researchers, and residents and workers in mountainous places. These are people who share, often, scientific and experiential knowledge, ability, and affection for traveling in mountainous, snow-bearing terrain. “Avalanche country” was not common in her time, but I think she would have liked the idea. A

⁴² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 45.

⁴³ Ed is well-recognized in his field. Some of his work includes: Edward LaChapelle, *A Field Guide to Snow Crystals*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969); Edward R. LaChapelle, *The ABC of Avalanche Safety*, (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1971); Edward LaChapelle, *Secrets of Snow: Visual Cues to Avalanche and Ski Conditions*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Edward LaChapelle, “The Ascending Spiral,” *The Avalanche Review* 24 no.1, October 2005.

country implies governance and, ultimately, LaChapelle wanted to find a higher power that organized relationships and obligations differently than modern Euro-American society.

This is a land governed by weather, terrain, gravity, and time. Every fallen snowflake experiences an unending process of metamorphosis through interactions with diverse environmental variables that equip this place with the capacity to generate an extraordinary diversity of change. The history and patterns of these interactions directly and simultaneously determine the character of skiing and avalanche conditions; the majority of ski areas in the Mountain West are in the business of providing one but not the other.

Few would fail to recognize the causal power of avalanche country in motion: vigorous agency erupts when miniscule bodies—billions of crystals—move into mass action seemingly simultaneously, flowing around trees, over cliffs, and into all the curves of the land. A fleeting breakdown in entropy, a momentary alliance of action. “Snow, gift of the sky, when too deep or unstable, is drawn down by the gravity of the earth, and this mutual appropriation of one to the other is called avalanche,” LaChapelle wrote, describing the agency of this place, again using Heideggerian language to express herself.⁴⁴ This is the assemblage of avalanche country that shapes patterns of permanent settlement and disrupts commerce by blocking train tracks built in avalanche paths. We see this type of assemblage in the final chapter: destructive but still generative.

A slide itself is over in moments or minutes. The moment of agency has passed and the landscape returns to stability. Or does it? Stability is not a fixed, static background state. Stability is also an assemblage: an impermanence, an event, a gathering of atmospheric and geologic

⁴⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 46.

forces acting on snow. Through lens of vital materiality, snow could never been seen as inanimate. LaChapelle experienced the quiet, yielding assemblages as blissful, countercultural, and morally instructive places. She also participated in unstable assemblages—including one that nearly killed her. She learned from all of it.. For its ability to render the range and fluidity of avalanche country’s causal power, Bennett’s vital materiality seem tailor-made for a study of LaChapelle.

Tool No. 3: Neo-Materialism

Lastly, a third recent theoretical innovation that this study benefits from is “neo-materialism,” a theory and method developed by historian Timothy LeCain in his 2017 *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past*, which emphasizes the role of non-human things in the shaping of history. A neo-materialist approach to LaChapelle’s ideas helps us break apart the assumption of a monolithic “nature” that acts on human culture, and to ask about the particular materialities of her hybrid environments.

I will not be able describe the attraction of skiers to powder on a steep slope as well as LeCain describes the biological and chemical appeal of silk in *The Matter of History*.⁴⁵ Also, I have a smaller point to prove: only that particular knowledge LaChapelle gained corresponds, in part, to the particular characteristics of Colorado continental snow climates, and the intermountain snow climate of Utah’s Wasatch Front. Digging into the particular characters and behaviors of these snow climates, then connecting them to certain aspects of LaChapelle’s style of thinking, allows me to illustrate some of the causal links between her and her teachers.

⁴⁵ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 188-202.

Building on Bennett's vibrant materiality, LeCain positions his method in contradistinction to the dominant, human-oriented theory of historical change. "Western humans made an immense error when they concluded that their intelligence, creativity, and unprecedented power came from some mysterious divine spark or immaterial mind that set them apart from the very world that created and sustained these," he writes.⁴⁶ As is clear with LaChapelle, the beings in her life that made her, her, were not people but things. A broader, more-than-human view of agency provides a better understanding of what it means *to be* human, LeCain asserts. "At least in some cases," he argues, "what we typically identify as abstract and solely human-generated intellectual, cultural, or social phenomena are more accurately understood as emerging from countless encounters between porous human minds, bodies, and cultures and a creative and even in some cases intelligent material world."⁴⁷ LaChapelle is a main character in this story, to be sure, but one among many, trying to be a humble and "plain member," as Aldo Leopold put it, contributing her talents and perspectives to tell a story without seizing the narrative.

With neo-materialism, LeCain attempts to bring the ways of knowing developed by the humanities and the sciences together in study of history. I do not avail myself of "the best available scientific insights" into avalanche country, which is necessary, LeCain writes, for taking "other things seriously."⁴⁸ I do bring personal awareness of avalanche country, as a lifelong skier and kindred lover of powder snow—and how lucky that science-based avalanche education is all but required for participation in the sport today. Embracing my experiential

⁴⁶ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 66.

⁴⁷ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 124.

⁴⁸ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 18.

knowledge has proved helpful in key moments of analysis. One reason for LaChapelle's obscurity is, I believe, that she underexplained what it meant to learn from skiing. Her thinking far exceeded what she left behind on the page, and I find that skiers have an easier time understanding her because we come to her work with a shared understanding. A number of outstanding recent histories that incorporate more-than-human agency ground their use of the theory in the author's own firsthand experience.⁴⁹ Furthermore, LaChapelle would certainly be in favor of this approach. In the early 1980s, she hosted a deep ecology conference in Silverton that involved discourse in town as well as backpacking in the San Juans. After, she wrote a friend, "The mountains taught us. That's the new academic discipline!"⁵⁰

Lastly, LeCain specifically recognizes that materialist inquiry offers a "more fine-grained way of analyzing" individual people such as LaChapelle.⁵¹ I am emboldened in a belief that LaChapelle herself would appreciate this approach. I think she would want to be known this way. Perhaps she would have even felt strangely about being studied as an individual human subject. A traditional biographical approach would likely fly in the face of all her efforts to show that we are not contained and separate entities.⁵² We are relationships.

⁴⁹ Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*; Kate Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014); Justin Spinney, "A Place of Sense: A Kinesthetic Ethnography of Cyclists on Mont Ventoux." *Environment and Planning. D, Society, and Space* 24, no. 5 (August 4, 2004).

⁵⁰ LaChapelle to Leonard and Leveton. She was referencing a letter she wrote to bioregionalist activist Peter Berg.

⁵¹ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 13.

⁵² For more context, see LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 58-60; LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 34-39; See Gregory Bateson, *Steps To an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). LeCain also discusses extended cognition and the embodied mind in *The Matter of History*, 6, 112-120.

These three frameworks—hybridity, vital materiality, and neo-materialism—proved so helpful in thinking about LaChapelle that I have wondered about describing this project as a “neo-materialist intellectual biography,” a new name to stake out the difference between this and traditional intellectual history or biography. But the sources of this project feel, in fact, quite traditional: I study the papers and books left behind by a woman. It should be clear by now that this project takes, as a starting point, the view that these sources are not merely human. Nonetheless, I read her words to absorb her ideas; I have tried to re-think them, as Collingwood might say. I do not try to follow the story of snow or avalanches nearly as closely as I do LaChapelle’s, which may seem a strange path for a project that aspires to account for the agency of these beings. In the end, “biographical intellectual history” feels like the most comfortable fit for this story about ideas and the historical context, seen from the perspective of one person’s life. This is no concession, but a challenge: I now wonder if the stodgy traditions of biography and intellectual history have the capacity to acknowledge the creative, vibrant contributions of more-than-human agency.

I began this study with her six books, all out of print.⁵³ These primarily present her research, including practical tips for learning from place, but I also combed these texts for autobiographical writing. As a scholar, she rarely introduced her sources by describing where in the academic tree of knowledge it sprouted from. More often, she introduced the scholar’s relationship to nature; this was the context she cared about most. So she attempted to offer this sort of insight into her own ideas, peppering vignettes through her books, often at the beginning

⁵³ I managed to find affordable copies, but lone copy of *Deep Powder Snow* on Google Shopping in late April 2022 was listed at \$900.

of chapters, to describe the event in her life that gave her “intuitive understanding” for something she later found explanatory words and concepts.⁵⁴ Written sometimes decades later, her vignettes provide a window into her thoughts when she was in a position to synthesize, reflect on, and interpret her earlier learning experiences.

I then put these autobiographical reflections into conversation with archival records: her personal papers, research notes, articles, correspondence, and media interviews. Sometimes, overlaps corroborated and elaborated on stories from her published work; other times there were inconsistencies and contradictions between her records and her rhetoric. Both offered productive analytical opportunity, and insight into how her thought evolved. Most of the storylines in this study weave between the archive, *Deep Powder Snow*, and *Rapture of the Deep*.

The archives of this project was thrilling, though overwhelming at times. LaChapelle’s papers are stored, unaccessioned, in private collections in Aspen and Durango, Colorado. I am the first researcher to visit these collections in the 15 years since her passing.

It was a joy to connect with the people who believe in LaChapelle’s legacy. Jody Cardamone, a friend and student of LaChapelle’s who hosted deep ecology workshops at the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, stewards one collection. I spent a day assessing these materials, and while there are a few bank boxes with notes and papers, the majority of the boxes there seem to be filled with books containing LaChapelle’s scribbled annotations.

Ananda Foley, partner of David LaChapelle, safeguards the other collection in her home in Durango. Since David’s death in 2009, Ananda has lived with these materials, which are stored in her home office, a tremendous commitment to LaChapelle’s legacy. Foley transferred

⁵⁴ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 5.

the boxes of books to Cardamone at some point years ago, but she wanted to hold onto LaChapelle's more personal papers, including childhood journals, letters, and correspondence with friends and colleagues. She also kept LaChapelle's compendiums, which may be best described as "intellectual scrapbooks." Handwritten and typewritten notes, poems, drawings, and photocopied research fill their pages: an abundant record of LaChapelle's source work. In addition to written records, there are hundreds of photos, most taken by Ed, of their lives and work. Over the past year-and-a-half, Foley has been incredibly generous, opening her home up three times for research visits. Together, we pull out boxes from the shelves, sit on the living room floor, and shuffle through papers, exclaiming whenever we come across something interesting, a frequent occurrence.

My partner Jackson George helped me digitize roughly 4,500 pages of materials from these two collections to reference and use as this project narrowed and developed. Despite our efforts, I often wonder about the materials we missed. There is simply so much there.

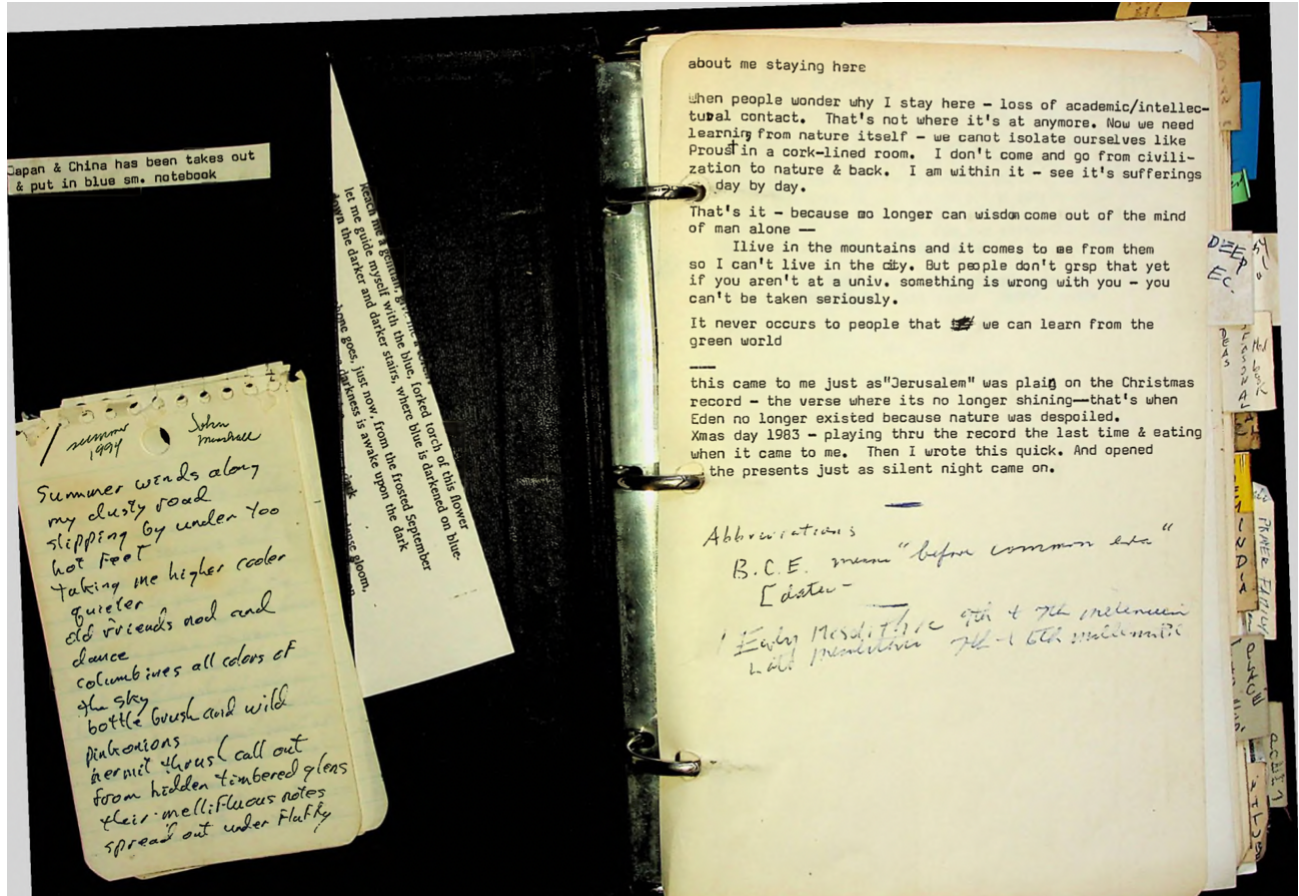


Figure 3. Compendium, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

Joy is A Lover Receiving What She Loves

In 1993, Thomas Dewell, a sports writer for the Jackson Hole News, in Wyoming, was skeptical about *Deep Powder Snow*, reviewing, "It sounded like the author... took a set of ideas that she read and applied them to her favorite thing, powder skiing."⁵⁵ In a way, he was right. She rarely found the words first. Her process of learning often had two stages: experiencing *then* conceptualizing. Receiving *then* interpreting. Learning *then* sharing. Observing the emergence of

⁵⁵ Thomas Dewell, "Deep Thoughts About Deep Powder Snow," *Jackson Hole News*, September 8, 1993.

this pattern throughout LaChapelle's early life is the underlying aim of this study. But the journalist made it sound like she just slapped a one-size-fits-all ethics onto skiing. This study shows that, in fact, the opposite is true: over years, she fit an eco-philosophy into her experience of skiing.

It is possible to think of her whole life, roughly, in these two stages. First she was a skier in the Wasatch, then she was a radical environmentalist in the San Juans. On a smaller scale, she repeated these two steps over and over throughout her life, like a wheel turning. Her thought process was a continuous feedback loop: place gave her experience, and she responded, by skiing and by theorizing.⁵⁶ This exchange, which she called the Way of the Mountain, sustained her intellectual inquiry for decades, helping her name and develop knowledge that was, in one sense, already known. LaChapelle did not always maintain the circulation evenly. Despite her passion for experiential learning, she was temperamentally bookish and intellectual, and especially during her intense periods of scholarship in the Silverton years, she struggled to pull herself away from her desk research.

She must have been a fantastic to follow in the mountains, but to retrace her steps as a scholar can make for an arduous journey at times. She worked hard to be a clear, solid writer, and she saved writing advice on little scraps of paper. But it's almost possible to sense where, in her writing, she felt inspired by her experience and where she was getting bogged down in the

⁵⁶ This description is inspired by LaChapelle's analysis of herself as an environmental system, as inspired by Gregory Bateson's work on cybernetics, and by Arne Naess's ecological self. For more context on LaChapelle and Naess' relationship, see Dolores LaChapelle, "Our Mutual Love of Mountains," *The Trumpeter* 9, no. 2 (1992). This notion of a feedback loop is but an iteration of a well-established idea, and finds precedents in the work of other scholars, such as John Dewey's reflex arc. John Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," *Psychological Review* 3 (1896).

research. A *Mountain Gazette* obituary described her writing style as “by turns lyrical, tedious, preachy, eloquent,”⁵⁷ a description that stands. Poet Gary Snyder called *Rapture of the Deep* a “wild ecosystem in itself, full of surprises and challenges,” which perhaps can be read as a subtle dig at the same time it was a genuine compliment.⁵⁸ An ecosystem’s beauty and creativity comes from its living, complex mess—and *Rapture* is not a book that is easily read, and certainly not straight through. Her writing is encyclopedic, wandering, and abundant, if lacking, at times, in synthetic narrative grace.

But there is much to appreciate about LaChapelle’s style of scholarship, including her earnestly personal stake in her inquiry and her willingness to challenge the status quo. LaChapelle was a philosophical seeker of the good life, committed her life to finding and sharing “the answers.”⁵⁹ In a letter in 1982, she described her work as “real survival in the true phil. sense.”⁶⁰ Toward the end of her life, LaChapelle experienced atrial fibrillation, a form of arrhythmia. These heart complications resulted from overly strenuous efforts over her books and the “extreme stress” of her vocation.⁶¹ To dive as intensely as she did required discipline as well as true sacrifice.

Her work is a gift, not only to readers but also her world of powder snow. While her pursuits were based in bodily pleasure, they appear driven by respect for her teachers to share what she learned. And though she worried the world was on the brink of ruin, her work lunged

⁵⁷ B. Frank, “Obituary of Dolores LaChapelle,” *Mountain Gazette* 131, 10.

⁵⁸ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, back cover.

⁵⁹ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

⁶⁰ LaChapelle to Leonard and Leveton.

⁶¹ Florence Rose Shepard, “Letters from Dolores,” *The Trumpeter* 24, no. 1 (2008).

optimistically and seriously toward a more respectful, community- and place-oriented way of being. One of her most quoted lines speaks to this hope:

Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves. This is the joy we feel when skiing powder. All this is a gift for us, now, at this moment! This overflowing gratitude is what produces the absolutely stupid, silly grins that we always flash at one another at the bottom of a powder run.⁶²

While she is most famous for loving powder snow, she also loved intellectual clarity. Joy is also LaChapelle going deeper into the understanding of how she belonged. This study attempts to shine a light on the fertile creative ground between her loves. I focus on three key places and periods that were important for the early development of her thinking.

Chapter Two begins at the beginning, with her childhood, in Denver, Colorado, during the interwar period and World War II. This was not a time of exploring radical and alternative ways of being. It was simply a time of growing up in a white, Catholic, working-class family on the suburban orbit of a rapidly developing western metropolis. Understanding her beginning position is important. As LaChapelle later told her story, she was a child when she first sensed that something was amiss in the culture she was being raised in. She did not know, yet—and would not fully know for many years—how to describe what was so “very, very wrong” about everything.⁶³ But we see her formative encounters with mountains and powder snow, and how this critical exposure stoked her countercultural curiosity.

In Chapter Three, we follow LaChapelle to Aspen, Colorado, where she moved in 1947 after graduating from the University of Denver to ski and work as an elementary school teacher. Though she had already encountered powder snow, she began interacting with it consistently and

⁶² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 79.

⁶³ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

regularly in Aspen, when she learned the Dipsy Doodle, a style for skiing that she later identified as critical for thinking. “Everything I know, I have learned from skiing powder,” she said throughout her adult life, and Chapter Three examines what this means.⁶⁴ Over three winters in Aspen, skiing powder became a central part of her sense of self and community. More and more, she oriented her worldview around this sport and the conditions, environmental as well as social, that equally enabled and threatened it.

Chapter Four brings us to the end of this story’s arc in Alta, Utah, where an avalanche in March 1963 carried LaChapelle over cliffs, strained her through trees, and buried her almost entirely except for her gloved hand poking out above the snow. This experience prompted some drastic reconsiderations of relationship, control, and ethical obligations. But I argue that the major transformation wrought by the avalanche was that LaChapelle became a writer. Expression through skiing was already part of her feedback loop for learning from place, but her newfound enthusiasm for writing allowed her to develop her emerging consciousness with concepts and theory. As she wrote in *Deep Powder Snow*, what she learned from engaging in scholarship “allowed” her to “go much deeper” into learning from place.⁶⁵

This study closes in the 1960s, midway through her life. A great deal lays beyond the scope: the summers of Ed’s fieldwork on the Blue Glacier on Mount Olympus, Washington; the academic years in Kirkland when Ed taught at the University of Washington; and of course, LaChapelle’s 30 years in Silverton, her most productive period of research and writing. In the epilogue, we briefly jump ahead to Silverton 1981, to a moment where LaChapelle brought her

⁶⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 1.

⁶⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 44.

method to the modern radical environmental movement, and to a more direct consideration of her ethical knowledge, not just of how the knowledge came together.

In this study, we see change that was push-and-pull, stop-and-start; we see the ebb and flow of successive as well as contradictory worldviews. This is a story of growth and development, but not of linear progress. Rather than identify precise moments where ideas popped into her head and she progressed along a journey towards an ever-more-perfect understanding of reality, I try to sketch the ongoing relationships through which her ideas emerged. In these relationships, there was return and repetition, learning and re-learning. As LaChapelle might like to say, there was a deepening.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MISEDUCATION OF DOLORES LACHAPELLE: CHILDHOOD PLACES AND CULTURE

In the mid-1970s, when LaChapelle was 50 or so, and writing *Earth Wisdom*, her first book about learning from nature, she revisited an early childhood memory.⁶⁶ Late summer, early 1930s. She walked across her north Denver neighborhood to a friend's house. Her friend was not home, so she wandered alone underneath the cottonwoods that lined the irrigation ditch where she often played, sometimes picking up horned toads or startling turkey.⁶⁷ On this day, she flopped down into the grass in a small clearing to watch the clouds move across the sky.⁶⁸ She wrote, "I was lying in the grass watching the seed pods waving in the wind when I was suddenly enveloped in a feeling of complete happiness. I felt totally at one with everything yet totally myself—and infinitely important."⁶⁹

She returned to the same memory a decade later, while writing *Rapture of the Deep* in the mid-1980s, expanding details and sharpening her take-home point: "There didn't seem to be any separation between me and the gently waving grass pods or anything else around me. That's the only way I can explain it now; then, of course, I had no words at all."⁷⁰

The moment broke, she got up from the grass and walked back home, where she laid down in the back of her family's old car. She hid out there, where nobody would see her, and

⁶⁶ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 65.

⁶⁷ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, August 12, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO. I will reference unaccessioned journals and letters from this collection by their date.

⁶⁸ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 118.

⁶⁹ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 65.

⁷⁰ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 118.

tried to figure out how to talk about what had just happened. The oneness she experienced in the grass simply did not make sense within her worldview. And perhaps because of this, she felt she should keep it to herself. “I couldn’t figure it out so I never ever talked about it,” she wrote.⁷¹

In *Earth Wisdom*, the vignette appears midway through a chapter titled “Mind,” where LaChapelle explored concepts that became central to her later eco-philosophy.⁷² In this section of *Earth Wisdom*, she argued that the self should be understood as a relationship—not only between the biological systems working together beneath the skin, but also the immediate, material things the body interacts with and depends upon. In *Rapture of the Deep*, LaChapelle used the early-childhood memory to begin a chapter concerning “The Sacred.”⁷³ Here, she described “the sacred” in experiential terms, as an awareness of broader relationships that comes from moving in smooth coordination with non-human relations.⁷⁴ In both books, LaChapelle presented her memory of nature connection under the cottonwoods as a brief flash of true self-apprehension and belonging.

To her, this story represented a great loss. “There were fleeting bits of this feeling occasionally during a ceremony in church—but not the total feeling at all,” she wrote.⁷⁵ At an early age, she got a glimpse at “the reality which had existed all the time,” but, apparently, it was not the reality the people around her lived in.⁷⁶ As a 50 and 60-year-old woman, she revisited and wrote about her primordial connection under the cottonwoods to process her reactions to the

⁷¹ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 118.

⁷² LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 55-79.

⁷³ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 116-130.

⁷⁴ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 127.

⁷⁵ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 118.

⁷⁶ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 65.

powerful socializing forces of dominant culture in the modern industrial world. By her estimation, these cultural powers thwarted the full development of self. They isolated her from belonging with her environment. In her later work, LaChapelle realized that what had happened to her during her childhood mirrored a far bigger societal rupture, which severed the continuity of relationship between Euro-American Western peoples and something set apart called *nature*.

LaChapelle wrote that for years and years, she was unable to explain what had happened to her in the grasses near the irrigation ditch in her north Denver neighborhood. She mythologized this memory like an origin story, describing it like a spark for her “search for answers.”⁷⁷ But, as discussed in the introduction of this study, LaChapelle’s search took her on a path that was neither linear nor straightforward. In this chapter, we see rare and scattered flashes of connection at the beginning of her search.

An appreciation for this contingency during LaChapelle’s childhood allows us to see that her eco-philosophy was, in many ways, unlikely. Her later work is the hard-won result of an ongoing negotiation between the inertia of inherited worldviews and her persistent curiosity. To appreciate the power and grip of the cultural traditions she rejected as an adult, this chapter begins by examining the history of ideas that rendered humans and nature separate.

How did we get in this mess? was one of LaChapelle’s motivating questions throughout her later life. By “mess,” she meant this intellectual and spiritual—but never actual—divide between humans and everything else.⁷⁸ As she put it, “the lines between man and environment are purely artificial, fictitious lines.”⁷⁹ These lines are, generally speaking, faint—difficult to see.

⁷⁷ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

⁷⁸ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

⁷⁹ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 55.

LeCain wrote that these lines are a good example of the “ghost theories” that historian Daniel Lord Smail described, those rarely acknowledged theories operating in the deep background of everyday life.⁸⁰ Simply seeing this construct was a task that occupied LaChapelle’s entire early life, in part because the cultures she grew up in were so deeply invested in this line of separation, and the story of human destiny being escape from brutish nature.

Progress Means Emancipation From Nature

As LaChapelle wrote in *Rapture of the Deep*, somewhere long ago in Euro-American history, “we threw ourselves out.”⁸¹ She spent a great deal of time and research effort trying to pinpoint the moment where somebody veered off the right path, drawing a line between themselves and everything else. This line threads through the foundations of both Occidental Western and Western American thinking—during her independent research, LaChapelle followed it back through the centuries and across the globe. In the 1980s, her investigation wound up in Greek antiquity, where, she argued, Plato and other philosophers “invented Nature with a capital N by abstracting it from the chaos of total existence.”⁸² She saw their way of analytical thinking as a process of ripping individual concepts out of the greater fabric of life and distancing the perceiving intellectual human mind from its objects of analysis. It was a way of thinking that made something whole become un-whole. It deconstructed relationships into constituent parts: into distinct “substances” and “things.” This “break” in relationship “is part of our European heritage,” she wrote in *Earth Wisdom*.⁸³

⁸⁰ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 12.

⁸¹ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 16.

⁸² LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 25; LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 84.

⁸³ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 5.

The idea that humans and nature are separate is resilient and adaptable. It has morphed across history, ebbing and flowing, changing shape, and adapting to innumerable historical contexts in the hands of different thinkers. LaChapelle was motivated to uncover the genesis of a subtle, powerful cultural idea; her desire to yank out a problem by its roots is understandable. But this master narrative is long and, today, it is a standard one. A narrower examination of how the twentieth-century Western metropolis of Denver developed can provide valuable, and more specific, context about the specific alienation and isolation LaChapelle experienced.

Progress—this modest, two-syllable word—acts as a “shorthand for a grand narrative of history,” as historian Leo Marx put it. It’s not just Webster’s definition of the word ‘progress.’ It’s Progress, a proper noun that labels a concept and a worldview. It is the belief in American civilization’s exceptionalism, and its supposedly pre-ordained ascent into the future. It is the water many people swim in unknowingly, and it is the current that people like LaChapelle swim against.

Where the stories of ceaseless triumphalist progress come into play in a study of LaChapelle is that the line she was so preoccupied with—the line supposedly separating humans from nature—runs along the spine of Euro-American progress narratives about transcending nature through civilization of the North American continent. In this thesis, when I refer to “dominant” ideas and culture, what I most often mean is that they fold into the grooves of this master progress narrative, which shapes American imagination about the future, relationships to place, and so much more. The myth-making factory has churned out varied iterations of progress. Nineteenth-century frontier settlement and twentieth-century modern technological mastery are the two powerful progress narratives that contextualize LaChapelle’s early life.

During the nineteenth century, the United States' expansionist, settler-colonial advances across western North America were never contested.⁸⁴ But in the minds of settlers, the frontier appeared to be sliding west, inevitably and undeniably, as if giving into gravity. If the frontier receded like a glacier, as historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, then the deposits of settlers who remained behind were like glacial moraines: sturdy foundations for a town or city, future places whose occupation was an act of intrepid self-determination for American citizens.⁸⁵

American settlement of Colorado was a giant land grab. In *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range*, historian Kathleen Brosnan describes settler-colonialism in Colorado and the American West as a struggle for control over the land by a people “confident of their progressive civilization”⁸⁶ who “held the unexamined conviction that nature should be harnessed to serve humans and their material needs.”⁸⁷ She describes an “aggressive attitude toward nature”⁸⁸ which presumed that “industrialization itself advanced nature, putting its resources to their most productive use.”⁸⁹ The process of improving undeveloped land gave settlers a claim to it, in the Lockean sense of virtue, ownership, and citizenship, wherein labor on land renders it private property. Progress was measured by its

⁸⁴ Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019); Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

⁸⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, with commentary by John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 34.

⁸⁶ Kathleen A. Brosnan *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 145.

⁸⁷ Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, 7.

⁸⁸ Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, 146.

⁸⁹ Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, 162.

distance from the conditions of the land when settlers arrived, which they incorrectly viewed as a static, unaltered baseline.

Gold and silver rushes may have sparked Colorado settlement, but coal gave this new American civilization staying power. During the nineteenth century, fossil-fueled industrial order transformed communities across Europe, then New England, then across the American West. As this fossil-fuel front advanced across the globe, it remade existing energy systems into intensive, progress-oriented regimes with no ceiling on linear growth. Early Denver depended on living energy, as historian Bathsheba Demuth has described it: plant and animal energy generated, in real time, through the circulations of solar energy through earth systems.⁹⁰ The land can only offer so much at a time, creating an energy bottleneck that settlers wanted to break through.⁹¹

As Thomas Andrews argued in *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, progress in Denver needed more fuel, faster. Extraction of fossil fuels conveniently cut into the ripple of history, hacking the temporal boundaries of real-time energy production and storage on the land.⁹² The mass extraction of fossilized swamp was like going to the bank and withdrawing an energy investment accumulated over billions of plant and animal lifetimes.⁹³ Upon discovering coal seams in Colorado, aspiring Denver industrialist William Jackson Palmer wrote of the "boundless power that could overcome the limitations of a stubborn land and create an

⁹⁰ Demuth, *Floating Coast*.

⁹¹ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, Jacques Grinevald, and John McNeil. "The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society A Mathematical Physical and Engineering Sciences* (2011), 847-849.

⁹² Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 32.

⁹³ Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 58.

industrial utopia.”⁹⁴ With this power, the city became a port at the base of the Rockies, a metropolis well-positioned to harness economic flows surging from east to west.⁹⁵ Denver, down to its very bricks, was built on fossil fuels meant to insulate the city from the fluctuations of the land.

In *Creating Colorado: The Making of a Western American Landscape, 1860-1940*, historical geographer William Wyckoff examined how frontier-settlement progress knit together large regions of Colorado, absorbing rural outposts into national and global culture and economies. A spatial constellation of resource extraction points organized a flow of resources and wealth to population centers like Denver. This combination of “nature, capitalism, and the impress of American culture produced a new human geography” across the state in less than a century, Wyckoff writes.⁹⁶ “An entirely new visible scene” emerged on the Rocky Mountain front during the nineteenth century, reorganizing life, space, and time.⁹⁷

This upswing of progress crested in 1890, when the United States Census issued a bulletin declaring settlement across the West “so scattered... that there can no longer be said to be a frontier line.”⁹⁸ The frontier was closed. The line between land “won” and “not-yet-won” was too wiggly and broken to see. This dissolution represented a supposed triumph of mastery over nature: nature remade within global markets, nature expelled from civilization, nature

⁹⁴ Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 20.

⁹⁵ For more on how cities in the American West fixed capital on the ground, see classic environmental histories like William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, Norton, 1991) and more recent studies, like Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁹⁶ William Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado: The Making of a Western American Landscape, 1860-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

⁹⁷ Wyckoff, *Creating Colorado*, 3.

⁹⁸ Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 31.

replaced with modern industrial cities like Denver. The establishment of the nation was a physical and psychic entrenchment of the line between humans and nature.

With the frontier gone, Turner argued, a significant chapter of American history—one defined by an opulence of land resources for its citizens—closed, too. This was a country, he argued, made up of people so restless and so conditioned to expect constant movement into an open vacuum, that to retain its national character, America needed to expand into other frontiers—maybe overseas territory? Or, perhaps, an intellectual frontier? Now that the land was under control, the country needed the “test tube and the microscope... rather than axe and rifle” to continue moving steadily into the future.⁹⁹ In the twentieth century, progress made headway behind the new frontier of technology and science, which promised modern civilizations that they had advanced far beyond nature, that they could control it, and produce whatever they wanted from it. “The key to becoming more powerful was to become more *unnatural*, to continually expand the gap between humans and the rest of the world,” LeCain writes.¹⁰⁰ Political scientist James C. Scott succinctly described this mindset as a “nearly limitless ambition to transform nature to suit man’s purposes” through “scientific and technical knowledge” and constant “expansion of production.”¹⁰¹

Increasingly powerful technology made connections to the non-human world increasingly abstract, invisible, or incomprehensible to the average consumer in Denver during the early twentieth century. Their parents may have had to load coal into the stove, but they could flick on

⁹⁹ Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, 114.

¹⁰⁰ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 73.

¹⁰¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 89.

the light switch without knowing a lick about where the energy came from.¹⁰² While living their lives on a day-to-day basis, they were not actively interacting with much they could understand as nature. As they moved about the built environment, they saw and touched mostly things that had been shaped or changed by people, in both obvious and mysterious ways. This interference was an adulteration which seemed to remake the raw material ontologically, cutting it out of nature and taking it into the domain of people who fancied themselves cut out, too.¹⁰³

Though these frameworks shaped the place of LaChapelle's childhood, the Western line of separation from nature did not encircle her. She was also exposed to countercultural ways of thinking, and it is these legacies we turn to next.

"My Life Was Saved and Given Direction"

During the final months of World War I, eight years before LaChapelle's birth, her father, John Adrian, enlisted in the service. The fighting ended before he could pick up arms, so he was shipped out to the Philippines, where—as Turner predicted—the United States was expanding its reach, the imperial state unfurling beyond the crucible of the frontier into overseas holdings.¹⁰⁴ Adrian suffered such seasickness on the Pacific Ocean that as soon as the ship reached land, he was sent to rest up at an army hospital, where he received the horrifying diagnosis of tuberculosis, the leading cause of death in the early 1900s.¹⁰⁵ Like many other

¹⁰² Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America*, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995).

¹⁰³ Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis*, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1990)

¹⁰⁴ For more context on United States overseas imperialism, Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ Jeanne Abrams, "On the Road Again: Consumptives Traveling for Health in the American West, 1840-1925." *Great Plains Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2010).

aspiring soldiers in this time who shared this diagnosis, he was transferred back to the homeland, first to a hospital in San Francisco, California, and then to Fitzsimons Army Medical Center in Aurora, Colorado.

LaChapelle's parents joined the families of fellow "lungers," health-seeking settlers with lung ailments like tuberculosis, asthma, and bronchitis who came to Denver for an invisible resource: a salubrious environment. "Climate, air, and sunshine were marketable health commodities," historian Gregg Mitman has argued, "a natural resource," that helped make the metropolis by drawing its populace.¹⁰⁶

This belief depended on a common nineteenth-century "logic of everyday healing" that understood place as medicine because the body was, in some intimate and basic way, seen as part of the environment.¹⁰⁷ Even though new ideas about germs and contagions were beginning to form, and even though salubrious skies were being visibly polluted by coal-fired smokestacks, health and wellness was an undeniable part of Denver's cultural identity when Adrian was admitted to Fitzsimons Army Hospital in the early 1920s.

The mile high city was a place doctors and boosters described as "buoyant and delicious."¹⁰⁸ They discussed various environmental interactions that occur in this dramatic zone of transition, focusing on atmospheric phenomena like sun, temperature, rainfall, relative humidity, winds, and electricity, as well as diurnal and seasonal patterns. Denver's air depended on all of these environmental factors converging, in just the perfectly hospitable combination, to

¹⁰⁶ Gregg Mitman. "Geographies of Hope: Mining the Frontiers of Health in Denver and beyond, 1870-1965." *Osiris* 19 (2004): 95.

¹⁰⁷ Valenčius. *The Health of the Country*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Mitman, "Geographies of Hope," 97.

produce “continuous genial sunny days and absence of disturbing elements,” as one physician, Charles Denison, put it.¹⁰⁹ He described the lifecycle and origins of this healthful air as journeys across the plains and mountains, through which air attained pure, pristine dryness.¹¹⁰

Denver finds itself at the inflection point between the sweeping High Plains of the continent’s interior, and the jumbled eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The region’s defining characteristic is its position at this major topographical and ecological transition zone. From the State Capitol building in Denver, which sits at 5,200 feet, a person can see a handful of 14,000-foot mountains, the highest summits in the most prominent mountain range on the continent, which sprawls more than 3,000 miles from New Mexico to northern coastal Alaska. Ten ecoregions cover the southern Rockies. From the sagebrush foothills, the land rises past mid-elevation woodland and into the high alpine, where constant exposure to harsh climate bends dwarf spruce, fir, and pine into bonsai-like krummholz. Up in the high country, abundant precipitation—the bulk of which arrives as snow—produces gardens of vibrant pink, purple, and yellow wildflowers during the short burst of summer. To the east of the city, the sun rises on a flat horizon, shining evenly over a grassy, sandy mosaic of cattle range and irrigated cropland.

Whether it was the “champagne climate”¹¹¹ or the rest, Fitzsimons served its purpose: Adrian’s tuberculosis became dormant, which meant while the bacteria continued to inhabit his lungs, his body had enough control over the infection that he could move about society without

¹⁰⁹ Charles Denison. “Report on the Climate of Colorado, and Its Relation to Pulmonary Diseases.” *The Transactions of the American Medical Association* 27 (1876): 463. See more discussion of Denison and similar rhetoric from physicians, boosters, and more in Mitman’s “Geographies of Hope.”

¹¹⁰ Denison. “Report on the Climate of Colorado,” 459.

¹¹¹ Abrams. “On the Road Again,” 272.

infecting others.¹¹² Adrian and Anna moved briefly home to Kentucky to have children in the mid-1920s. Mary Dolores Greenwell was first, a summer baby born in Louisville's Catholic hospital on July 4, 1926. It was a sticky hot day, the labor was difficult, and LaChapelle was born without vital signs, but she clung onto life.¹¹³ Next was Patricia, or Pat; and then Adrienne, who everybody called Tiny because the name was a bit too big for such a small girl. The Greenwells returned to Denver to raise their family in an 800-square-foot, two-bedroom home at 5152 Beach Court. The street on the north end of their block marked the edge of Denver city limits, and LaChapelle remembers being surrounded by farmland.¹¹⁴ Many health settlers believed that once they acclimatized to the high country, they would not be able to return to their home lowlands and survive it.¹¹⁵ Perhaps this is why they went back to Colorado; perhaps they were simply drawn to the opportunity of the growing city.

The family was formal—loving, but not the kind who gave hugs.¹¹⁶ Raising their three young children during the Great Depression, Anna took on income-earning responsibilities, in part because a stigma against consumptives limited Adrian's employability. LaChapelle remembered her father as “full of emotion and laughter,”¹¹⁷ and she would follow him everywhere.¹¹⁸ In the winter of 1939, Adrian found employment at an automobile filling station.

¹¹² In LaChapelle's journals, she wrote that her two sisters displayed signs of tuberculosis and both spent extended periods at a free “Jewish hospital where you go to school in the afternoon and get plenty of rest, fresh air, and wholesome food.” LaChapelle, September 23, 1939.

¹¹³ D. LaChapelle, “The Totality of a Lifetime.”

¹¹⁴ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Denison. “Report on the Climate of Colorado,” 427.

¹¹⁶ Patricia Hubbard (Dolores LaChapelle's sister) interview by author, August 11, 2021.

¹¹⁷ LaChapelle, *D.H. Lawrence*, x.

¹¹⁸ Hubbard, interview.

“Daddy went to work for the first time since he was sick,” LaChapelle wrote in her journal.¹¹⁹ It was a big deal to have two incomes. They made home improvements, like a fresh coat of ivory paint, a brand-new dugout basement, and new ceiling lights. There was disposable money for consumer goods, like a “green spring coat and a pair of white loafers” from Montgomery Ward’s department store for LaChapelle on Easter,¹²⁰ and, for Christmas, an archery set and pop gun.

She saved a small stack of blue composition books, in which she dutifully reported the daily activities of her youth and school-aged life. The journals begin in seventh grade, in January 1939, when she was 12 years old. Many days during her middle-school life, “nothing much happened.” Other days, she baked, happy to labor for hours over rhubarb, lemon meringue, and peach pies. With friends, she played Chinese Checkers and bunko, as well as trivia games like “the naming of the 48 states.”¹²¹ At least once a week, she rode the electrified city streetcars by herself to the theater for double-feature pictures. She adored Errol Flynn, the silver screen’s swashbuckling stud, and collected, in a shoebox, cutout magazine pictures of all her favorite Hollywood stars.

There were many animals around, like Cola, the family’s German Shepard. LaChapelle attempted to befriend local pigeons, with varying success. They willingly inhabited the galvanized steel birdhouse Adrian brought home from Montgomery Ward’s department store, and LaChapelle was delighted when the birds followed her inside, but she was horrified when the “oldest son” of the brood became a bully, plucking out the feathers of one of its siblings and

¹¹⁹ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, February 5, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²⁰ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, April 9, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²¹ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, January 21, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

pecking at its skin until the bone was exposed.¹²² Adrian gave her a little white rat, which LaChapelle carried around in her coat pocket until a friend mounted it for science class. She applied herself, with much dedication, to an apparent grasshopper infestation, spending many summer days in the yard, catching hundreds of bugs, and either burning them or feeding them to her friend's chickens. When there was snow, she followed bird and rabbit prints around the ditch, and left her own toboggan tracks down a nearby hill. When they got "swell deep snow," she and Pat went to the irrigation ditch to wade around in it.¹²³ "We never tired of it [sledding on the hill] and I guess that's where it all started," she wrote in *Deep Powder Snow* to explain the origin of her love for sliding on snow.¹²⁴

LaChapelle spent most of her early indoor life ensconced in Catholic spaces, and her development was deeply shaped by this all-encompassing religious environment. She went from lessons at St. Catherine of Siena School, to drill practice and Sodality meetings at the Catholic Daughter's Hall, to spelling bees and basketball games at other Catholic schools across the city. The summer after Adrian went back to work, they partook in the popular middle-class pastime of an automobile trip, driving to Shiprock, New Mexico, to visit a Kentuckian priest.¹²⁵ During the 10-day trip, they camped, visited national parks, and went to mass in mining towns. Tiny even played a slot machine in Silverton, winning 55 cents.

¹²² Dolores LaChapelle, journal, September 3, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²³ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, December 21, 1941, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 8.

¹²⁵ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, July 6, 1939 to July 15, 1939. For more context on mountain roads and automobile tourism in the twentieth century, see Rothman, *Devils Bargains*, Philpott *Vacationland*, and Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

Her journals portray a student who “had fun in religion” class,¹²⁶ aced Catechism exams, and consistently earned the highest scores in her grade. In *Rapture of the Deep*, she wrote that she enjoyed Catholic ceremonial life and the sense of community in her church.¹²⁷ LaChapelle got in trouble like most kids: she occasionally incurred the wrath of the St. Catherine’s sisters for boisterous misbehavior such rowdy snowball fights in the school yard. “I must not run around the halls during noon hour,” she was instructed to write a hundred times one afternoon.¹²⁸ But generally, as her sister Pat said, “we were good Catholic girls.”¹²⁹ In *Deep Powder Snow*, LaChapelle described her childhood faith as having a “fierce” hold on her.¹³⁰ She was just another “Catholic girl in Catholic schools” with “total belief” in the teachings.¹³¹

She spent much of her free time reading the newspaper, novels, and old issues of National Geographic acquired in bulk at thrift stores. It seems like the more she read, the more she started to wonder about and question the insular world view and values being presented in her school, church, and city. Later looking back on childhood, LaChapelle described her school-age self as a “docile, top-of-the-class” student who was in fact leading a “totally split life.” She compartmentalized her curiosity, and went through the motions performatively, “never [taking] anything [she] heard in school seriously.”¹³²

But as 13-year-old, she did not yet know what it was that Sister Agnes was neglecting to teach her. She would not begin to know for years and would not fully know for decades. When

¹²⁶Dolores LaChapelle, journal, February 23, 1942, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²⁷ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

¹²⁸ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, September 28, 1939, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹²⁹ Hubbard, interview.

¹³⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 49.

¹³¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 50.

¹³² LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

recording the day's events in her journal, she did not add any blasphemous doubts in after a sentence about which trees she and Gwennie climbed after school. Nonetheless, she offers this as another origin story: in the schoolrooms of a Catholic church on the northern fringes of an industrial and modernizing Denver, she began a quest to learn what "real human nature" was all about.¹³³ She depicted the unsatisfactory world views given to her by childhood teachers and priests as a question she had to answer.

On December 7, 1941, when LaChapelle was 15, Japanese forces bombed American military bases in Hawaii and the Philippines. "So I guess we are in war now," LaChapelle wrote in her journal.¹³⁴ She viewed a double-feature that evening at the theater and went downtown the next day with her sisters to do Christmas shopping. She felt the presence of war daily in Denver, which had mobilized a massive industry to meet the demand for chemicals and munitions manufacturing.¹³⁵ When journaling, she rarely included commentary or reflection on world events. Instead, she processed her experience of the war through hands-on craft, documenting every little detail of the conflict in scrapbook pages filled with newspaper clippings.

Adrian began working at the mess hall at Lowry Field, a U.S. Army Air Force training facility that was built in a former sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. Soon after LaChapelle's 17th birthday, in July 1943, he brought home a paper produced by the soldiers there which contained an advertisement for a special trip with the Colorado Mountain Club to Pikes Peak,¹³⁶ an isolated 14,115-foot summit out on the eastern edge of the range. LaChapelle begged her

¹³³ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 8.

¹³⁴ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, December 7, 1941. LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹³⁵ For more information Denver's development and the role of the defense industry, see Leonard and Noel, *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis*.

¹³⁶ Hubbard, interview.

father to go. Adrian and Anna had often brought the kids to a cabin up the South Platte, which was owned by some family friends. The main activity there was scrambling around the locality, a mountainous landscape populated by ponderosa pine, aspen, and Douglas fir. But she had never climbed anything *big* before.

Pat remembers her father either calling the club or visiting their downtown office to ask “if his pushy daughter” could join.¹³⁷ LaChapelle remembered it slightly differently; she saw an ad in the paper and called herself.¹³⁸ However it happened, the result was Anna dropping LaChapelle off at the bus station on the afternoon of July 17, wearing a new knapsack purchased for the occasion. LaChapelle rode the bus with eight others, including a handful of fellow school-aged kids, and the trip leader, a nurse at Colorado General. They rode to Colorado Springs and accumulated more participants, cramming 15 people into three cars for the final stretch to Bar Ranch at the Manitou Incline, their lodging for the night. By LaChapelle’s bedtime, she recorded a group size of 41.¹³⁹

The members climbed the mountain in waves. LaChapelle woke up with a 2 a.m. group and began ascending underneath a full moon. They moved up the mountain in a long string, the faster climbers moving ahead while slower climbers fell back. At first, LaChapelle kept a speedy pace, but halfway between timberline and the summit, she began feeling altitude fatigue and slowed down. LaChapelle had left her coat at the ranch because it was a warm night, but she was

¹³⁷ Hubbard, interview.

¹³⁸ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

¹³⁹ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, July 17, 1943, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

shivering at dawn, when “it got awfully cold.” They summited at 6:15 a.m., not quite fast enough to catch the sun rise from the top.¹⁴⁰

As family legend goes, LaChapelle’s tennis shoes were giving her tremendous blisters, and so she removed them for the descent, her feet sufficiently calloused from neighborhood play. Her determination must have delighted the other club members, who invited her to join them on their next trip. Pat remembered her sister’s response: “oh yes, of course.”¹⁴¹

In her 50s, in *Rapture of the Deep*, she wrote that when she got involved with the mountains, “my life was saved and given direction.”¹⁴² LaChapelle’s journals show that she was ruined for other activities. From then on, it was mountains, always mountains. She had a job working the counter at Stocher’s Bakery, and she used her earnings on a proper pair of \$10.75 Russel’s Bird Boots. One Sunday, she wore them with jeans to 6 a.m. mass so she could head straight from church to the bus depot and to the mountains. She went into the Rocky Mountains on Club trips most weekends through the summer before her senior year of high school. Though her sisters sometimes joined her, she often went alone. Her mother usually drove her downtown to the bus depot, where the Club swept her up into its flow.

Though there was a general coherence to the Club’s trips, an open format gave LaChapelle a great deal of autonomy and control over her experience. Participants traveled in loose groups, using a mix of private vehicles and public transportation that worked with their schedule. They could get off at an earlier bus stop if they wanted to hike longer, or they could

¹⁴⁰ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, July 18, 1943, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁴¹ Hubbard, interview.

¹⁴² LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

opt for a shorter jaunt if they wanted food and drink in Idaho Springs afterwards.¹⁴³ It was a joyous community; whenever there were fellow Club members on the bus, it seemed impossible for them to resist bursting out into song.

LaChapelle could choose to accompany groups based on the way they approached the mountains, and through this freedom, LaChapelle gained first-hand experience making decisions for safe, successful, and fulfilling mountain travel. Up the ridge or across the snowfield? Down this gulley or the next one? Two summits or push for three? They found their own routes, based on any number of factors including weather, skill, fitness, risk tolerance, and group dynamics. With so many people on the mountain, she also observed how different people made decisions, and learned whose style she liked. She learned how to use her stomach muscles to stem more quickly up a vertical chimney, how to find places where she could slip through cliffs, and how much ground she could cover at a comfortable pace on smooth trail or rough terrain.

She treasured these lessons. In *Earth Wisdom*, she wrote about how she learned she could survive a crackling, sizzling, electric monsoon. Lightning and thunder tended to materialize around 2 p.m. almost every afternoon they climbed in the summers. After enough afternoons, enough summers, they “developed a particular sensitivity to the coming of thunderstorms” which appeared as a “particular kind of deep headache, impossible to describe verbally, but very localized in a small area.”¹⁴⁴ When someone got the headache, they doubled back and found safer ground, knowing “as plainly as if it was written on the sky that a thunderstorm was on the

¹⁴³ For more context on how road development helped remake the Colorado high country as a tourism destination, see Philpott, *Vacationland*.

¹⁴⁴ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 70.

way.”¹⁴⁵ Later, LaChapelle cared about *this* kind of knowledge, functional place-based understandings that came from being in the mountain; knowledge that allowed her to spend more time there, safely and skillfully.¹⁴⁶

“I felt grand up there,” she wrote in her journal about standing on the summit of Mount Edwards.¹⁴⁷ That feeling was an important lesson, too. This was a space where she gathered personal power. That feeling of power in the Rocky Mountains during World War II did not lead LaChapelle to recreate the classic dynamic of difference and domination embedded in the sport.¹⁴⁸ In the forge of twentieth-century mountaineering clubs, Victorian Europeans approached the sport as “a way to awaken the climber’s ‘dormant sense of mastery,’” historian Joseph E. Taylor argues in *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*.¹⁴⁹ Instead, LaChapelle’s experience mountain sport and community allowed her, instead, to begin working her way out of the tangles this kind of worldview.

As historian Susan E. Schrepfer discusses in *Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*, masculine perspectives did see mountains as “arenas in which to

¹⁴⁵ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ Once, she got the headache while skiing and booked it down to the bottom of the lift to squeeze in another run before the lift inevitably closed for lightening. Sadly, they had already shut it down when she got to the bottom. LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 71.

¹⁴⁷ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, July 30, 1944, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁴⁸ For more context on the European and American cultural meaning of the sport, see Susan R. Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars: Mountains Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Caroline Schaumann, *Peak Pursuits: The Emergence of Mountaineering in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Peter H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man; Mountaineering after the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 29.

exercise control,”¹⁵⁰ but competing feminine versions of the sublime “emphasized the warmth, life, intimacy, freedom, and comfort provided by the natural world.”¹⁵¹ Both sublimes could be spiritual, but while those with a masculine lens saw the sublime as an opportunity to express their power as individuals on the landscape, those with the feminine lens saw the mountains as a comfortable, safe space to explore community and kinship. As Taylor discusses, mountain club members in the American West during the mid-twentieth century “were remarkable for how little they resembled earlier or later generations,” especially in the way they moved in the mountains—a style that he termed “mob climbing.”¹⁵² Club members “sought escape neither from civilization nor each other.”¹⁵³ As seen on LaChapelle’s first Pikes Peak climb, these “communions with nature were often social, even crowded, affairs” that incorporated women, children, and people with varying levels of experience, skill, and ability.¹⁵⁴

At first, the Club introduced LaChapelle only to climbing, which was important for her development as a person who felt comfortable and competent in the mountains. It was not, however, the type of movement that produced the first answers about “real human nature” that she felt were real and true and robust—that came soon enough, when she learned to ski in powder snow in her first winter with the Club.

Fall 1943 brought snow to the mountains, and she nearly froze her feet off on an enthusiastic ascent of Douglas Peak. LaChapelle recorded the first snowfall on November 15, noting that it was the latest start to winter since 1882. A few days later, she began preparing for a

¹⁵⁰ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 4.

¹⁵¹ Schrepfer, *Nature’s Altars*, 6.

¹⁵² Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 62-63.

¹⁵³ Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 87.

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 68.

ski trip with the Mountain Club, going downtown to get a 7-foot-long pair of army surplus “skiis,” which cost her \$8.59, as well as bindings for \$7 and prewar boots, all of which she paid for with her wages from working as a typist for the department store Montgomery Ward’s.¹⁵⁵

Being somebody who skis is “tied up with questions of place and identity,” as historian Annie Gilbert Coleman writes in *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies*.¹⁵⁶ For many people—then and now—skiing is not just a thing they do; however and whenever they ski, it can shape and convey a person’s sense of themselves, their possibilities, desires, fears, and values. In the American West, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw dramatic changes in the meaning and purpose of skiing. Broader societal forces transformed the sport from a necessary skill for mountain living into an expression of local identity into a new status symbol into hopes for a post-silver economic comeback and into a serious recreational industry. Coleman and other historians, like William Philpott, have told these longer histories and situated them within national, cultural, and economic histories.

What did skiing mean when LaChapelle bought her first pair of skis? In *Ski Style*, Coleman describes two distinct camps of Colorado skiers during the period from the silver bust in the late 1890s through the Great Depression and World War I. Skiing was, separately, local and elite. The miners, mailmen, and midwives who skied for work had embedded the sport into ways of life for mountain residents. As mountain towns dwindled in size, skill in sport was a point of community pride. It was a cheap, convenient way to have fun. A separate group of skiers were wealthy urbanites who had the resources to travel to the resorts of Switzerland and

¹⁵⁵ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, November 22, 1943, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO; LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 8-9.

¹⁵⁶ Coleman, *Ski Style*, 3.

Austria, the birthplace of alpine skiing tourism, or stateside facsimiles like Sun Valley, Idaho.¹⁵⁷

As Philpott and Coleman discuss, they skied to perform and reinforce their elite racial and class status through the prestige of alpine experience.¹⁵⁸

The local and elite began to converge when the stubborn residents of mining towns, seeking economic revival, helped present their towns as coherent cultural experience worth paying for. In *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country*, Philpott contextualizes the history of Colorado skiing within a broader narrative about the construction of the Front Range's mountain tourism economy. He examines how, during the early twentieth century, national trends in leisure, middle-class affluence, and automobile culture kicked off a process of transformation during which "places themselves became products: manufactured, packaged, branded, and marketed like so many consumer goods."¹⁵⁹

The war also cemented skiing as a patriotic American pastime. The gear LaChapelle bought was manufactured for the 10th Mountain Division soldiers who trained in Colorado for mountain combat. The 10th was like a melting pot: welcoming a range of skiers Dartmouth men to Leadville, Colorado, locals and churning out American athlete archetypes.¹⁶⁰ When LaChapelle stepped in the gear shop, she encountered "rack after rack of white army skis. They looked beautiful to me at the time," she wrote in *Deep Powder Snow*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Andrew Denning, *Skiing into Modernity: A Cultural and Environmental History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

¹⁵⁸ Coleman, *Ski Style*.

¹⁵⁹ Philpott, *Vacationland*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Coleman, *Ski Style*; Philpott, *Vacationland*.

¹⁶¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 8.

Until these changes unfolded, she told the editor of *POWDER* magazine in 1998, “we never thought we’d ski. Back in the 30s, skiing was for rich people.”¹⁶² When LaChapelle was making her magazine scrapbooks, the people she saw skiing were celebrities like Errol Flynn. The only store she knew of in Denver that sold ski equipment was the Ski and Tennis shop, which catered to an upper-class clientele, the kind of Denverites who went on vacations to the Swiss Alps.¹⁶³ Though there was “explosive growth” in society skiing during this time, Colorado Front Range’s ski scene remained small and local.¹⁶⁴ The Club provided LaChapelle with access, material resources, and a social safety net that extended beyond the city into the mountains.

The week after Christmas in 1944, LaChapelle and her sister, Pat, signed up for a juniors club trip to ski Loveland Pass and stay at the Zipfelberger lodge, which had been built just below timberline by some CMC alumni with aspirational images of the Sun Valley prototype in mind.¹⁶⁵ With wartime gas rations in place, the club was authorized to drive its rig to the cabin, but hitchhiked to the top of the pass, a gaggle of kids squeezing in tight on the back of a flatbed truck. She learned the snowplow and skied under the full moon.¹⁶⁶ On the hill, the Greenwell girls “floundered along, falling and falling but still loving it.”¹⁶⁷ Reflecting on this formative moment later, LaChapelle wrote in *Deep Powder Snow* that by the end of her first day skiing, she

¹⁶² Rob Story, “Between Earth and Heaven,” *POWDER* 28, no. 4, November 9, 1997.

¹⁶³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Coleman, *Ski Style*, 51.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Bronski, *Powder Ghost Towns: Epic Backcountry Runs in Colorado’s Lost Ski Resorts*, (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 2008), 203.

¹⁶⁶ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, December 27, 1943 to January 1, 1944, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁶⁷ Dolores LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 9-10.

knew “this was what I wanted to do the rest of my life.”¹⁶⁸ As with mountaineering, she was hooked. She went on another ski trip, to Berthoud Pass, on Jan 14; then another on February 4 to Winter Park, where she skied packed snow, “such as we had never skied on before,” she wrote.¹⁶⁹

In mid-March, soon after the first green leaves came out in Denver, she schlepped back into the Zipfelberger lodge for a ski trip with the seniors Mountain Club. The first day was stormy, and they traveled through cold, windy, snowy weather to ski. Using climbing skins on the bottom of their skis, they traveled up the ridge and skied down the upper basin. The visibility was “zero,” and it was so frigid LaChapelle felt her face getting frostbitten.¹⁷⁰

The storm broke just as they descended back to the lodge, where the snow was so deep that they had to take off their skis wade through a section they could normally cruise. “We didn’t mind so much as it was absolutely beautiful,” LaChapelle wrote in her journal. The storm broke and “everything was pink. No wind at all. Just perfect.”¹⁷¹ Back at the lodge that night, as they sat around and talked, they waxed their skis. In *Deep Powder Snow*, she recalled her burgeoning obsession. During the trip, “I skied all day with the group and dreamed of skiing all night long, every night. It seems to me that I never stopped skiing that whole time.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Dolores LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, February 4, 1944, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁷⁰ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, March 24, 1944 to March 27, 1944, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁷¹ LaChapelle, journal, March 25, 1944.

¹⁷² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 10-11.

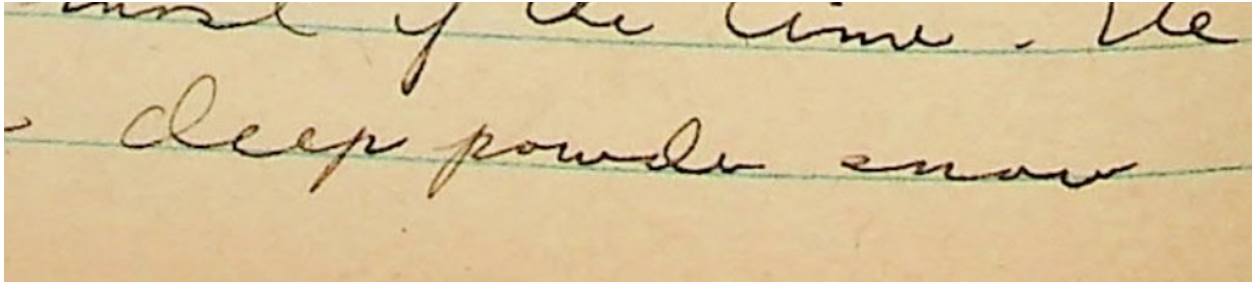


Figure 4. Possibly the First Mention of Deep Powder Snow in LaChapelle's Writing, February 2, 1946, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

"The Beginning of the Problem"

As LaChapelle went through high school and college, she journaled less and less about her everyday life as a student, and more and more about her life in the mountains. She did not neglect her studies, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in the spring of 1947.¹⁷³ Occasionally, she did write about school, like in March 1945, when she did well on Forest and Conservation test that was the "hardest he has ever given because he asked more stuff in more detail but I really knew it."¹⁷⁴ She chose to minor in botany, an interest she may have picked up from women in the Club.¹⁷⁵

But, generally, she looked back on her university studies as a wrong turn—a waste of time—in her life's intellectual journey. "I was working toward a degree in history (so I could find out all the answers)," she wrote in *Deep Powder Snow*.¹⁷⁶ Instead, she found herself disappointed. In the introduction to *Rapture of the Deep*, she wrote, sourly, "I found none of

¹⁷³ Dolores Greenwell, "Scholastic Record," June 7, 1947, from University of Denver Registrar's Office.

¹⁷⁴ Dolores LaChapelle, journal, March 16, 1945, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁷⁵ For more context on women's interest in botany, see Schrepfer, *Nature's Altars*.

¹⁷⁶ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 11.

them.”¹⁷⁷ She was optimistic enough to keep reading history enthusiastically after graduation, but she eventually realized that this part of the journey had been like a red herring for her.



Figure 5. LaChapelle University of Denver Graduation Portrait, 1947, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

¹⁷⁷ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 9.

In other places where LaChapelle wrote about her college years, like in *Earth Wisdom*, she had never trusted this Western institution for knowledge in the first place. “The idea of relevance in a college class never even occurred to me. I did what I was ‘supposed’ to do,” she wrote. A degree allowed her to “go out to live and teach in a Colorado mountain town so I could ski all winter and have summers off to climb.”¹⁷⁸

Whether or not her choice of major was in pursuit of loftier motivations, her minor in education was practical: get to the mountains. Though her decision to move to Aspen was driven by wanting to climb and ski the mountains, she looked back at this as an essential junction in her intellectual and spiritual development, a step in the right direction. As she wrote to a friend in her 50s, when she made the decision to continue in the mountains, “that was my split.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 119.

¹⁷⁹ Dolores LaChapelle to Michael Zimmerman, January 1980. LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DIPSY DOODLE WILL GET IN YOUR HAIR: ENCOUNTERING POWDER SNOW

“Powder skiing is at the core of her life. It has opened a gate for a flood of thought,” Brooke Williams wrote in an article for a ski magazine in the 1980s.¹⁸⁰ LaChapelle must have liked how he put it, because she chose it to lead the introduction of *Deep Powder Snow*. What direction was that flood of thought moving? In this study, I build on LaChapelle’s own interpretation of her experience to argue that she was receiving, not independently generating, knowledge through her relationship with powder, terrain, and gravity. In this chapter, we see how she found the gate and how it swung open for her.

When she said and wrote, “everything I know, I have learned from powder snow,”¹⁸¹ what did she mean by *everything*? She meant that she learned who she was when she figured out the beings she depended on the most. She skied powder, but the powder also skied her, and it was this back-and-forth which made all the difference.¹⁸² Skiing powder snow “cannot merely be considered a metaphor for living, but rather, skiing powder shows us how to live,” she wrote.¹⁸³ In this chapter, I show how learning to ski powder snow first for bodily pleasure prompted LaChapelle to make a number of adjustments in her approach to the world, which she later linked to significant developments in her thinking about ethical relationships with a more-than-human community. Whenever she skied deep powder on a steep slope, she returned to the

¹⁸⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 1.

¹⁸¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 1.

¹⁸² LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 127.

¹⁸³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 69.

beginning of this learning process—a process she repeated again and again and again until it became who she was.

In this chapter, we first see the adjustments of physical technique. To flow through deep, unskied snow, LaChapelle needed to make an attitudinal and embodied reorientation: from complete control over her ski line to allowing the snow and mountain to guide her turns. Second, we see the influence of seasonal weather patterns on her mood and well-being. Though painful at times, the second adjustment she made was to pay more attention, over the course of the winter, to the forces that produced powder. If a practice is simply something one does, this chapter studies the very first practices LaChapelle gained to retrain herself to interact with place without trying to control it. Third, we see how this relationship was meaningful enough for her to build identity around being a powder skier, and how this identity led to social belonging and a sense of community. We see how powder skiing was an essential part of her relationship with Ed, her new fiancé—their love for mountain sport and living was perhaps the only thing they truly shared.¹⁸⁴

LaChapelle gained essential things during this period: identity, community, and method. But we also see how the historical conditions in which all this emerged were fleeting and contingent. Aspen in the late 1940s was a scrappy mining town being reborn. In these years after World War II, locally oriented ski towns across the American West were evolving rapidly into sites for industrial recreation. As outside capital lay the groundwork in Colorado for a new national ski industry, the changes threw LaChapelle's emerging identity into sharp relief.

¹⁸⁴ Dolores and Ed divorced in the late 1970s. LaChapelle remained in Silverton and Ed eventually made his way to Alaska. See more in epilogue.

Surging consumption, leisure, and development in Aspen introduced new power dynamics that LaChapelle experienced as an existential threat to the relationships between powder and powder-lovers. She became a powder skier at ground zero of a David-and-Goliath story that continues ski towns today.

A Means, Not Merely a Metaphor: How She Let It Ski Her

Before LaChapelle learned from powder snow, she learned to ski it—and before that, she honed the fundamentals of the sport on packed trails. Her first winter, she bought Aspen’s discounted ten-pack of tickets, skied on the weekends when there was no school, and occasionally took lessons at Friedl Pfeifer’s ski school. She improved her technique and soon began teaching lessons herself.

Common ski technique at the time, imported from Europe, taught skiers to control the turn by driving a great deal of power from the upper body. LaChapelle described it as a wrenching motion. Purveyors of the Arlberg professed their authority over the mountains. They sold mastery. Historian Andrew Denning has shown how European ski culture before the World War II had accommodated the modernist tensions between “harmony with and mastery over nature,” but post-war skiers focused more exclusively on the mastery.¹⁸⁵ Arlberg instructors understood, and taught their students to understand, as Annie Gilbert Coleman writes, “their sport as an act of raw power and masculine dominance over feminine nature.”¹⁸⁶ Skiing was a

¹⁸⁵ Denning, *Skiing into Modernity*, 77.

¹⁸⁶ Coleman, *Ski Style*, 46.

performance and practice of mastery over not just the mountain and snow, but of the most basic forces of nature, like gravity. Philpott described the approach as a “quest against nature.”¹⁸⁷

Skiers who used the Arlberg moved with this attitude, and it seems LaChapelle felt herself doing it, too. But she rather enjoyed a different type of skiing: off-trail powder snow, fluffy and unskied, like it was at Loveland or Berthoud Pass with the Colorado Mountain Club. LaChapelle followed a sensory preference off-piste; she did not intend to develop a countercultural ski practice. But that’s exactly what she did.

Snow is frozen water with the properties of a mineral. It appears in multitudinous forms, all of which are dependent on the environmental context. As American Studies scholar Bernard Mergen writes in *Snow is America*, “there are as many ways to know snow as there are snows, from the powder that blows away as a skier descends to the avalanche that buries everything in its path.”¹⁸⁸ Skiers know snow type by *feel*: as firm, scratchy, chattery, dense, sticky, smooth, slushy, heavy, creamy, and so on... Some snow types are universally hated, like a breakable crust. But when it comes to love, different skiers bond with different snow. What does one prefer? The better question is, where does one ski? No snow type or climate is *best*, though skiers from all places will defend their own.

In New England, where prevailing skiing conditions are hardpacked or icy, skiers develop a love for the feeling of their skis carving across fast, glidable surfaces. In Colorado powder country, LaChapelle liked it bottomless. Deep and light. A skier can float effortlessly through this kind of snow, as it billows into their lap, across their chest, and over their shoulders.

¹⁸⁷ Philpott, *Vacationland*, 140.

¹⁸⁸ Bernard Mergen, *Snow in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 120, 166-171.

When conditions are prime, it feels like an-almost touchless, all-consuming embrace with a benevolent cloud. But the Arlberg, the technique she perfected at the ski school, was not so well-adapted for soft snow or for the steep chutes and tight trees where someone like LaChapelle went to find fresh powder. So, a friend taught her a new ski style. The “Dipsy Doodle,” as it was called, was named after the big-band tune with a peppy, smooth swing. “It’s got a very bouncy rhythm,” LaChapelle wrote—in fact, the perfect rhythm for steep powder.¹⁸⁹ Whether or not she actually hummed the tune while she skied, she weighted both skis and relaxed her chest. She moved like a climber descending a loose scree slope, setting her heels in and flowing along with the cascading stone, rather than trying to power through the substrate.¹⁹⁰

Adjusting her body like this was the key for a flood of thought. She held onto a vivid memory of the first time it truly clicked, a stormy, gray day. In *Deep Powder Snow*, she wrote,

Because of a snowfall so heavy that I could not see the steep angle of the slope, I learned to ski quite suddenly, when I discovered that I was not turning the skis, but that... the snow and gravity together were turning the skis. I then quit trying to control the skis and turned them over to these forces.¹⁹¹

Suddenly limited in her ability to control her path of descent, she learned that she hadn’t needed to control so much in the first place. She could respond, in real time, as the ground shifted underneath her feet. As much as she relied on her body’s skill and strength to ski, when she doodled, she moved in a way that intentionally increased her reliance on the environment. This transformed snow and slope from a medium into a partner. For this change in relationship to occur, she wrote, “you had to turn yourself over to the mountain in a way that the skiers of that

¹⁸⁹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 14.

¹⁹⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 13.

¹⁹¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 32.

day couldn't handle."¹⁹² In LaChapelle's mind, they were too fixed on skiing for the sensation of power and control.

Doodling was not necessarily about skiing slowly or gently—it was about responding to the environment, and sometimes the environment beckoned speed. As snow and slope undulated downslope, she undulated, too, using the wood plane beneath her feet to play with the mountain. As she improved her skills, her trust in this interaction grew, and she turned herself over more, finding even more joy and pleasure. Powder snow became her flow. “It turned out that learning this technique was the most important thing in my skiing life,” LaChapelle wrote.¹⁹³ In *Deep Powder Snow*, she described, with exquisite, embodied awareness, *how* she skied, which she described as a “rhythmic relationship to snow and gravity.”¹⁹⁴

Now, to begin a run all I need to do is point the skis downhill. As they begin moving, I push down with my heels so that the tips can rise just enough for the snow to lift them. As I feel this lift, I respond as I come up by turning the tips ever so slightly out of the fall line [the straight downhill slope] to the right. Immediately I feel the snow begin to lift them. As I feel this lift, I respond a I come up by turning the tips ever so slightly out of the fall line to the right. Immediately I feel the snow turning them and then gravity takes over and finishes the turn. At a certain point in this process, I am totally airborne, but then, as I feel myself being pulled down, I cooperate with gravity and again push down on my heels and feel the snow lift the skis once again. This time I begin to move the skis to the left and once more the snow and gravity finish the turn.¹⁹⁵

As she developed this skill, something solidified in her perception of herself and her environment. In *Deep Powder Snow*, she described it as a slow, but steady, consciousness raising. “In those days there were few powder snow skiers, and we didn't talk about it much; but

¹⁹² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 12.

¹⁹³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 33.

¹⁹⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 33.

we learned a lot. The more often I skied this kind of snow, the more intrigued I became,” she wrote.¹⁹⁶ She opened herself to the formative influences of this interaction.

Interacting with the world this way was not something the adults in her childhood seemed to know how to do, or, if they did, they neglected to pass it down. The “Dipsy Doodle,” a ditty about the giddy flush of a new connection, is, in retrospect, the perfect soundtrack for LaChapelle’s Aspen years. “*The Dipsy Doodle will get in your hair... it’s almost always in the back of your mind,*” Ella Fitzgerald sang. LaChapelle was only in Aspen three years, but it was just enough to inculcate her as a powder skier. Being a person who skied this particular type of snow began to define who she was, and how she wanted to move through the world.

“Discouraged, Disgusted, Disconsolate”

Powder skiers depend on snow and slope in the moments of direct contact for however long it takes to ski the slope, a few minutes. But as LaChapelle’s letters in 1949 and 1950 show, they are also dependent on bigger environmental processes and longer timescales: a winter, or the cyclical rhythm of many winters. To a skier, powder is not just light or deep. It is early or late; it is consistent or erratic; it is abundant or not enough.

During summer 1949, she met a quiet, thoughtful young man, Edward LaChapelle, on a Canadian Alpine Club trip in Banff National Park.¹⁹⁷ It was a “lucky day,” she wrote, on July 20, in the earliest letter among the bundle that he saved.¹⁹⁸ It was lucky indeed. While traversing the Freshfield Glacier, she fell on ice, and as she slipped toward a crevasse, Ed, a quiet Navy veteran

¹⁹⁶ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 33.

¹⁹⁷ Don M. Woods, “Biouvacs from the Freshfield Camp,” *The Canadian Alpine Journal* 1950.

¹⁹⁸ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, July 20, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

who was also 23, reacted instinctively, rescuing her from the crack in the ice sheet. LaChapelle was intrigued by the way Ed would listen during a conversation, the kind of person who rarely spoke but always spoke well. He lived in Tacoma, Washington, finishing advanced degrees in physics and math. It was an intense way to meet, and perhaps because of that, they began writing letters back and forth that summer.

At first, they just got to know each other. “Really I know little about what your ideas in life are,” she wrote in the July 20 letter. He must have told her and on September 27, she responded, “I like your ideas on life. They’re just about what I’d hoped.”¹⁹⁹ He had an out-of-doors childhood, growing up with “frontier values” that he felt had been deeply shaped by the presence of “The mountain,” Mount Rainier, and “The river,” the Nisqually.²⁰⁰ Rather than “thinking only of making money or getting ahead in the world,” the young couple began planning a life oriented around being in the mountains.²⁰¹

Ed also attempted to spark deeper conversation by mail. “You mentioned that I wasn’t carrying on any good discussion. Well, I have a good one in mind but I’m going to wait until I see you to talk about it because it’s rather important,” she wrote in November 1949.²⁰² She seemed to just hate expressing herself through writing, constantly attempting to defer bigger conversations to a later date. As she told Ed, it seemed like whenever she wrote, the words that came out were “different from what I really wanted to say.”²⁰³ She may have stopped journaling

¹⁹⁹ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, September 27, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰⁰ Edward LaChapelle, “Christmas essay for Randy, 1976,” LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰¹ D. Greenwell to E. LaChapelle, September 27, 1949.

²⁰² Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, November 2, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰³ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 3, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

entirely during this time, or at least she did not save any writing along with her school-age composition books. What she did feel more comfortable writing about in letters to Ed was the skiing and the snow.

She reported on what was happening in the environment to make powder—or, conversely, what was happening to prevent powder. This topic was reliable common ground. Ed was a powder skier; the snow that she loved, he loved, too. They met in the summer, but they built their relationship in the winter, doing so in the company of common non-human relations. Her letters to him, written throughout her third and final winter in Aspen, are a portal into her emerging identity as a powder skier. They help reconstruct the ebbs and flows of her experience of over one winter as a powder skier. From fall to spring, weather that brought powder made her happy; dry, warm, or windy weather soured her mood. It was a tumultuous season that began with late and spotty storms in 1949.

LaChapelle reported the first snowfall on a letter dated October 13. “A very wet one,” she commented.²⁰⁴ The month dragged on. On October 18, she fussed, “This is the worst part of the year to me—It’s too cold and dreary to go hiking and not enough snow to go skiing.”²⁰⁵ The following day, she wrote him a lonely letter. “There’s nothing to do but miss you. I think it will be better when skiing starts.”²⁰⁶ Skiing would be a welcome diversion: a companion, a community, a pastime.

²⁰⁴ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 13, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰⁵ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 18, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰⁶ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 19, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

On October 21, she wrote of winter's arrival. "Thank heavens. Cold weather certainly agrees with me. I find it much easier to get up in the morning and the whole day is easier."²⁰⁷ Based on her response to his next letter, it seems like he mentioned that he was skiing already in the Pacific Northwest, and empathized with her about her lack of skiable snow. Possibly, he wrote that he wished she was there, not in Colorado, where she seemed so unhappy. But she felt he misunderstood her comment about this being the worst part of the year. Sure, she might complain about it, but it was a sacrifice she was happy to make.

I certainly envy you being able to ski already but I don't want you to get the wrong idea ... the trouble with Colorado is that there is much too long a time between when the leaves all fall and there is enough snow to ski on because our snowfall is relatively light compared with Washington and it takes so much longer to accumulate a base. But then think how much finer our dry powder snow is — once we have it. Please don't mind this little discussion I just want to stand up for my own state.²⁰⁸

She was defending her snow climate, a concept that, unknown to her, was of significant interest to the country's leading researchers on snow. Through the 1940s, there had been just one avalanche research station in the United States, in Utah. In 1949 and 1950, additional stations popped up in Washington and Colorado as researchers realized that the snowpack between these three places had strikingly different characteristics, and that their science needed to account for all variables.²⁰⁹

"Snowpack" describes the mass of snow on the ground, but it is not a single mass; it is layers upon layers of snow, a complete record of the season's passing. The character of a layer

²⁰⁷ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 21, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰⁸ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 24, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁰⁹ For a discussion of this scientific development, see Miller, "Spent a Little Time on the Mountain," 21.

depends on the snow that falls, and on the weather that follows: key variables include temperature and total precipitation, patterns in accumulation, wind, seasonal cooling and thawing out. Ski climates closer to the Pacific Ocean, like the Cascade or Sierra Mountains, are typically warmer and wetter, which produces thick, strong maritime snowpacks. Frequent precipitation events load the mountains with dense new snow, which stabilizes in the hours afterward. Conversely, ski climates far from the influence of the ocean—like the Rocky Mountains—are high, dry, and cold. As a result, continental snowpacks are thinner and weaker. Brittle layers lurk deep in the snowpack, sometimes persisting for weeks and months before suddenly collapsing when a skier approaches the slope. Places in between tend to have an intermountain snowpack, falling in between maritime and continental. These are broad generalizations, and conditions in any given place and time fluctuate with spatial, interseasonal, and interannual variability. Snow climates are not necessarily mapped onto specific regions, but prevailing conditions do lend a great deal of character to local and regional skiing.²¹⁰

LaChapelle knew the basics, the relevant climactic aspects of this interaction that she cared about, as a skier. Voicing an affinity for her Colorado Rockies climate, she presciently observed the difference between her own and Ed's regional situations. Colorado snow rarely cakes the mountains like it does in Washington, but Washington snow is rarely as powdery as Colorado. Even though she preferred waiting for Colorado powder, she did not necessarily know how to endure with grace. The fall of 1949 was a total disappointment to LaChapelle. She wrote,

²¹⁰ Bruce Tremper, *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*, (Seattle, Mountaineers Books, 2001).

“So you are getting the same disgusting weather we are here—no snow, I mean. That’s too bad... Everyone is just getting rather irritable waiting and wishing for snow.”²¹¹

In the next letter, written two days later, she rejoiced. “We have some snow at last, too. It’s amazing how snow can change everyone’s attitude so much. People are much happier.”²¹² Five days later, her hopes were back to nothing. The snow may have melted, or maybe it stuck only at the highest elevations. “We still have no skiing and no sign of any new snow,” she wrote.²¹³ Two weeks later on November 29, still nothing. “Absolutely nothing of interest is going on here and everyone is getting discouraged, disgusted, disconsolate, and anything else you can think of which indicates extreme dissatisfaction,” she wrote.²¹⁴

December was more of the same, and she was souring on the whole situation. A little snow arrived later that month, and the ski area opened just the upper hill. Skiers were not supposed to go on the lower hill, but she and her friends did, taking “great chunks” out of her skis. Conditions were “rugged.”²¹⁵ But they were desperate. She had not really skied by the time she left Colorado in late December for Washington, to spend a few days of her winter break from the school with Ed. In the first letter after returning to Aspen, she reported that she had not

²¹¹ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, November 9, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²¹² Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, November 11, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²¹³ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, November 16, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²¹⁴ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, November 29, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²¹⁵ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, December 20, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

missed much. “Lots of people have wrenched knees and sprains,” she wrote.²¹⁶ Things were likely getting desperate, tense, impatient.

The drought just lingered on in Aspen, and she continued to pine for snow well into January, beginning a letter: “I wish the snowfall was a little more evenly distributed. We still have too little and you have too much.”²¹⁷ The Friday afternoon school program began that week, and she skied on Little Nell, the beginner’s slope, with the students. Sure, it was skiing, and it was better than not skiing, but it was not *doodling in powder*—it was not that particular feeling of turning herself over that she craved.

And then, on January 15, everything lined up. The storm came on a weekend, when LaChapelle was off work. “We’ve finally had a weekend of good skiing,” she wrote Ed. “We had lots of fresh powder snow and a large group of us went down together having lots of fun, doodling and turning with no effort at all.”²¹⁸

By the end of the month, a second, even bigger storm blew in, with Aspen receiving more snowfall in a single push than LaChapelle had seen in her previous two winters. “We are really having enough snow now to make up for lost time,” she wrote on January 31. “It snowed for three days and nights last week so I thought this would be a perfect powder weekend. Well on Saturday we had the worst wind storm we’ve ever had.”²¹⁹ The ski area shut down the chairlifts due to safety concern. This was a devastating shift in the weather in terms of snow quality, too.

²¹⁶ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, January 5, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²¹⁷ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, January 12, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²¹⁸ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, January 15, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²¹⁹ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, January 31, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

There's a reason wind is a four-letter word. Blowing snow crystals across a snowy slope grinds them down into firm particles, ruining powder by turning it into stiff boards. Still, LaChapelle and her friends still went hunting for power. Because so much terrain was wind-affected—punchy and stiff, not soft and fluffy—they poked into new, unfamiliar terrain. They skied a narrow, treed gulch with little jumps where the low snowpack left small cliffs and waterfalls unburied. Returning to town around noon, they found everyone hanging out, drinking beer. At some point in the afternoon, someone hooked up a skijoring setup to the back of a car and they took turns being pulled behind it at speeds up to 35 miles per hour. As long as there *was* snow, there was a way to play with it.

As the winter of 1950 passed, there were more ups and downs. Early February brought rain. “Isn’t that a catastrophe?” she wrote on February 7.²²⁰ In March, winter returned. “All weekend it was snowing and the powder snow was wonderful,” she wrote on March 13.²²¹ A week later, she assured Ed, “you no longer have to envy me for good skiing.”²²² A wind storm had ruined all the powder. On March 28, she confessed that the skiing “was so bad I had to quit early for the first time in two years... what an awful feeling not to get any fun at all out of skiing.”²²³ By April, things were looking up again, when a storm brought “real light powder... the skiing was wonderful.”²²⁴ Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful—when it was good, she usually described the skiing in simple, straightforward terms, not lavish in her descriptions. The feeling

²²⁰ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, February 7, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²²¹ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, March 13, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²²² Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, March 20, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²²³ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, March 28, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²²⁴ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, April 10, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

of powder is not indescribable, but wonderful is just shorthand for an experience. The word isn't the idea. Ed knew what she meant. The season ended on a low note, without the kind of diurnal melt-freeze cycles that produce good spring corn snow.

Readers of her later work might be surprised to read about the variable conditions of that winter. Like a first love, LaChapelle remembered an idealized version of her Aspen seasons. She relished these memories. In *Deep Powder Snow*, it seems that her winters there blended together in abundance: they were doodling day in, day out. "This was the old days... we had unlimited powder all of the time," she wrote.²²⁵

LaChapelle held tight to the deep powder memories and let go of drought memories. Powder is never truly unlimited, as her experience of the winter of 1950 shows. There is always tension between the joy of skiing it and the angst of waiting for it but not knowing when it will come. Later, she recognized this tension, articulating it perfectly in one of her most-cited comments:

One can never be bored by powder skiing because it is a special gift of the relationship between the earth and the sky. It only comes in sufficient amounts in particular places, at certain times on this earth; it lasts only a limited amount of time before sun or wind changes it. People devote their lives to it 'for the pleasure of being so purely played' by gravity and snow.²²⁶

She put herself, willingly and intentionally, at the whims of non-human factors. This submission, paired with the submission to the force of gravity on a snow-covered, slope gave meaning and direction to her life.

During her airmail courtship with Ed, she thought very seriously about longer commitments, about where and how she wanted to live, and who she wanted to be. She wanted

²²⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 11.

²²⁶ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 159; LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 3.

to devote herself to powder skiing, which meant that she wanted to always be in the right place at the right time: in the mountains with the freedom to ski when powder arrived. But by the spring of 1950, it seems that Ed was voicing some doubts about the future—maybe just a case of cold feet.

She was “insulted” when Ed repeatedly worried that she wanted to “settle down and be domestics. I was suggesting quite the opposite... you should rather worry about my lack of domesticity in a future wife. You need never worry about me wanting to quit climbing mountains because that time could never come.” A constrictive marriage that forced domesticity on her would actually be a hardship, and she liked him because he would not cramp her style. “I’m not out to trap a man—I’ve no need for that,” she argued.²²⁷ She trusted him because he cared about being in the mountains, too, and those were the people she wanted to be around. Because LaChapelle was “always out in the deep stuff” in Aspen, she fell in with others who were just as willing and committed as she was to powder skiing.²²⁸ Collective identity emerged as they hitched their hearts to powder, sharing cycles of longing for new snow as well as the euphoric release of a powder day.

“Skiing was what we were there for, and that was our life,” she wrote in *Earth Wisdom* in the 1970s.²²⁹ This pastime which depended so much on the environment gave them a reason to know their place more intimately—to find powder on that windy day depended on understanding, to some degree, the interactions between weather and terrain. Just the fact that

²²⁷ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, April 10, 1950, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO

²²⁸ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 11.

²²⁹ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 119.

she could not “manipulate the weather or the snow... [clarified]”²³⁰ for her the role humans should play in the world: real human nature abides by forces in the environment, not the other way around. Her powder skiing community provided a cultural context for developing and living out this understanding.

She called it a “culture of relationships” and a “culture of awareness,” meaning a shared attention to the same patterns in the environment.²³¹ What we can see, looking back, is the commitment of being a citizen of powder country. It is not necessarily a state of blissful flow, though there is that, too; it is harmony and disharmony, and a constant flux between them. Later, what she appreciated about her world of powder snow was that it introduced her to a new sense of governance. Throughout her young adulthood, she still felt the strong influence of the authority of the Catholic church, but there was something undeniable about this non-human authority. If she wanted to be in the right place at the right time to ski, she would have to conform to climactic patterns, and to the dynamic relationship between gravity, snow, and her body. Years after LaChapelle left Aspen, the lasting lesson of her time in this community became clear. When she saw so many eager communes fall apart in the 1960s, she realized,

The flaw was that people were living together for the sake of living together, and it was work all the way. When we lived together for the sake of skiing, we had a clear, visible goal which had to do with the nonhuman factors in the environment—terrain, weather, and the snow.²³²

For her, understanding the independence of these nonhuman factors was the beginning of considering them as teachers and fellow members of an ethical community. They were not in the backdrop; they were beings, too. But was she thinking this way—or at least, with these words

²³⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 16.

²³¹ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 120.

²³² LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 120.

and concepts—in Aspen? It’s possible. She felt like she could never get the words down on the page like they were in her head, so the absence of these ideas in her letters to Ed is not a definite answer. She did leave one intriguing breadcrumb in 1949, writing apologetically to Ed, as they strategized the logistics of their future life, that her “thinking is frequently impractical. I mean I don’t think nearly as well on practical subjects as I do abstract questions.”²³³

Nonetheless, this analysis came later, out of her later scholarly period. She was not yet theorizing about complex interrelationships. She was experiencing them. As she continued skiing, reading, and reflecting, she recognized her answers *as answers* because they reflected her experience as a powder skier and gave her a deeper understanding of what she was doing, and why it felt good and right. That’s how she knew those answers were the ones. An embodied certainty about this solidified in Aspen and informed her thinking for the rest of her life. This was a “deep body knowledge” about relinquishing control.²³⁴

Whatever her abstract questions may have been, and whatever she may have thought about powder skiing in Aspen, the important thing for understanding her is that when she was 50 and looking back on this time, she liked the idea of a gate flinging open and a flood of thought pouring in.

“One of the Few Sub-Cultures in Modern Industrial Society Still Open”

In the 1990s, looking back on her early 20s, LaChapelle remembered her three seasons in Aspen as a glimmer of life as it should be—a similar reaction to the experience under the

²³³ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 19, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²³⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 2.

cottonwoods by the irrigation ditch in Denver. If that experience was an early, insufficient, fleeing intervention in LaChapelle's upbringing as a Catholic child in the modern, industrial, urban American West, then Aspen was the intervention that lasted. But her experience there, too, was impermanent and contingent.

As much as LaChapelle learned that she depended on snow and weather to doodle, she recognized that she also depended on human forces largely beyond her control. During the winter of 1949-1950, LaChapelle found it rather hard to figure out if she was discontent because winter was late, because she missed Ed, or because of the way things were changing in Aspen. When she graduated from the University of Denver in the spring of 1947, three school districts offered her work, and she took the job in Aspen because the ski area had just installed the longest chairlift in the world.²³⁵ This major capital investment represented changes in the ski industry that created and threatened LaChapelle's experience all at the same time.

Moving to Aspen in the wake of World War II put LaChapelle right in the crosshairs of ski history. The end of the war in the fall of 1945 marked the shotgun start of the modern ski industry, which organized to commodify the alpine experience more efficiently—not just in mountain towns like Aspen, but in Aspen, specifically. As Philpott writes in *Vacationland*, boosters sharpened their marketing skills, recreation skyrocketed, and “tourism in the region began to burgeon on a scale that virtually no one, before the war, would have ever thought possible.”²³⁶

²³⁵ For a discussion on how chairlifts represented the changing meaning of skiing post-World War II, see Coleman, *Ski Style*, 118-120.

²³⁶ Philpott, *Vacationland*, 19.

In his seminal work, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, historian Hal Rothman analyzes how an influx of outside capital “transformed instead of adapted” to the place.²³⁷ He argues that the new tourist industry belonged to “the modern and postindustrial, postmodern worlds; its social structures and cultural ways are those of an extractive industry.”²³⁸ But this new industry was not quite the same as the old ones. As discussed also by Coleman and Philpott, the process of re-scripting a place for the tourist’s gaze alters it in fundamental ways, physically and emotionally.²³⁹ These changes were vast and total, nothing short of “the cultural, environmental, and psychic transformation of place.”²⁴⁰ This modern tourism asked locals not just for their labor or their minerals, but for their “authentic” sense of self and place.

During LaChapelle’s three years in Aspen, a wave of outside economic power shifted the balance of wealth and power in town. As Rothman writes, locals were “frozen... in a limited realm; the action that drove Aspen occurred beyond their reach.”²⁴¹ Agency slipped away from residents like LaChapelle, who was not only a skier but also a basic part of the community as an elementary school teacher. The people who organized their lives around skiing could not hold on in a town organized around the extraction of profit. Everything was becoming about money—but none of that money was accessible to her and her friends.

The changes in town made survival competitive instead of collaborative. It seems they depended upon on each other economically, but that this was a cutthroat reliance: she wrote in

²³⁷ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 209.

²³⁸ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 13

²³⁹ Coleman, *Ski Style*; and Philpott, *Vacationland*.

²⁴⁰ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 25.

²⁴¹ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 221.

Deep Powder Snow, “we just shared the work and shared the bills and skied. If you didn’t fulfill your share you were dropped because any time or money wasted meant that much less skiing.”²⁴² Her friends often left town to chase powder elsewhere, and they had the freedom to do so because their employment was completely unreliable. Her steady, but perhaps suffocating, job at the school left LaChapelle feeling isolated.

In September 1949, she wrote Ed that “the corporation is really causing trouble.”²⁴³ The next month, she grumbled, “One thing about Aspen is that there’s always something new.”²⁴⁴ The growing pains and breakneck pace of progress in this formerly sleepy ski town left her winded. She sensed the significance of her timing, writing in *Deep Powder Snow* how her “community ended very soon when it became clear that skiing was a marketable commodity and more people moved in with financial gain in mind. At the time none of us [skiers] clearly realized what we were losing but we knew it was ending.”²⁴⁵

To skiers today, LaChapelle’s sepia-toned memories of unlimited powder in Aspen are predictable, if not exasperating, because, in retrospect, she so clearly had it good. She described her years in Aspen as a “brief taste of true community,”²⁴⁶ it while it is clear that there only ever was a brief taste to be had before industrial capital dominated the assemblage, some people never even got a taste at all. As much as postwar Aspen was an industrial, capitalist, modernist project, it was also a project of white American middle- and upper-class identity-making, as Coleman has

²⁴² LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 119, and *Deep Powder Snow*, 16.

²⁴³ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, September 30, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁴⁴ Dolores Greenwell to Edward LaChapelle, October 31, 1949, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁴⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 16-17.

²⁴⁶ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 15.

established.²⁴⁷ Who skied reflects who had access to the wave of consumerism, leisure, recreation, and sport during the postwar era. But the historical context offers an understanding for her nostalgia and defensiveness against change. She watched, in real time over three short years, the forces of modernity, industrialization, and technology, which she experienced in Denver and attempted to escape by moving to the mountains, remake the mountains. She wanted to protect her privileged and historically lucky access against the influx of outside capital and rapid growth.

But if she had nostalgia, it was for a time that never quite existed, or only truly existed for a blip in time before the assemblages shifted. Rothman defines “neo-natives” as new residents drawn to towns like Aspen by new narratives of what the place is for—drawn by a new chairlift, for example. As Rothman writes,

They embraced a notion of culture and place had been defined and created just before their arrival. They too saw their community as authentic, meaningful, traditional, and deep rooted. They also changed the town, bemoaning the impact of successive waves of visitors often without recognizing their own effect on the place.”²⁴⁸

Neo-natives like LaChapelle often feel a great stake in their adopted home, imagining the state of affairs when they arrived as a baseline to preserve, viewing any changes “antimodern terms, seizing on a perfect moment in the past and seeing a fallen world in the changes since.”²⁴⁹ This pattern, of course, echoes patterns of settler-colonial expansion across the North American continent.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Annie Gilbert Coleman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 4, Tourism and the American West, 1996. See also Coleman, *Ski Style*.

²⁴⁸ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, 216.

²⁴⁹ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, 198.

²⁵⁰ See, for example, the protection of landscapes in the American West: Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*, (Oxford,

LaChapelle firmly staked out a timeline that predated the postwar changes: it was important to her and her message that she had arrived “before skiing became so popular and no one knew yet, that it would soon become part of the consumer industry,” as she wrote in *Rapture of the Deep*.²⁵¹ Though true to some degree, there is cultural power in positioning herself this way. “This view of a halcyon era exists in almost every resort community,” Rothman writes. Neo-natives “and the community they joined were younger, freer, somehow less tainted or jaded.”²⁵²

Arriving as she did at the very close of Aspen’s “quiet years,” it makes sense that LaChapelle experienced the postwar changes so acutely. Powder skiing—as she did it—may have felt increasingly countercultural, something concrete to grip onto as skiing seemed to become all about the money. She felt that she was part of “one of the few sub-cultures in modern industrial society still open” to the formative influence of snow.²⁵³ When LaChapelle later criticized Industrial Growth Society,²⁵⁴ she wasn’t thinking only about the modern, industrial Denver of her childhood. It was postwar Aspen, too.

A Ticket to the Doodle Homeland

Whether it was the bad winter in Aspen or the squeeze of industrial recreation that broke her loyalty, LaChapelle defected. Ed seemingly offered to move there, but she demurred, telling

Oxford University Press, 2000); William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996); Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows*.

²⁵¹ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 252.

²⁵² Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, 198.

²⁵³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 45.

²⁵⁴ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep* LaChapelle, 50.

him he had no hope of finding steady income. She wrote Ed that she had always dreamed of Alaska but told him that she would go anywhere with him after they married.

They spent the summer of 1950 on a mountain-climbing honeymoon tour of the Northern Rockies in the United States and Canada. In the fall of 1951, Ed secured postgraduate research position in Davos, Switzerland, at the Swiss Federal Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research, the leading center for avalanche studies at the time.²⁵⁵ While Ed worked, she skied, wrote letters home, and cooked their suppers on a shoestring budget. Winter ended, and they crisscrossed the Alps together, living in cheap tourist accommodations, bicycling everywhere, and climbing whenever the mountains permitted it. When July came in the Swiss Alps, the skies did not always cooperate. Foehn winds blew, black clouds gathered, and blizzards overcame the midsummer skies. This atmospheric drama seemingly turned the climbers around just as often as not, but they timed a few perfect days well, summiting bucket-list peaks like the Matterhorn, as well as more obscure and remote mountains. While climbing Mont Blanc, a thick fog settled in and they only managed to identify the summit by the flat packed ground. “Here we were on the highest spot in Europe, with what is supposed to be one of the most thrilling views anywhere, and we couldn’t see anything,” she wrote home darkly.²⁵⁶ LaChapelle’s letters home to Colorado detail her equally felt anxiety over both the cost of living in the mountains, and the “changeable weather where you can’t trust it at all.”²⁵⁷ During that summer, LaChapelle kept learning the lesson that the weather calls the shots.

²⁵⁵ For more context on the development of avalanche research in Europe, see Betsey R. Armstrong and Knox Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, (Wheat Ridge, Colorado, Fulcrum Books, 1992); Colin Fraser, *The Avalanche Enigma*, (London, John Murray, 1966).

²⁵⁶ Dolores LaChapelle to Her Family, August 20, 1951, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁵⁷ Dolores LaChapelle to Her Family, August 18, 1951, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

They returned home to the United States, and within a year, Ed's expertise helped him lock down a dream job applying relatively new avalanche research to the even newer task of actively managing the avalanche hazard at Alta, Utah. This ski area was already a fabled place for skiers when the LaChapelles arrived, and not in the mold of Aspen or Sun Valley, not a glamorous place to see and be seen, but a place for serious schussers. Alta was home to avalanche hunters and powder hounds. It was the epicenter of deep powder snow skiing in the interior American West: the place that produced the Dipsy Doodle.



Figure 6. Mr. and Mrs. LaChapelle on their Wedding Day, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

CHAPTER FOUR

LACHAPELLE “REBORN UNDER THE SNOW”

There is a brief, undated piece of writing in LaChapelle’s collection, likely from the 1980s or 1990s, that works through an idea for a self-introduction activity before a group ritual. There was a question, “Who are you?” and there was supposed to be an answer in the form of, “I have... done such and such ... with a natural entity.” She considered what her own answer would be. Perhaps she did not hesitate over her typewriter for a moment before writing, “I have died in the air and been reborn under the snow. I have achieved enlightenment mid the howling wind and over the rock cliff and passing through the tallest tree.”²⁵⁸

How, exactly, did she achieve enlightenment nearly dying in an avalanche? Her burial in March 1963 was a climax, a moment of extreme drama within the “on-going process”²⁵⁹ of her relationship with the powder snow world. In *Rapture of the Deep* and *Deep Powder Snow*, she wrote that during the tumult of the avalanche, she lost her Catholic faith and decided she wanted to end her marriage.²⁶⁰ While the avalanche was a breakthrough, it was not quite a clean break. In reality, it took her some time to work through this radical reorientation. She was a 36-year-old “young mother locked into the Christian system,”²⁶¹ and she did not leave Ed or the Catholic church that winter, that year, or even that decade. This transformation—beginning with a

²⁵⁸ LaChapelle, “an idea for a ritual,” in untitled black compendium, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁵⁹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 31.

²⁶⁰ For more context on LaChapelle’s Catholicism, how the avalanche “saved” her, and how her ideas on sex and relationship evolved, see LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 252-253; LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 49-60, 81; letters between Dolores Greenwell and Ed LaChapelle, 1949-1950.

²⁶¹ LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom*, 65.

dramatic moment but unfolding over years—was foundational in her thinking: Later, she described the coexistence of her ecological consciousness and the Catholic ideas she grew up with as a “basic impossibility.”²⁶²

But this chapter examines a faster, closer change. She was not reborn as the godmother of powder snow—not yet. In Alta, LaChapelle was reborn as a writer. This chapter suggests that the avalanche gave her a voice. In Aspen, even though she was mulling over abstract thoughts, she never liked how they sounded on paper. While healing in Alta, “even though [she] had never written anything before,” she picked up her pen and recorded her reflections.²⁶³ She survived her avalanche with the desire to process her experiences on the page. As with the Dipsy Doodle, she gained a practice that led to knowledge. She developed her ideas through writing, sharing what she was learning from her relationships with place and connecting with others who were wondering about the same kinds of questions.

The gate described in the previous chapter—the gate for a flood of thought—is a helpful metaphor here for understanding the significance of the avalanche. Chapter Three established how thought, in the form of experiential knowledge, flowed in as she turned herself over doodling in powder snow. This chapter will show that floods of thought moved through the gate in *both* ways, and how expressing herself through writing completed the feedback loop of inquiry. These floods of knowledge evolved into the experiential and intellectual exchange that defines her approach to scholarship and life. In the end, the gate may be a limited metaphor because it suggests some sort of barrier between LaChapelle and the outside world. Perhaps,

²⁶² LaChapelle to Zimmerman, June 1980.

²⁶³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 52.

instead, the avalanche destroyed the gate and allowed her to experience a more porous and free exchange with her world of powder snow. Either way—the concrete change is evidenced by words on the page.

LaChapelle included reflections on her 15 Alta winters, from 1952 to 1967, in most of her books. I am not aware of journals and letters written during this era; the scattered state of the collection means they may exist, but I am skeptical, given her aversion to writing during her 20s and 30s. Even though we do not currently have this kind of direct access to her daily experience, she did write a series of essays in the 1960s that illustrate starkly different ski experiences and provide insight into a critical juncture in her story.

The first piece is different from the rest. It emerged in the days and weeks after the March 1963 avalanche. She was the mother of a 10-year-old, the wife of a snow scientist, and a woman who was thinking—to some degree—about her conduct as a skier and as a person more generally. To process the trauma of this near-death experience, she wrote a satirical essay lampooning her own hubris. This is a bemusing, subversive, and original text. Thirty years later, she included it in *Deep Powder Snow* “just the way I wrote it,” she noted.²⁶⁴ She recognized the rhetorical power of her experience. It showed that she came from a place with beings like avalanches: beings that powerfully challenged Euro-American arrogance.

The other pieces of writing that this chapter will examine are from the months and years after the avalanche: short, unpublished, typewritten sketches of everyday life in the mountains. These are tucked away in a manilla folder labeled “When I first began Writing,” with five essays,

²⁶⁴ I do not have the original draft, just the version from *Deep Powder Snow*. This is my archival white whale.

none dated.²⁶⁵ The folder is labeled 1963, which means that the essays about skiing may have been written the first winter she returned to the slopes after the avalanche.

Together, LaChapelle's post-avalanche writings bear witness to one of the most dramatic transformations in LaChapelle's life.

Avalanche Country, USA

Before moving to Alta, LaChapelle spent the hot summer of 1952 pregnant in Denver with her family. Living back at home on Beach Court, she climbed with other pregnant women on a Colorado Mountain Club trip and learned to drive. She knit pastel green baby clothes and brainstormed baby names. Though she had always liked Michelle, she lamented that it would be "too much" with their last name.²⁶⁶

Ed's work that season took him across the continent to Alaska, to the Juneau Icefield in the Coast Range, for glacier research with the American Geographical Society of New York. They both had their eyes on the future and their plan for the fall to move up to Alta. Randall, or Randy (who later changed his name to David) was born on October 8, 1952. Their baby's first home was a Forest Service cabin at the ski area, one of the few ski-in, ski-out residences in Little Cottonwood Canyon. "Moving to a high-mountain cabin that can be reached only by rope tow with a two-week-old infant may sound bizarre to most people. But for me, even though I was a nursing mother, I was still a powder snow skier. So it was perfect," she defended her decisions in *Deep Powder Snow*.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Dolores LaChapelle, "When I first began Writing," 1963. LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁶⁶ Dolores LaChapelle to Edward LaChapelle, June 27, 1952, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

²⁶⁷ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 23.



Figure 7. LaChapelle Family at Alta, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

Positioned on the eastern fringe of the semi-arid Great Basin, the Wasatch Front jumps some 6,000 feet abruptly above the valley floor. It is a skinny, glaciated range running about 160 miles north-south. Little Cottonwood Canyon cuts west through the Wasatch, draining toward Salt Lake City. Though summits elsewhere in the range are taller, this area represents the largest concentration of alpine terrain in the Wasatch. When experienced skiers like LaChapelle look at this land, they notice the powder fields, the bowling-alley chutes, and pinchy gulleys that fan out into wide aprons.

She titled her *Deep Powder Snow* chapter about this period of her life “Alta, Utah—The Greatest Snow on Earth,” using the marketing tagline inspired by Barnum & Bailey’s.²⁶⁸ In this case, skiing deep powder snow was the spectacle. The desert to the west may seem to suck the moisture from the sky, but when clouds meet the Wasatch, orographic dynamics create their own weather. In *Deep Powder Snow*, LaChapelle described the source of snow in Little Cottonwood Canyon, drawing on Heideggerian ideas,

The worlding of the powder skier’s world begins with the mutual appropriation of the earth and the sky as moisture-laden clouds from the Pacific Ocean move in across the deserts from California, meeting no barrier until the uplift of the Wasatch Mountains in Utah. Then, the mountains cause the sky-borne clouds to release their gift of snow down onto the high, steep slopes below, resulting in the highest delight of skiers—powder snow.²⁶⁹

Alta sits in palm of a catcher’s mitt, positioned at the “the climatological sweet spot” of the range, Jim Steenburgh writes.²⁷⁰ The “professor of powder,” as he’s known, is an atmospheric scientist, mountain meteorologist, and skier—and his book, *Secrets of the Greatest Snow on Earth*, is a scientific look at the marketing claim.²⁷¹ Tabulating water content of the snow, annual snowfall, storm frequency, storm characteristics, and numerous other factors, Steenburgh realized that, indeed, Alta storms are not the coldest, the biggest, or the driest. But, he argued, despite common misconception, the coldest, biggest, driest storms do not make the best powder skiing. Wasatch weather produces what he calls “Goldilocks storms.”²⁷² They come regularly and consistently. They bring lots of snow, but not too much at a time. They tend to get

²⁶⁸ Jim Steenburgh, *Secrets to the Greatest Snow on Earth: Weather, Climate Change, and Finding Deep Powder in Utah’s Wasatch Mountains and Around the World* (Boulder: Utah State University Press, 2014), 6.

²⁶⁹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 45.

²⁷⁰ Steenburgh, *Secrets to the Greatest Snow on Earth*, 20.

²⁷¹ Steenburgh, *Secrets to the Greatest Snow on Earth*, 6-39.

²⁷² Steenburgh, *Secrets to the Greatest Snow on Earth*, 14.

colder over time, producing more stable conditions with the lightest powder right on top. They're not as light as Colorado and Montana champagne powder, often less than 7 percent water content. But they're not as heavy as 11 percent maritime cement. The average water content at Alta is 8.4 percent, Steenburgh reports. Enough to give that feeling of no resistance, but with enough bit of body to float on. In Aspen, LaChapelle defended her continental Colorado snow, comparing it to Ed's maritime Washington snow. His mountains had deeper snowpacks, but they would rarely be as dry—and she coveted the weightless floating feeling of light, bottomlessness, dry snow. Alta was just right.

Despite the quality of snow, the development of a modern American ski area was a bold, risky move in this box canyon. In order to provide people like LaChapelle with an everyday skiing experience, somebody needed to do something about the avalanches. Others have covered the history of the avalanche hazard in the Wasatch, including historians Diana DiStefano, Mette Flynt, and Alex Miller. Here, “hazard” refers not to the general ability of snow, slope, and gravity to produce avalanches, but to the combination of avalanche terrain and people: the particular assemblages that make avalanche country. In the Wasatch, the need to engage and manage avalanche hazard is a throughline between mining and skiing across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As Di Stefano discusses in her book *Encounters in Avalanche Country: A History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920*, miners in avalanche country across the Mountain West, including in the Wasatch, developed local knowledge, practical strategies, and community networks for reducing their exposure to the hazard. Alta was a “workscape”²⁷³ where culture

²⁷³ Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 125.

emerged from relationships between laboring people and place. Before the modernist optimism of the mid-twentieth century, few would have thought to harness or control the relationship with avalanche country.²⁷⁴ During this period, Di Stefano writes, “industrialization in Avalanche Country did not turn all of nature into a commodity, nor did it mean absolute control of nature, or that workers lost touch with their places in nature.”²⁷⁵

Early avalanche management for skiing in the Wasatch resembled the miners’ style, Flynt writes, “centered on restricting movement of people, not changing the flow of snow,” an avoidance tactic that minimized exposure to hazard.²⁷⁶ But this changed in when recreation became a constant pressure, and customers wanted to ski regardless of what avalanche conditions the weather created. This brought the resources of the modern state, via the U.S. Forest Service, to bear on avalanche country and make it more productive.

Miller argues that a “cohesion” of stakeholders “emerged out of the peopling of avalanche terrain post-1930” with a shared an interest in developing new management approaches that could actively neutralize the hazard in the Wasatch.²⁷⁷ This cohesion generated modern scientific knowledge and management practices that kept safe the bodies of primarily middle and upper-class white Americans as they engaged with wild and exhilarating mountain

²⁷⁴ Diana L. Di Stefano, *Encounters in Avalanche Country: A History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

²⁷⁵ Di Stefano, *Encounters in Avalanche Country*, 124.

²⁷⁶ Flynt, “Becoming America’s Ski City,” 74.

²⁷⁷ Miller, “Spent a Little Time on the Mountain,” 15.

environment.²⁷⁸ Boosterist efforts,²⁷⁹ skier demand, and the Forest Service's ability to mobilize science significantly altered the relationship between people and avalanches in the Wasatch, opening up the terrain for thousands of people to move about safely in this wilderness for the price of a ski ticket. Especially after World War II, Alta attracted a critical mass of attention from recreationists like LaChapelle and scientists like Ed, as well as support from the government, in the form of funding and military resources for avalanche control.

At Alta, as at ski areas across the West, the contrast between resort and backcountry, which was essentially imperceptible during the pre-World War II-years, sharpened into a hard boundary, demarcating the safe island of leisure and consumption from the dangerous wild.²⁸⁰ Few assemblages embody this change better than the collaboration between Ed, Monty Atwater, modern science, government funding, and the avalanche country of Little Cottonwood Canyon.

Atwater's memoir, *The Avalanche Hunters*, published in 1968, is a colorful tale of his cowboy years on the frontier of snow science and avalanche mitigation at Alta.²⁸¹ He spent his first winter attempting to correlate weather patterns to avalanche behavior, with the goal of forecasting the hazard and closing terrain more selectively. Alas, skiers still ducked ropes and ignored closure lines, either annoyed at the new bureaucrat on skis, unaware of the risk, or accepting of it. Atwater decided to take a more active approach. "To an ex-infantryman the

²⁷⁸ These developments can be observed in successive handbooks produced by the Alta Avalanche Study Center, beginning with U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, "The Alta Avalanche Studies," by Montgomery M. Atwater and Felix C. Koziol, Technical Handbook (Utah: Wasatch National Forest, 1948).

²⁷⁹ For a discussion of Utah boosterism, see Flynt, "Becoming America's Ski City."

²⁸⁰ Coleman, *Ski Style*, 127.

²⁸¹ Montgomery Atwater, *The Avalanche Hunters* (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, 1968).

answer was obvious: fight the avalanches... this means? Explosives.”²⁸² Targeting weak spots on the slope, like a wind slab on a ridgeline or a convexity in a bowl, he could stabilize a slope by shaking loose potential avalanches, neutralizing the threat. He “stalk[ed] avalanches on foot and stuff[ed] explosive calling cards down their throats.”²⁸³ During an era of peacetime prosperity, Atwater recreated the drama of war, describing avalanches as man’s “natural enemy”²⁸⁴ and Alta as his own personal “battleground,” a stage for the performance of masculine mastery.²⁸⁵

At the beginning, Atwater shunned European knowledge, but Ed’s academic training and studies at the institute in Davos and his knack for building scientific instruments took Atwater’s work to the next level. Together, they could address trickier questions about the more secretive, internal actions of the snowpack. For example, in the early 1960s, Ed experimented with inhibiting the formation of lab-grown depth hoar using formaldehyde, chloroform, and other chemicals.²⁸⁶ For an ambitious scientist, controlling the process that produced this particularly troublesome crystal would be a holy grail of mastery in avalanche country. The project did not succeed; nonetheless, with increasingly precise and perceptive scientific knowledge of avalanche country’s weaknesses, they could run increasingly accurate programs of forecasting and control, optimizing the amount of time each piece of avalanche terrain was safely open for members of the public to ski.

²⁸² Atwater, *Avalanche Hunters*, 55.

²⁸³ Atwater, *Avalanche Hunters*, 57.

²⁸⁴ Atwater, *Avalanche Hunters*, xvii.

²⁸⁵ Atwater, *Avalanche Hunters*, 4.

²⁸⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Wasatch National Forest, Alta Avalanche Study Center, *The Chemical Modification of Depth Hoar Part II*, Edward LaChapelle, 1962. 14541, Ski Archive, J. Willard Marriot Digital Library, University of Utah. <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6513w43>, 7.

The management program that Atwater and Ed developed worked well enough to sell skiing in avalanche country that it became an indispensable modern technology for ski areas during the waves of industrialization across the west after World War II. Now, progress looked like a chairlift, a howitzer, *and* a snow study plot. The rescripting of local avalanche activity with science-driven management for tourism was part of the very same postwar changes LaChapelle fled in Colorado. Even so, her time there began with an experience that dispelled any pretenses of a polished commercial product.

In *Deep Powder Snow*, she wrote about how, in their first winter, a huge avalanche released above the cabin in the middle of a stormy night. Its force was powerful enough to knock things down off the shelves. The cabin was spared, sheltered by a rock outcropping. This was one of few places in the canyon safe to live though the winter. In the next morning's early light, LaChapelle surveyed the firm avalanche debris and shredded trees surrounding the cabin, as well as the damage to Ed's instruments for studying snow and weather. Describing this as their "first introduction to Alta's avalanches," she was undeterred by the new acquaintance.²⁸⁷ They were actually familiar friends: snow, terrain, and gravity, just assembled differently in a different place.

"Do You Think It's Ready For Us Yet?"

When the slopes were stable and the powder was good, she could hop on her skis at her cabin and be skiing it in minutes. Motherhood posed few restrictions for LaChapelle, who defied expectations for mothers and female skiers. Unlike in Aspen, where she could only ski on

²⁸⁷ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 24.

weekends, her schedule was free. When Randy was small enough, she skied with him strapped to herself in a homemade kiddie carrier. Reportedly, when he needed to nap, she would sync up her baby monitor to the ski area loudspeakers—the same ones used to broadcast avalanche safety warnings—and keep skiing. Randy proved he could ski independently on the mountain by the time he was 4, and she got a job working at the ski school. In the touching eulogy David wrote about his mother, he described how clear it was to him, as a child, how much she loved to ski. His mother was a powder skier. He shared the memory of her bustling out the door with “little use for niceties as the most important appointment would be kept: the exhilaration and free fall of dancing with millions of ice crystals under the sun in the mountains.”²⁸⁸

Powderhounds often arrive at the ski area first thing, chomping at the bit to find and ski fresh snow. But because of her family and work commitments, LaChapelle was more often an afternoon skier. Ed’s work shifts were in the early morning, and they traded childcare duties when he returned home mid-day. Not as many skiers stick around until last chair, but LaChapelle was devoted to the day’s end.

Right before the chairlifts shut down, she would meet up with friends for a beloved tradition: “last runs,” a big group ski in the disappearing light. When the bullwheel came to rest for the night, the visiting skiers moved inside, warming up the bar, and the quiet mountain felt a little more personal for those who lived there all winter. Often, if it had been stormy, it would clear around this time. For her ability to sense the days when it would clear, a friend gave her the nickname Witch of the Wasatch.²⁸⁹ The same splendid weather pattern still happens today at

²⁸⁸ D. LaChapelle, “The Totality of a Lifetime.”

²⁸⁹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 61.

Alta, and it is still tradition for to hold out hope for sun at the end an overcast day. She loved last runs. In *Deep Powder Snow*, she wrote that “the laughter and beauty... contributed to their bliss. None of us ever missed going on one of these ‘last runs’ no matter what else happened during the day.”²⁹⁰

The goal was always to find fresh powder. “It might take us awhile as we looked down the various slots, but invariably we found it,” she wrote. To find the snow, it helped to be familiar with the place. They had their spots where, depending on the conditions, they were likely to find untouched snow. It also helped to know about how the canyon interacted with weather to produce variable skiing conditions across the mountain. LaChapelle described powder skiing as a culture of awareness, and in Alta, this constituted an awareness of weather, snow, and time—avalanche factors. Passing by Ed as he came home from work and she went out to ski, they likely exchanged a few words about how the mountain was skiing, what the snow was like, and where it might be good.

This kind of exchange is part of the modern endeavor of “prospecting snow.”²⁹¹ As Alex Miller argues, ski tourers are a lot like miners, venturing into the mountains in search of an environmental resource. “One does not become a successful prospector simply by going into the mountains,” Miller writes.²⁹² Successful prospecting for experience successfully in uncontrolled avalanche terrain depends, in part, on the user’s “constant accumulation of environmental knowledge, specifically scientific and experiential understanding of snow conditions and

²⁹⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 40-41.

²⁹¹ Miller, “Spent a Little Time on the Mountain,” 58-66.

²⁹² Miller, “Spent a Little Time on the Mountain,” 49.

geography.”²⁹³ This cultural attention to the environment, combined with government funding and the recreation industry’s demand, “created communities distinct from the flashy socialites of Aspen and Vail,” Miller writes.²⁹⁴

LaChapelle was in good company as she thought about how place impacted powder. Avalanche researchers offered precise, systematic, and scientific frameworks. Naturalist Ruth Kirk writes in her 1997 book, *Snow*, that “Snow isn’t simply snow; it is different kinds of snow. English expresses this poorly. A language developed in a moderate climate, it lacks the subtleties needed to speak adequately of snow.”²⁹⁵ As Mergen discusses in *Snow in America*, skiers had done a fine job developing their own non-scientific terms, but snow science was a modern new language that offered high quality insights. The scientific work Ed performed gradually discerned smaller links within an enigmatic complex of interactions between snow, weather, terrain, and time. This knowledge gave LaChapelle a deep appreciation of the delicate balance of being a powder skier, and it revealed for her the dynamism and creativity of avalanche country.

In *Deep Powder Snow*, LaChapelle described Alta’s working community as “intensely involved in a relationship with earth and sky,” a constant awareness of how weather and time were impacting safety and skiing.²⁹⁶ “Ski instructors, ski patrol, lift crew and others... are directly, physically, and emotionally involved with nature every day,” she wrote. This ongoing relationship was, to some extent, a local’s culture.

²⁹³ Miller, “Spent a Little Time on the Mountain,” 58.

²⁹⁴ Miller, “Spent a Little Time on the Mountain,” 17.

²⁹⁵ Ruth Kirk, *Snow* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1980). 30

²⁹⁶ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 68.

Not having to know about avalanches was part of the experience produced for, marketed to, and purchased by visitors. The public loved to witness the fruits of this involvement, gathering to spectate artillery control on popular ski zones was a headlining event. But they outsourced the knowledge to professionals. As Atwater wrote, “What we perfected at Alta was a fast and effective technique of pacifying what we defined as the *lift-served area*.”²⁹⁷ They created a new commercial place within avalanche country where avalanches were pacified, a specific word that echoes the civilizing rhetoric of settler-colonialism.

Could LaChapelle truly come to know collaborative relationships under this regime of scientific and technological control? LaChapelle was loud about what behavior is valid in the mountains, but she was quiet about this particular aspect of her relationship. What did she think as Ed poisoned his lab-grown depth hoar? What did she think when she heard bombing echo through Little Cottonwood Canyon, day after day, winter after winter? Even in Silverton, when she primarily skied in the uncontrolled backcountry, avalanche control maintained the roads between her home and the towns where groceries were affordable. Given her attention to the dynamics of Euro-American power through the mastery of nature, I have hoped that at some point she analyzed the challenges this context might pose to her theories about turning herself over and relinquishing her will to the place, but she did not.

To explore questions of right relationship and submission to non-human powers LaChapelle neither had nor needed a pure landscape free from human intervention, even scientific, explosive, industrial intervention.²⁹⁸ Non-human agency was always present.

²⁹⁷ Atwater, *The Avalanche Hunters*, 62.

²⁹⁸ For more on the “blurred dichotomies” between city and mountain on the Wasatch Front, see Flynt, “Becoming America’s Ski City,” vii.

“Avalanche control” is a misnomer—a myth, perhaps. As scientific research produced a theoretical framework for understanding snow dynamics, the Alta snow rangers also maintained that firsthand engagement with avalanche country was necessary to account for its epistemological limitations. And even with this hands-on information, avalanche country was still not fully knowable, and is not fully knowable today. Even Atwater knew he did not actually exert total dominance over nature. Sometimes, after his snow rangers rattled off the temperature, wind speed, and other data, he’d ask for the “framus of the frumentum,” a “pretentious expression with no meaning” invented to poke fun at their hubris for attempting to scientifically pin down such spirited environmental phenomena.²⁹⁹ Scientific negotiations with snow only rendered avalanche country *more* safe.³⁰⁰ Maybe visitors didn’t think about the agency of the land, but locals physically interacted with it every day.

LaChapelle hinted at this dynamic in *Deep Powder Snow*, sharing what seems like an early practice for cultivating a non-conquering mindset. At Alta, “we never approached the steep powder slopes with the idea: ‘I can handle this.’ Rather we had ritual sayings to prevent such ‘arrogance of humanism’ statements.”³⁰¹ The way she described it in that book relies on frameworks of ritual and humanism, which she did not have until later, so it is hard to know how she thought about it during the Alta years. But her words speak for themselves. She paused at the top of a ski run, looking at the powder below her, to wonder aloud, “Do you think it’s ready for us yet?”

²⁹⁹ Atwater, *The Avalanche Hunters*, 48.

³⁰⁰ Flynt, “Becoming America’s Ski City,” 124.

³⁰¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 39.

LaChapelle did not write about how she understood the slope telling them, *yes, I am ready*. When recounting the ritual practice, she skipped over this step. She described a ski partner who “would sometimes stand there and say in a worried tone of voice, ‘Do you think the snow will let us?’ before pushing off and floating effortlessly down.”³⁰² Within Alta’s boundaries, where human intervention manufactured stability, they did not necessarily learn how to listen to for the answer to the question. It was a formality, a practice, a beginning.

The Day The Snow Was Not Ready

The winter of 1963 began with drought in the Wasatch Mountains. It was worse than the winter of 1950 in Aspen. “All of us powder snow skiers were on edge with the continual hope that each time it clouded up it would snow, but each time the clouds vanished, and day after day no snow fell... For a powder skier this is devastating,” LaChapelle wrote in *Deep Powder Snow*.³⁰³ As the pattern wore on week after week, jittery antsiness and unfulfilled expectations hardened into real tension. There was only waiting, only skiing the same packed-down, cut up, “dead” snow again and again.³⁰⁴ Traces of snow came, enough to cover the ski trails, but off-piste conditions were hairy, littered with downed trees, stumps, and other obstacles. January and February came in dry and went out dry. On March 1, the weather shifted.

“Finally, the new snow arrived—beautiful powder—longed for, anticipated, delighted in now that it had arrived,” LaChapelle wrote.³⁰⁵ Alta’s avalanche professionals reported that the storm was “short and intense,” loading the skimpy snowpack with eight inches of snow in a

³⁰² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 40-41.

³⁰³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 49, 51.

³⁰⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 56.

³⁰⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 56.

matter of hours, according to a government review of the incident.³⁰⁶ Heightened winds during the heaviest period of precipitation may have drifted snow ten times as deep in certain places. For the skiers, this furious deliverance meant the waiting continued. As they may have known from experience or thanks to avalanche research, loading is a type of rapid change that increases the avalanche danger. On the clear morning in wake of the storm, avalanche control work produced a few small avalanches in steep areas, of minor enough concern that ski patrol determined the conditions stable enough to open avalanche terrain. Skiers flooded the mountain to visit all their favorite lines in deep powder—a joy they had not yet experienced that season.

At the end of the day, LaChapelle joined a group of other skiers at the top of the Wildcat chair for a last run. “The only thing left [unskied] was the steepest of them all, the rarely skied, somewhat feared slopes above Peruvian Gulch,” LaChapelle wrote.³⁰⁷ Seeking more of the same fresh storm snow that was now skied out across the mountain, the skiers headed that way, coasting down the flat ridgeline trail to an avalanche gun tower.

The zone they wanted to ski, Gun Towers, is serious terrain with regular avalanche activity. It is steep—up to 50 degrees in places—and speckled with trees and shallowly buried rocks, which can act as trigger points, which, if touched, could initiate a collapse or fracture and produce an avalanche. It was also a complex slope, with narrow, pinched gulleys sitting below open, planar terrain. Features like these amplify the hazard by forcing mass quantities of snow into a constricted space at accelerating speeds. Here, even a small avalanche could bury, injure,

³⁰⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Wasatch National Forest, *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1910-1966*, ed. by Dale Gallagher, (Alta, UT: Alta Avalanche Study Center, January 1967. 84.

³⁰⁷ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 56.

or kill a person. They skiers hoped to piece together a safety route through. On a day like this, for example, they likely would have avoided areas where the winds may have packed new snow into harder slabs, which can fracture without warning and propagate widely.

LaChapelle was at the end of the group, after stopping to fuss with her ski gear. By the time she got to the top of the run, her friends had already dropped into terrain beyond the ski area, where there was no active mitigation of the avalanche hazard for skiers. Before leaving the boundary encircling the place of human control, did she pause to ask, *is it ready?* Because of the powder frenzy and excitement, because she was behind the rest of her group, or because the slope had already allowed five skiers to descend, it is possible that she did not. They may have discussed the hazard already, while riding the chairlift. The snow they had skied all day gave them reason to hope; largely, it had been light and cohesionless. “Deceptively quiet—not even a small slide, not even a displacement of snow,” she wrote.³⁰⁸ So it was with some small degree of confidence that they skied into the uncontrolled terrain the day after a big storm. As they descended from tighter trees near the ridgeline into more open conifers, they practiced common defensive travel protocol, like skiing one at a time and stopping to wait in protected islands of safety, such that if the slope moved, some members may be outside the avalanche path and able to perform a rescue if needed.³⁰⁹

LaChapelle made it only a few turns down the slope before she cruised out into an opening in the trees and noticed, immediately, a crack in the snow surface shoot 100 feet across the slope.³¹⁰ Ten inches below the surface, a weak layer collapsed. The new storm snow

³⁰⁸ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 56.

³⁰⁹ *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1910-1966*, 84.

³¹⁰ *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1910-1966*, 85.

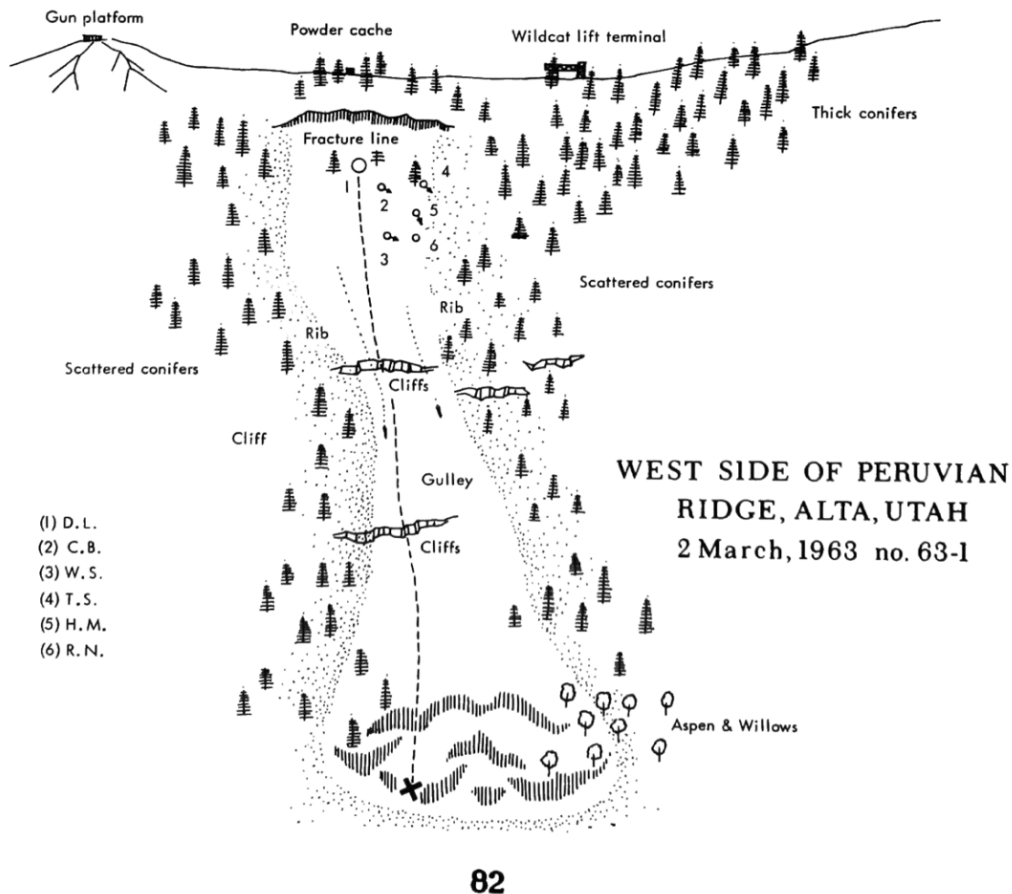
surrendered to the combination of gravity's pull and the steep slope angle. LaChapelle shouted a warning to her companions, but she could not escape the mass of moving snow from pulling her downslope past her partners and over two cliff bands, dragging her through trees and likely over rocks left exposed by the shallow snowpack. The failure initiated on top of a slick sun crust, which had formed earlier, during the long drought. The slab gained speed and mass in the open terrain at the top of the run, and when it barreled into the narrow gullies lower down, layers deeper in the snowpack responded. During its short lifespan, the storm slab entrained more and more snow, evolving into a large, destructive avalanche.

This was before the invention and popularization of avalanche transceivers, so LaChapelle's best chance of survival hinged on her ability to stay on top of the torrential debris. She swam towards the surface, fighting to stick out her arm, knowing that her companions would have to rely on a visual cue to locate and rescue her.

Just as the avalanche had accelerated at an unfathomable rate, it decelerated the moment it encountered the bottom of the gulch, erupting in a cloud of snow over a flatter area thick with aspen and willow. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of chaos lithified and the avalanche was over. "I gave up. I was completely conquered and fought not in the least when the full weight of the whole slope of snow came down on me," LaChapelle wrote.³¹¹ She was fully buried except for her gloved hand poking up through the concrete snow debris, a result of her determination and sheer luck. "The moment it stopped, it settled into solid concrete; however, I could move my hand, so I knew it was out of the snow, and then I passed out," she wrote.³¹²

³¹¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 57.

³¹² LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 52.



82

Figure 8. Diagram from Peruvian Gulch Incident Report. *The Snowy Torrents, 1910-1966*.

She woke up in the hospital the following morning, encased in plaster from her chest to her toes. She was lucky to survive, though she did dislocate her right hip and fracture bones in her left leg. It was a brutal injury, and beginning in the early 1970s, she began Rolfing therapy to help manage everyday pain and improve her mobility. Her long recovery began in a hospital bed in Salt Lake City. Between visitors, LaChapelle explored her magnetic, undeniable attraction to powder: why was she *this* obsessed? She scribbled down the details of her most memorable avalanche encounters, tracing back the precedents leading up to this one. Then at night, when she

could not sleep, she began to “fantasize” about her love of powder snow, imagining an affair with a wily but irresistible and satisfying partner.³¹³

This reflection laid the groundwork for her satire, likely written while healing in her Alta cabin that spring. It’s relatively short, and describes all her avalanche experiences “intimate contacts” with her lover:³¹⁴

This lifelong intimate affair with snow began quietly enough; so quietly I hardly knew the snow was responding to me. Skiing in heavy clouds in Davos, Switzerland, I noticed small cracks suddenly appearing round my skis in the snow and radiating out in all directions. It wasn’t until I picked myself up some yards downhill that I realized it had been a small avalanche—just a gentle touch. So gentle, that had I known my adversary better, he wouldn’t even have swept me off my feet.³¹⁵

She depicted a flirtatious and coy meet-cute that quickly escalated. While writing, she imagined herself writing like Madame de Pompadour, a powerful advisor and mistress to King Louis XV. She also tried on the lens of the “macho types” around her who objectified “major natural entities in nature as she.”³¹⁶ When they summit a mountain, she wrote, “they brag, ‘We conquered her!’” She noted that women did not as commonly indulge in this kind of objectifying anthropomorphizing, and she fancied giving it a try. Maybe it was cathartic to feel in control, for a moment, but ultimately, she chastised herself for acting like these buffoons who overplayed their hands—for acting like someone who hadn’t learned what she had learned from doodling in powder.

³¹³ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 53.

³¹⁴ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 54.

³¹⁵ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 54.

³¹⁶ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 53.

As the affair progressed, her “adversary” grew stealthier and more cunning, she developed better tactics, and their encounters become more thrilling.³¹⁷ The narrative moved through passion, jealousy, trickery, and betrayal; always she coyly maintained her upper hand. But as often as she evaded him, he caught her.

One brilliantly clear afternoon, having skied all the more available slopes, I headed out for one particularly inviting, voluptuous slope... I took the first turn into that yielding, caressing powder. The next thing I knew.... it had exploded with a sudden, chaotic, disintegration in all directions.³¹⁸

Even as “massive, churning blocks” of snow tumbled by, she managed to avoid being buried in the slide.³¹⁹ “Smiling triumphantly, I stood up some 1,500 feet below and skied off to borrow some poles and return to the scene of action.” When she dropped into the Peruvian Gulch in March 1963 the love affair was peaking in its intensity, and she was at the pinnacle of her humanist prowess.

Always a new slope to conquer, always a new man—much the same thing until there comes a day when the slope does not yield to you but instead picks you up and hurls you through the air over cliffs, smashing you against trees and almost having its final way — of destroying you, the would-be conqueror.³²⁰

She concluded the satire on a reconciliatory note, writing, “I hold no grudges in spite of multiple factors. The sheer beauty of the best of our contacts more than made up for the brutalities of the worst and I must confess that I’m still in love with the mad fantastic thing—powder snow.”³²¹

³¹⁷ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 55.

³¹⁸ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 55.

³¹⁹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 56.

³²⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 54.

³²¹ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 57.



Figure 9. LaChapelle Passes Time in the Hospital Playing Guitar, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

This conclusion emphasizes the ongoing nature of her relationship with avalanche country, her willingness to receive what it offered her. She was spared and given a lesson. Her interpretation: Uncontrolled avalanche country won't let you get away with the wrong kind of attitude for long. You will be put in your place if you parade around avalanche country like a conqueror, like the land is yours to take, like the slope is yours to ski. The snow is a being of its own. It is a *gift* from the sky, *act like it*.

Yielding

What did LaChapelle learn from the time the snow was not ready for her? She sharpened her anti-anthropocentric thinking, and her Catholic faith began to crumble, but before either of those outcomes fully emerged, she began writing. A flood of thought poured forth and she embarked on a new chapter in her lifelong process of finding the answers.

In his eulogy for his mother, David recalled the day in 1964, two autumns after the avalanche, when LaChapelle sat him down at the breakfast table with some toast. She told him that she was going to become a writer. “She had clearly arrived at a turning point in her life and felt that at 38 years old, she might finally set forth on the path that was to be a great service to her world,” he said.³²² He felt like maybe their talk was supposed to prepare him for a new era of independence, and, feeling apprehensive, ate a bag of marshmallows to calm his nerves.

She practiced her voice on religion and recreation topics she knew well, though, at the time, separately. She wrote her first book-length work during this time. The title, “First Steps in Faith,” suggests a text for raising Catholic children. It was supposed to be published in 1968 by Herder & Herder, a Christian press, though friends and family say it never went to print.

The vignettes in her “When I first began Writing” folder tell stories of watching rain, hiking to a cave, and skiing. They are rich in descriptive detail and lavishly sublime, far more romantic than her later academic work or personal writing. She witnessed a “brief, broken piece of rainbow—delicately pastel, fleeting.” She stood in an aspen grove and felt herself being “drawn into a world of light... the entire universe is nothing but a manifestation of light.”³²³

³²² D. LaChapelle, “The Totality of a Lifetime.”

³²³ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

One story, typewritten on unlined yellow paper, briefly sketched a ski day in an unnamed location, likely Alta. She narrated in-the-moment, dropping the reader in on the ridge, at the top of the ski run. The snow, having been exposed to more extreme weather, was firm and loud, but they found powder as they descended down on the mountain into more protected terrain. The snow was “relaxing,” she wrote, just her preferred balance of being “soft, yielding yet supporting the skis easily along the whole length of them.”³²⁴

Another sketch described a last run, because of course she wrote about her favorite ski habit. On this undated day, she slipped out of the cabin, hopped on skis, and headed toward Collins lift. As she held the rope tow, it cleared just like she hoped it would. “The fog receded down the valley and it was once more a glorious day,” she wrote. She observed that some of her usual terrain looked “unskied and very inviting.” When she rendezvoused with Charlie and George, they decided to take a quick lap on Wildcat.³²⁵

She let George ski first, then eighted his turns, turning left where he turned right, so that their tracks, together, looked like a neat strand of DNA. Keeping just the right distance behind him, they moved downslope in tandem, sharing a flow of physical interaction with snow, slope, terrain, and each other. One of her favorite ski styles, powder eights are a retro novelty today, after fading out of fashion when the sport progressed into the faster, more modern 1990s and 2000s.³²⁶ But they illustrate the pleasure she took in being collaborative as a skier.

³²⁴ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

³²⁵ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

³²⁶ Matt Hansen, “You Open ‘Em, I Close ‘Em,” *POWDER*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.powder.com/stories/powder-8/>

Back at the Collins lift, they learned that ski patrol was about to open Yellow Trail, a big, open powder field edged with gulleys. They sped to the untouched snow, traversing across the top to scope out their options. Two friends behind her shouted that they were dropping into an early gully, but she kept going to the far end before peeling in. She wrote,

Suddenly realized it was good snow. I pointed my skis downhill and went into the first turn. It was good. The snow responded beautifully and the skis came up of their own power and slid sensuously into the next turn. Now it was right. Just the yielding perfection of powder. No effort. The snow a part of your.³²⁷

Yourself? Your *what*? Maybe the implied possession of “your” felt wrong. Maybe she got distracted from finishing the thought. Maybe she was not yet sure how she and the snow were related. Despite all she had gone through, she did not have the answers. The omission of a single noun illustrates the ongoingness of LaChapelle’s learning process. Even if she didn’t know quite what to say, she was willing to see how it sounded on the page. She was certain that nature was not separate, and she was motivated to figure out how she could express this. She continued to describe her experience,

Pushing the skis down into the snow. The soft yielding of the snow, the gentle resistance almost sensuous as the snow responds, raising your skis into position for the next turn. Then again the yielding flow of the snow.”³²⁸

At the bottom of Yellow Trail, LaChapelle gathered with her partners and they shared a “hushed moment,” then “the exultation of unbelieving wonder.” Then they turned, skating and poling down the long, flattish trail home. Back at the base, she described “standing in the last rays of the sun looking back at the curving faultless tracks,” and looking forward to “the warm intimacy of the bar.”³²⁹ Good stable powder, moving with ease with peers through this

³²⁷ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

³²⁸ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

³²⁹ LaChapelle, “When I first began Writing.”

challenging and creative environment... if she could have bottled up a feeling that described true community, it would be this.

In all three ski writings—these two sketches as well as the satire—LaChapelle described the climax of experience, again and again, as powder *yielding*. She returned to skiing after her avalanche with a longing for this feeling, which may have seemed like the opposite of conquering: consent. When she felt herself yielding to the snow, and the snow yielding to her, it felt right. In these writings, her earliest intentional reflections about learning from non-human beings and place, these were the ideas she wanted to work through first.

Few things yield better than snow, the being she named as her most significant teacher. It is fragile, intimately sensitive to weather, gravity, people, and all the other beings it interacts with. Deep powder snow, in particular, depends on especially temporary assemblages. LaChapelle learned to respond to the world by watching how willing snow is to metamorphose. She tried to be just as open to letting the environment change *her*.

EPILOGUE

THINKING IS DOING AND DOING IS THINKING

On a clear warm morning in the summer of 1981, LaChapelle, 55, rested on an old bench with the sun on her back. The day's early light swept across the upper elevations of Sultan Mountain and alighted her roof before washing over Silverton's neat western grid. In 1975, when she moved to this old mining town, dandelions and tansy grew in her grassy yard. Inspired by the "dump heap" theory of agriculture,³³⁰ LaChapelle began throwing her vegetable waste out across the soil to provide fresh humus. In response, two dozen species of wildflower grew, including dense indigo clusters of alpine gentian, which she adored. 15 species of bird flocked to the yard, attracted by the wild plot. LaChapelle rankled some neighbors, devoted as they were to the thankless labor of lawn maintenance in Silverton's alpine subarctic climate. But that morning, she sat with guests who appreciated her efforts to help the land express itself with more ecological diversity.³³¹

Bill Devall, George Sessions, and Michael Zimmerman—all deep ecologists—drove up the San Juan Skyway to see this garden and to visit the mountains she loved. She invited these environmental thinkers for her Heidegger in the Mountains Symposium, a one-time gathering to sort through some of the pressing philosophical tensions in their shared work.

In response to a late-1960s groundswell of general public awareness about various environmental issues, reform-minded advocates worked within existing institutions to

³³⁰ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 31.

³³¹ LaChapelle, "The Blue Mountains are Constantly Walking."

incrementally advance various policy agendas, like public health and pollution or conservation and land management. Meanwhile, theorists in the Western academy took a different approach: They questioned the basic ethical and ontological underpinnings of their institutions, societies, and worldviews. Deep ecologists like Devall, Sessions, Zimmerman, and LaChapelle combed their disciplines' traditional ethical theories for principles that laid out the moral relationship between human beings, non-human beings, and other aspects of the natural world.³³² In much of what they found, impacts on the activities or lives of non-human beings seemed to be only incidentals, not moral transgressions. Alas, it seemed that their tradition had produced largely a species-specific moral system, in which humans owe obligations to each other exclusively, and non-human things like animals and plants, ecosystems and watersheds, or snow and gravity receive no consideration. Anthropocentrism, as a concept, emerged in the 1970s to critique the human-centered character of these ethical systems.³³³

Deep ecologists identified some usable Western theory—for example, Sessions and Spinoza—but they disagreed on whether Heidegger was an ally to their cause. Though they embraced German philosopher's critique of humanism and modern technology, they worried about the way he discussed human ability to bear witness to the world and to respond with culture, myth, and poetry. Did this backslide into anthropocentrism? Representing the initial wave of reaction against anthropocentrism within their tradition, they were a skeptical group,

³³² Michael E. Zimmerman "From Deep Ecology to Integral Ecology: A Retrospective Study," *The Trumpeter* 30, no. 2 (2014); Bill Devall, "The Deep Ecology Movement," *Natural Resources Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 302-303, <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol20/iss2/6>; Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1985).

³³³ Katie McShane, "Environmental Ethics: An Overview," *Philosophy Compass* 4/3 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00206>.

seeking ideas that were not only non-anthropocentric, but *anti*-anthropocentric, actively combatting narratives that could be used to justify human control and mastery of nature. They were wary of any philosophy that seemed to suggest humans were different or special, but this left them struggling to identify and affirm the moral purpose of humans within a biocentric ethical community.

For the first few days of the Heidegger in the Mountains Conference, resolutions eluded them; this problem was a thorn in the side of deep ecology. The scholars went around and around on this debate, and then, they directed their attention to the mountains. LaChapelle designed the structure of her Heidegger in the Mountains Symposium to reflect the way she liked to learn, through a feedback loop between experiences and ideas. Though theoretical methods were part of her process, LaChapelle insisted upon the insufficiency of reason, helping push the radical environmental movement beyond “merely human” sources.³³⁴ Taking the philosophers out climbing was her way to make sure their movement had more-than-human authorship.

If they were uncertain about their theories, she was certain about her place. In 1978, she published *Earth Wisdom*, her second book, and her first work of deep ecology. Around this time, she began advertising herself as the director of the Way of the Mountain Learning Center, based in Silverton.³³⁵ This was a savvy marketing move by an independent scholar struggling to find a publisher, but it also suggests a sort of milestone, a solidification in her thinking and methods for learning from place.³³⁶ The point of the symposium was to gather her human colleagues with her

³³⁴ LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 281.

³³⁵ *Rapture of the Deep* dates this as 1977, *Future Primitive* dates it as 1975. Her first book, *Earth Festivals*, in 1976, is “A Way of the Mountain book.”

³³⁶ She published *Earth Wisdom* with International College Guild of Tutors Press, which was part of the development of a “new natural” philosophy program. International College was

non-human colleagues. “What I wanted to do was show how the natural beings—mountains, storms, snow, etc.—actually teach us,” she wrote.³³⁷



Figure 10. LaChapelle, Silverton, 1986. LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

founded 1970 in Los Angeles with a remote-learning model for students who wanted to “live in place,” while tutoring with people like Gary Snyder, Paul Shepard, and Vine Deloria. She connected with Naess, Sessions, and others through this program. LaChapelle, *Rapture of the Deep*, 197.

³³⁷ LaChapelle letter to Leonard and Leveton.

She took them to Engineer Mountain, a striking summit positioned between Silverton and Durango in “the still center of a giant mandala” of 14,000-foot mountains, as she wrote in an essay about the conference, which Sessions published in his eco-philosophy newsletter.³³⁸ Then she took her guests into the Weminuche Wilderness for an overnight backpacking trip. From the Cunningham Gulch trailhead, which sits at 10,000 feet, they climbed even higher to travel across broad, rolling tundra on the Continental Divide. The wet summer brought wildflower abundance to the high country and LaChapelle led the group slowly: intentionally not rushing, not overexerting. Mid-afternoon, clouds materialized on faraway summits and as they descended the meadow to their camp at Eldorado Lake, a torrential downpour unleashed. They crawled into sleeping bags and just laid in their tents, the only shelter in such exposed terrain.

Night fell, the waxing moon rose and set, and when the sun reappeared the next morning, the storm was still on, dashing their hopes for a day of climbing. Late in the afternoon, the weather finally cleared and warm golden light swept over the verdant alpine. “So easy in such a light after the cold darkness of the day to understand sun worship,” LaChapelle wrote.³³⁹ *This* was her answer to the anthropocentrism question. She showed her guests that, as Heidegger suggested, one of the valid roles they could play was responding with appreciation and gratitude to the expressions of place. Though she may have wished for mild climbing weather, she knew that *something* interesting would happen in this domain of extreme earth and sky. It was the same fulfilling role she learned to play as a powder skier.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ LaChapelle, “The Blue Mountains are Constantly Walking,” 25.

³³⁹ LaChapelle, “The Blue Mountains are Constantly Walking,” 29.

³⁴⁰ LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow*, 76-78.



Figure 11. Clouds Gather Above Eldorado Lake, author photo.

As LaChapelle wrote in a note to herself, undated but likely from the early 1980s,

Answers are not an accomplished fact. Real answers, which I have found and want to pass on require you t [sic] share in the process of answer as it developed for me because nothing is the answer in itself—the answer lies in the coming together of events, processes.³⁴¹

During the early stages of coalition-building, self-definition, and work on the anthropocentrism question, radical environmental theorists in the United States embraced experiential learning methods like this.

³⁴¹ Dolores LaChapelle, “idea for a lecture,” in untitled black compendium, LaChapelle Estate, Durango, CO.

Soon after LaChapelle's death, Kenneth Maly, a Heidegger scholar, environmental philosopher, and friend, wrote how much he appreciated her understanding that thinking is, as Heidegger put it, a *handlung*:

an action, something that you handle, take into your hands; an experience, something dealt with; what one has to do, deal with, be involved with... I admired this in her, especially since I saw all around me academic philosophers not able to do this... her work is always honest, creative, way-making, and engaged.³⁴²

Thinking is doing and doing is thinking. LaChapelle's style of scholarship was, itself, a way of living out the valid relationships she described.

So far, this study has focused on describing how more-than-human assemblages came together and fell apart to produce *The Way of the Mountain*. The Heidegger in the Mountains Symposium provides an opportunity to pivot, briefly, to the philosophical implications of this history and the relational agency that grounds it.

The stories in LaChapelle's books and records suggest that when beings participate in assemblages that produce ethical knowledge, those assemblages might do a better job at accounting for their needs. Because assemblages do not necessarily come together and fall apart innocently and equally, beings seem to share the basic obligation to the assemblage *itself* of showing up to participate without the intention of preventing the expression of others. All beings bring needs, desires, and agendas, but powerful beings like humans (or avalanches) can express their needs and desires so forcefully that it skews the balance of power in the assemblage.

LaChapelle worried that Euro-American conquest attitudes prevented non-human beings from

³⁴² Kenneth Maly, "Finding Our Undamaged Ecological Self: Dolores LaChapelle as Reminder," *The Trumpeter* 24, no. 1 (2008), 32. This article is a celebration and thorough review of LaChapelle's scholarly contributions.

fully participating. There was no yielding—and, perhaps, this was why their ethical traditions fell short.

All of LaChapelle's scholarship shows a commitment to cultivating relationships with the non-human beings she knew—snow, mountains, storms, and more—that would allow them to fully emerge as beings with ethical standing and communicate how she could live in relationship with them. LaChapelle tried to account for their needs by allowing herself to be influenced by them as a skier and philosopher. Whether she gathered with other beings to create ski tracks or ethical knowledge, she tried to guide her fellow humans in this openness.

Areas For Future Work

After nearly two years of all-consuming effort on this study of LaChapelle and the Way of the Mountain, I am invigorated with new questions. But I feel equally daunted, knowing how much ground there is still to cover, and how much energy it took to travel such a short stretch. I am humbled by the work, and more grateful than ever to LaChapelle for her immense efforts.

I will briefly discuss three key areas of future research potential—the places I feel my interest being drawn, possibly, for a larger project. The first two areas are historical. The third engages culture, philosophy, and avalanche country.

I am interested in developing various themes from Chapter Four, especially the confluence of ethical and scientific frameworks in the LaChapelle household. Dolores and Ed, two scholars who built their relationship by writing each other about snow and skiing, worked on ways of knowing and interacting with place that seem, at times, contradictory and complementary. Leaning more into history of science and field work, I would focus on their early Silverton years, the 1970s and 1980s, when Ed worked on a project to enhance

precipitation for storing water resources in snow. During this time, LaChapelle launched her career as a scholar began moving, more firmly than ever before, away from her Catholicism and toward an understanding of the sacred as emerging from relationships. Her relationships with mountain beings evolved, as she reconnected with Colorado powder and developed new bonds with high-altitude light. As their marriage wore thin, how did she and Ed talk about snow and place?

In Ed's eulogy, David described how his parents were teachers for each other. "My mother tested my father and he her, in very strong ways. Their marriage was not easy. It served as a fire of purification which gave both of them the steady wisdom of their later years."³⁴³ Dolores and Ed died a week apart from each other in winter 2008. He passed away while skiing powder in Colorado, after traveling from his home in McCarthy, Alaska, which sits at 1,401 feet, up to Silverton for his former wife's funeral.

Beyond this Dolores-driven inquiry, do snow scientists and avalanche professionals have questions about how this relationship impacted Ed's research, their contemporary fields of study, and the landscapes they work in? Perhaps as part of this project, I could inquire more broadly into the creative agency of avalanche country, with a more neo-materialist approach that engages more directly with snow science, as well as the historian of science's interest in cultural production of scientific knowledge.

As a second area for future study, I have concerns that LaChapelle's efforts to engage Indigenous, non-Western sources in her scholarship and practice of ritual led to significant

³⁴³ David LaChapelle, "There Was Always the Mountain: The Passing of Edward LaChapelle," *The Avalanche Review* 25, no.4, April 2007.

appropriative elements in her work. I did not address these in this study, as they manifest later in her life, beginning with her first book, *Earth Festivals*, in 1976.

United States settler-colonialism severs and suppresses relationships between people and place. I worry that LaChapelle largely accepted, and even recreated, this dispossession as she tried to develop a native relationship for herself by de-contextualizing and commingling other peoples' sacred teachings and ritual practice. This topic requires a significantly more nuanced discussion than I am able to engage here, but I would like to begin with American Indian Studies scholar Dina Gilio-Whitaker's analysis of the challenges facing countercultural theorists within the modern environmental movement:

The problem was not so much that hippies looked to Indian country for answers. It was that they unconsciously brought with them worldviews and behavior patterns that were inconsistent with Indigenous paradigms and tried to fit Indigenous worldviews and practices into their own cognitive framework... At its core, cultural appropriation is always an invocation of 'authentic' Indians and Indian culture as constructed by settlers, however falsely.³⁴⁴

The social and cultural conditions that LaChapelle rebelled against, *as well as* the alternatives she sought, emerged equally within the context of the settler-colonial American West. Understanding her in this epistemological and political context could yield broader insights into the ways white childhood educators, environmentalists, mothers, and renounced Catholics in the twentieth century United States viewed themselves as people lacking relationships to place, and how they attempted to go about developing them. I imagine this not as a project to independently verify the "authenticity" of LaChapelle's sources, but to assess her

³⁴⁴ Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 104.

spiritual bricolage-style approach,³⁴⁵ especially with ritual. I am motivated more broadly to understand the racial attitudes she held, as well as how her racial identity shaped her work. I believe LaChapelle's work can be a rich cultural resource for skiers and environmentalists wrestling with the same questions she did, but that we need this analytical and historical contextualization, first.

Third, studying LaChapelle has helped me better understand, practically speaking, that avalanche country is a landscape of relationships and beings. In March 2022, I drove down to the San Juan Mountains with some friends to ski. While discussing terrain options, identifying the beings at play helped me assess the conditions and avalanche hazard. We visited during the equinox, which meant that the days were long and the sun was high, warming everything from east to west aspects. As a result, a melt-freeze cycle was locking up snow surface in a thick crust, not very pleasurable to ski. Shaded, north-facing aspects preserved powder snow—but they also preserved persistent weaknesses, which formed during seven weeks of drought and were capable of producing large avalanches.

Sun, crust, powder, corn, persistent weakness and large persistent slab avalanches: these were some of the beings present. Being backcountry skiers, we spent our evenings endlessly discussing them all: how we saw them interact that day, how the forecasted weather might change those interactions, and, ultimately, where we could go to find or avoid them.

At first, we responded by trying to dance away from the equinox sun, searching for powder shots on lower-angle aspects until strong winds blew in from the north. Unexpected joy

³⁴⁵ Amanda J. Lucia, *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

came on our last day, lapping a sunny, broad, meadow near the road. There was a nice zipper crust, just thin enough that it was satisfying to glide through, though we skied with tense muscles at first, wary of catching an edge. A Way of the Mountain-style answer emerged. We couldn't float like in powder or make fast, sweeping turns like on hardpack, but the thin crust showed us how to ski it: in long, wiggly, lines, barely turning. The meadow provided just the right gentle slope angle to ski this way.

Currently, avalanche education for recreationalists draws primarily on earth sciences and social sciences, and LaChapelle has led me to wonder what contribution the humanities have to make to this model. The language of beings and relationships reveals the characters and stories of avalanche country. During trip planning as well as during the trip itself, asking after avalanche problems, environmental factors, or terrain features *as beings* creates bonds that form relationships—and LaChapelle's work argues that this produces useful, familiar knowledge. I don't know whether this knowledge is for surviving an actual ski run in avalanche country or, as LaChapelle would say, for surviving in the true philosophical sense. But by this point, I'm not sure those are actually two different things.

All these problems and possibilities (and many more) are part of LaChapelle's legacy. Her presence is palpable today across ski country, especially in her home San Juan Mountains.³⁴⁶ Many people still care about their friend Dolores, and many others who never knew her are curious about her ideas. But her work is not accessible.

Her best-known book, *Deep Powder Snow*, may be a concise distillation of her knowledge, but it is limited by its concision. Reading her complete works and spending time

³⁴⁶ As one example, see Missy Vogel, "Deep Thoughts," *The Gulch* 18, Winter 2021-2022.

with the archival materials has given me a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the questions she asked and how she went about answering them. I worry that it is easy for spiritually minded skiers to project their own desires onto her, to simplify her ideas, or make her out as a hero. It is easy, I also worry, for scholars to dismiss her and miss out on her contributions. To all these worries, my answer is archival recovery. I hope this study has demonstrated the significance of her work as well as some promising areas for future research. LaChapelle's papers must be reunited, organized, protected, and made accessible.

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