

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Tangible Communitas: A Folkloric Investigation of the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology

By

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## Abstract

### Tangible Communitas: A Folkloric Analysis of the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree

By

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Master of Arts in Anthropology

Visitors flock to highly-urbanized Los Angeles for its culture and sights, the world famous Mount Lee featuring the Hollywood sign is one such destination. While the Hollywood sign remains an internationally recognized symbol of Los Angeles, a small tree has struck a chord of true significance for a community of locals. Atop the Burbank Peak along the Cahuenga Pass a lone tree is visible-- the Wisdom Tree. Locals and some visitors to the city climb to the summit just to visit this special tree. It is decorated by canteens, backpacks, and other items that visitors leave behind, a way of marking their presence. Next to the tree is a large metal tool box that has been converted to a 'wish box.' Notes, overflow from the box. The notes, wishes, letters, and art in the box vary in language and content. People feel compelled to leave a piece of themselves in this box, at this place.

In this thesis, I analyze the tangible articles found in the box, local lore about the Wisdom Tree and wish box, in addition to 21 interviews I conducted with hikers who frequent the tree. I examine hikers' motivations for visiting the tree, their experience while visiting the

tree, and the special meanings they assign to the tree. I utilized a reflexive and reflective methodology, providing a multivocal analysis of this phenomenon.

I argue the Wisdom Tree is an example of anti-structure which permits the restrictive qualities of urban society to be released, allowing for spontaneous *communitas* to manifest. The tree unites individuals by offering them a pilgrimage-type destination and site of respite and reflection that is reached by overcoming strenuous hiking trails that climb the peaks of Griffith Park. The content of notes varies widely: letters expressing personal struggle, loss and abuse are mixed in with grand statements of optimism, wisdom and comedic phallic drawings. At this unique site of Los Angeles folklore individuals connect to nature in spiritual ways despite their diverse experiences and needs, and despite inhabiting a highly dense city where it is often challenging to connect with others in meaningful ways and to form a community.

I assert the Wisdom Tree is a place of non-religious spirituality that attracts urban “pilgrims,” and provides support, healing, community, and a connection to the natural world in a dense urban space.

## SECTION 1

### INTRODUCTION

What a weird thing, writing something in a book of other people's hopes, thoughts, wishes and prayers. As I read through the other messages, I couldn't help but lament the amount of longing in this city. However, at the same time it seems hopeful to leave things for others to find; some serious, some funny, some snarky, cheesy or creative. I thank everyone that has left something in this box for being you; and though I may never know you and we may not get along if I did, thank you. It is people like ya'll that make the world worth living in. I hope you find what your [*sic*] looking for, from the bottom of my heart. If you do- please let me know. Always remember what you do matters. [Anonymous message, Wisdom Tree, November 14, 2014]

The Wisdom Tree is a lone tree sitting atop the Burbank Peak in Los Angeles, California.

This tree lies just below the Cahuenga Peak, the highest point both in Los Angeles, and on the Cahuenga Pass. The Cahuenga Pass connects to Mount Lee, which is where the internationally recognized large white letters of the Hollywood sign are displayed. The Hollywood sign, such a large piece of Los Angeles culture, overshadows the Wisdom Tree.

The singular tree sitting atop the Burbank Peak has many names, most prominently the Wisdom Tree. The Wisdom Tree is a place of local lore, legend, and tradition. This tree unites people, both locals and travelers alike, in a secular pilgrimage to this space. The Wisdom Tree has inspired a unification of individuals that exists without differentiation based on social, economic, political or geographic limitations. Members of this community unite based on the common interest in the pursuit of this tree, and through contribu-

tions to a wish box at the base of the tree, an imagined community has blossomed. The Wisdom Tree allows for the restrictive qualities of urban society to be released allowing for spontaneous communitas to manifest in the anti-structure of the space.

The passage quoted above is an eloquently stated representation of the exact phenomena occurring in this place. The Wisdom Tree unites individuals who recognize they are communicating with strangers, but still feel a deep-seated connection to them. The clear recognition of anonymity and realistic understanding that interaction would not create instantaneous friendship, “and though I may never know you and we may not get along if I did...” is a crucial aspect of this community. It is this very factor that makes this project unique. The Los Angeles Wisdom Tree is a pilgrimage site that has created, and continues to maintain, a community of pilgrims who interact, though never in person. The communication occurs through written notes contained in a tool box. The Wisdom Tree unites many, and therefore has become a figure of local importance, anthropomorphized with names, abilities and character traits; the Wisdom Tree is loved by many for a multitude of reasons.

I was instantly fascinated by this site and wanted nothing more than to learn everything I could about its history, function and importance. I felt myself transforming from a local hiker who had gone to the Wisdom Tree, to a pilgrim, feeling compelled to reach the tree. I felt connected to the space. I even found myself believing the tree was somehow magical. Nonetheless, as I pursued this research, I grew hesitant. My initial interest and even-

tual love for this place caused a very intense moral dilemma. If I continued to research this space, there was no doubt new attention would be drawn to it. Popularity is often the initial stage of destruction for sacred, unique or culturally significant places. The magic of this space lies in that there are so few who know of it, take the time to reach it, and have built and continue to maintain the community associated with it. Should my research draw new attention to this space, I may be a contributing force in the loss of its true magic. Regardless of drawing attention to the Wisdom Tree, my research would undoubtedly revoke at least a small part of the enigmatic nature of this lone tree on this hill. Nonetheless, my fears of unintentional consequences fell to the back of my mind as I realized how important this place was to so many.

Sitting beneath the tree one day, waiting to meet a trail runner for an interview (the only interview I conducted at the tree), I heard a family approach. As they reached the space the three young girls began giggling, running to touch the branches of the tree. The man leading the group, and intuitively the father of the girls, began calling to the family to gather near the wish box. They began looking through the notes. I heard how completely captivated the young girls were reading the words of so many others. They giggled at some notes, correcting spelling and grammar, admired artwork and sighed at sad notes. They spent time looking at all the pieces of paper that represent the individuals who are part of this community. The family sat for a time, enjoying nature and talking about how wonderful this place has been for them.

This experience reinforced my understanding of the special quality of this space. This conversation contributed greatly to my decision. My moral dilemma seemed to lessen with the clear connection the girls found with the notes in the box. I pursued this project with the intention of collecting data to represent how this place is unique to so many in a multitude of ways. The fluidity associated with tradition caused within me an instant urgency. I found that I was striving to collect a snapshot of what this tree meant to the people who were currently using it, in the hopes of documenting the magic before it morphed into something new.

I understand the risks associated with pursuing and sharing research. I know that my interactions, questions, and even my presence will and have had an effect on the site. I have done my best to minimize the effects of my research: providing anonymity to my informants, ensuring I treat the space with respect, and restricting my pursuit of interviews to those who willingly approach me with interest in my research. I did not want to set up camp at the tree, asking people for personal information, begging for interviews or altering the feeling and flow of people who climb to the top to enjoy, even if just a moment, being the only one at the tree. The family's conversation helped guide my research practices.

However, it was a middle-aged man who convinced me that it was not a danger to pursue my research, rather a necessity. His curiosity surrounding my intentions suggested to me that I must pursue this research in order to protect the Wisdom Tree. He had emailed me

expressing concerns regarding what exactly I was doing. He was curious of my intentions, and very protective of the Wisdom Tree. He so eloquently stated that the implicitly understood rules of the tree are being lost as it is gaining popularity. Now, perhaps an explicit code of conduct is necessary. But I am not writing a book of rules, nor am I an authority on such. I hope, however, that through this research, the importance of the Wisdom Tree is emphasized, providing motivation to those who use it to better protect the space. In this thesis, I aim to provide an understanding of how individuals use the Wisdom Tree and maintain the practice of contributing to this shrine, the wish box, and how community forms as a result of these practices. My hope is that through documenting this surprising piece of Los Angeles folklore, I am committing to the historical record descriptions of a place that may be eventually lost to vandals, thieves, or an inevitable wildfire. Traditions emerge and morph. I believe this research to be representative of exactly what it is: data collected from the box in November 2013 and 21 interviews conducted in early 2014. I do not doubt that there have been and will be fluctuations in usage, themes, and importance within this tradition and place. Nevertheless, I hope my description encapsulates the magical quality people see surrounding this place as I studied it; I hope to convey a snapshot of the traditions at the Wisdom Tree at this particular historical moment. I have aimed to preserve what it is that draws so many to this place and creates a unique example of community by writing careful descriptions of the site and the expressions and cultural practices it engenders. At the same time, I analyze the cultural expressions and material objects at the site in order to develop a theoretical argument that challenges the strict association of pilgrimage with religion. Thus, I provide an example of

urban culture that is spiritual in nature, yet is not religious in a traditional sense, and is more akin to the concept of an “imagined community” (Andersen 1983).

The most important outcome of this project is the window I have been afforded onto the overwhelming sense of respect that members of the Wisdom Tree community have for one another, for the tree, and for life. I believe the imagined community connected by their perceptions of the Wisdom Tree find that connection through their understanding of cultural meaning associated with the human experience— life, love, death, stress, friendship, personal growth, and change— it is uniting people from all walks of life, of all different histories, from different places, with different ideologies to create a nondiscriminatory experience of *communitas*. The anonymity of the contributions of the notes provides a non-discriminatory vehicle for expression. I myself had an ‘ah-ha’ moment one night as I was scrolling through quotes on the social media blog builder, Tumblr. This quote in particular by S.K. Louise hit me, “There will always be writers in the world because there will always be pain. There will always be readers for the same reason. In this at least we find solace: problems are universal and in that we’re never truly alone” (S.K. Louise n.d.). Suddenly, I understood a little better how so many visitors had come to see friendship and familiarity in so many strangers.

This project allowed me to deeply empathize with so many. As I read their notes, I came to know their struggles, broken hearts, death, stress, soul searches and often the difficulties they experience in daily life. Others expressed a more positive outlook: the joys of

life, graduating, falling in love, finding oneself, and pursuing one's passion. The Wisdom Tree radiates expressions of individuality, creativity, and emotions, while it also provides a safe place to simply be without judgment and worry. It is a beautiful place that has been nourished with the love, admiration, and advice of many. I began this project as an outsider. And now, I find myself hiking to the tree when I need just a little extra support, a place to think, or time to relax. I believe this place has a very dynamic quality that is poorly described in scholarly works. At times I am at a loss to find the right words to explain exactly how it makes one feel.

### *Historical Background*

America has a long-standing love affair with nature. A deep reverence for nature has been highlighted throughout American history by various cultural movements, including Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Conservationism, and Environmentalism, for instance. My project views the Wisdom Tree and the expressions of an American appreciation of nature, calls to mind these movements. In particular, elements of the Wisdom Tree call to mind the early environmentalist, John Muir, and his views of nature. Muir is one of the most well-known American preservationists and avid explorers in American history. He is also the father of the American National Parks system (Sierra Club n.d.). In the 1800s, Muir spent much of his time exploring the great American wilderness. He wrote about trekking through Yosemite, the Sierra Nevadas, and even the California quarter (Huggins 2014). In 1892 John Muir co-founded the Sierra Club, a premier organization in the Unit-

ed States that is dedicated to wilderness conservation. As stated on their website, "...the Sierra Club is now the nation's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization— with more than two million members and supporters. Our successes range from protecting millions of acres of wilderness to helping pass the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act..." (Sierra Club n.d.). As a result of co-founding the Sierra Club, Muir became recognized as an environmental activist. Muir was also a profound writer. He often took time during his adventures to take notes and reflect on his environment. For example, in his book Our National Parks (1901), Muir provides numerous descriptions of the parks and natural areas that he loved. His descriptions distinguished these areas as important to national culture and identity, and as needing protection for the sake preserving national resources. In "John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature," Donald Worster explains, "Muir was right in assuming that the human passions, including the passion for nature, are among the least culturally constructed parts of our minds: they can antedate and transcend intellectual fashions or social conditioning" (2005: 9). This passion explains this American tradition of wanderlust. Muir held a firm belief that nature was superior to man, as it came from the hand of the creator. Because of his true reverence for the natural world Muir believed, "immersion in wilderness... is important for the physical and spiritual health of human beings," (MacDonald 2014: 62). This worship of the space motivated his lifelong fight to protect wilderness. I believe the Wisdom Tree community echoes these same beliefs, in protection of natural space and assigning a spiritual importance to wilderness.

The wish box at the Wisdom Tree mirrors Muir's passion for reflective writing. Muir typically kept journals of his adventures. For example, John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir (1938) is a collection of journals from adventures in what is now Yosemite, the Sequoia National Park, among other places. Some entries are longer than others, some are just a few sentences. Regardless of the length, Muir named his paths, trees, and places. Muir utilized his journaling as a way of expressing his interaction with the space around him. Moreover, Muir anthropomorphized pieces of nature, claiming them as "friends or neighbors, worthy of camaraderie; 'all the rocks seemed talkative, and more telling and lovable than ever. They are dear friends, and seemed to have warm blood gushing through their granite flesh'" (Huggins 2014). He writes, "...and I love them with a love intensified by long and close companionship" (Muir 1918). We see in Muir's anthropomorphization of nature his extension of personhood to trees, stones and rivers, and that his journal entries are inspired by interaction with nature, the seeds of the American impulse which appears to blossom today in the form of a pilgrimage to and reverence of the Wisdom Tree.

I find Muir's practice of naming of things to be a crucial aspect to how the wilderness became an important element of American identity and sense of belonging to a place. This dynamic also seems to be at work at the Wisdom Tree. As Tuan (1977) explains, space becomes place when attachments are formed. Muir's effort to justify making wilderness areas protected places is an example of this transformation. When Muir viewed nature, he didn't just see open, endless tracts of land and trees. He saw American

cultural resources, which to his mind, needed to be preserved. Muir revered nature for its enigmatic quality and regarded nature as more than good for society, but good for the soul. Thus, by naming wilderness areas and creating policies to protect them, he transformed natural spaces into culturally significant places. In this same way the Wisdom Tree is a natural resource to its community. Individuals living in the dense urban sprawl of Los Angeles see the tree as an escape to a place of freedom and relaxation. It is a symbol of nature's magic, the same magic that Muir saw in Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada. However, the Wisdom Tree is not one of many in a forest. Rather, the Wisdom Tree is the only tree that remains atop the Burbank Peak. Wisdom Tree visitors adamantly protect this tree and place because of its immense importance to them as Muir did with his beloved Sierra wilderness.

Muir's dedication to the protection and preservation of natural space is not only an important piece of American history, but sparked an American tradition of citizens identifying themselves by their claims of having deeply rooted connections to nature. As Muir explained, "The tendency nowadays to wander in wilderness is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home, that wilderness is a necessity..." (1901: 1). Muir's journals express not only his love, but his creative expression of individualized conceptions of the space he explored creating awareness of the importance of the natural world.

Worster explains, “getting back to... nature has become one of the most popular pursuits in the modern world,” (2005: 9). The fascination with modern memoirs such as Cheryl Strayed’s Wild (2012) and Suzanne Roberts’ Almost Somewhere (2012) demonstrate the same admiration for nature and personal experience that Muir’s My First Summer In the Sierra (1911) illustrates. And, the great success of the adaptations of Strayed’s Wild (2012) and Jon Krakauer’s Into the Wild (1996) show an interest relating to this subject, American exploration, personal adventure, in a word: wanderlust. Moreover, these memoirs and stories of adventurers also connect a sense of healing to this exploration of the natural world. Muir’s journals and experiences are reflected in these modern accounts, and similar themes of wanderlust and healing are visible in the objects and notes that are left at the Wisdom Tree in Griffith Park. Indeed, examining the objects and reading the notes calls to mind John Muir and his contributions to defining wilderness as a central symbol of American cultural identity.

Even before Muir, Henry David Thoreau, another naturalist, held a similar practice of romanticizing the natural world. Thoreau, however, was more poetic in his expressions; inspired by nature, he allowed nature to guide his philosophical investigations (Thoreau 1984). Further, Thoreau’s most prominent work, Walden, expresses ironies of his escape from civilization in which it is clear nature is influenced by perception. Wisdom Tree visitors demonstrate this perception based interpretation of nature, believing they are immersed in pristine nature, when truly they are surrounded by all of Los Angeles.

Thoreau abandoned his life in society to become completely immersed in nature hoping to abandon the constraints of 'civilized life' (Thoreau 1970). However, even in a cabin alone in the woods, Thoreau found that he still felt surrounded by society; for example, experiencing consistent company in the woods. The Wisdom Tree parallels Thoreau's experience, when standing the the Wisdom Tree, the views are filled with densely developed urban land. Though, the Wisdom tree provides an escape, a place of refuge despite being entirely social constructed.

Walden is an example of man's desire for escapism. The Wisdom Tree echoes that desire. Thoreau's experience in Walden (1970) expresses a need for freedom from social structure, reverence for nature and the healing qualities of the two. The structure of society has only grown more intense and obvious, as natural undeveloped land disappears, especially in the dense urban space surrounding Griffith Park. While the mechanisms of Thoreau's Walden and the journey Wisdom Tree pilgrims take may be different, the point is the same, escape society and be healed by nature.

Thoreau's writings also emphasize the individual's relationship to nature. Much like Muir, Thoreau "rejects the assumption that man is separate from nature, and locates man as a creature within nature. This is not for the sake of demeaning man, but rather for revealing the vibrancy and richness of human experience," (Dull 2012: 230). Further, it is only through the exploration of nature that man can truly feel alive, as wandering in wilderness allows for conventions to be disrupted and new experiences to blossom (Dull

2012: 231). The Wisdom Tree is a place for many to ‘reject the assumption man is separate from nature’ to feel the ‘vibrancy and richness of human experience’ as this place allows individuals to connect and unite with nature.

Similar to Thoreau’s rejection of society, Ralph Waldo Emerson critiques reliance and encourages self-sustainment through the harmony of human beings in the natural world. Emerson envisioned the natural world as benevolent, kind, and good. By contrast, society is the opposing force. Believing in a dualistic nature of the universe, and the soul being deeply connected to surroundings, Emerson believed individuals should be immersed in nature, goodness and kindness. This connection of the soul to the surroundings is far deeper than simply enjoying nature. While Muir and Thoreau reflected on the positive effects of nature on individuals, Emerson explains nature more as an ideology. Seeing the universe as a connected place, the soul reflecting the surroundings, Emerson believed that the natural world was crucial for the good of all people. Nature, for Emerson, seemingly held a moral framework, a simplicity that was good for the soul, the body and for people.

American history is filled with great explorers and thinkers who reflected or connected with nature. The natural world has been a great inspiration for numerous poets, artists and writers. American history is rooted in exploration and escape. The first pilgrims who came to America were in pursuit of a new land, free from persecution. America was inhabited by Native Americans, who utilized and honored the natural landscape. Lewis and Clark, Manifest Destiny and gold rush settlers all reflect the inherent human curiosity that

remains today, as people continue to take adventure and explore. The findings from the PRRI/AAR Religion, Values and Climate Change Survey, Believers, Sympathizes: Why Americans are Conflicted About Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science found that more than six out of ten Americans say they “feel a deep connection with nature and the earth” and more than half of Americans say they “feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe” (PRRI/AAR 2014).

Wanderlust runs deep within the American soul. Because of environmentalists such as Muir there are large areas of wilderness that have been designated as national parks in the United States, and places with distinct natural landscapes such as Half Dome in Yosemite have become national symbols. This connection to nature is sought to be reconstituted in cities as well. Since the 1960s, there has been a movement in the United States to protect public urban parks, for they provide city dwellers with a means to tap into this American love of nature as well as a means to develop and fortify a sense of community (Proshansky et al. 1976; Bachin 2003; Low et al. 2005).

### *Griffith Park*

In the dense and highly urbanized Los Angeles, space for public parks or natural land are few and far between. With such a large amount of development and competition for space, Griffith Park has been a protected piece of public green space and an oasis of hiking and recreation for locals. Without Griffith Park there would be very little natural land

for people of Los Angeles to enjoy. This space provides plain people with access to green public space they may otherwise have no access or transport to. And, due to the immense amount of diversity, this centralized place serves to unify this population. The establishment and success of Griffith Park is crucial to understanding the popularity and accessibility of the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree.

Mount Lee, the Cahuenga Pass and the Burbank Peak are all part of Griffith Park. The land, originally given to the city of Los Angeles by its name sake, Colonel Griffith J. Griffith in 1896, did not include these areas. The original donation of 3,015 acres of Rancho Los Feliz was given by Griffith to create the greatest city park in the world (Eberts 1996: 3-4). Griffith had only two stipulations for his donation to Los Angeles: low rail fares to ensure the park would remain accessible for all and that it be eternally named Griffith Park (Eberts 1996: 4). His donation of this land was perceived by some to be a precaution. It was obvious Los Angeles was destined to become a bustling metropolitan city; Griffith knew land would soon become scarce. Taking action early, his donation provided land just outside the city limits to give ‘plain people’ a place to explore and enjoy (Eberts 1996: 6). While some argue that Griffith was attempting to avoid paying taxes for the large piece of land, unload land he could not sell or was buying social respectability; it was Griffith’s donation that provided the city park with which many Angelenos of the past and present enjoy (Eberts 1996). His two stipulations are met to this day; Griffith Park remains a public park in the middle of Los Angeles, open to all residents of the sprawling and diverse areas that are lumped into the conglomerate of subculture included in the loaded classification of Los Angeles.

Griffith Park embodies the contradictions of both the Santa [Monica mountains] and the city of Los Angeles as a whole. Here on the fringes of Hollywood and just a few miles from downtown Los Angeles is a more than five-square-mile area of steep slopes, volcanic outcrops and rugged canyons, as well as such major cultural venues as the Greek Theater, the Museum of the American West and the Griffith Observatory... [Jaffe 2006: 44]

Griffith Park is filled with 53 miles of trails both for beginners and more strenuous trails for advanced hikers (City of Los Angeles 2015). Small side trails, established hiking paths, fire roads, horse trails and even many closed paved roads are hiked daily.

Griffith Park has a unique geographic location, situated in the middle of the internationally-recognized metropolitan center that is Los Angeles. The park is a small oasis of natural space surrounded entirely by urban development. Los Angeles is a rather odd place geographically in that it is typically understood to be a unified city, though Los Angeles is really many small cities and towns. These places range dramatically from Downtown, Hollywood, East Los Angeles, Glendale, Burbank, Pasadena, West Hollywood, Van Nuys, Sherman Oaks, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica... the list is truly endless. And further, each of these places can be and is often lumped into 'Los Angeles,' though is its own unique place with local subculture, different ethnic distributions, and therefore, cultural influences. Each place is vastly different than the next.

Griffith Park provides a place surrounded by these different cities, cultures, subcultures, and influences, in which people can unite in nature. Griffith Park was established for

recreation, and has been a place in which, as Griffith wanted, ‘plain people’ can visit. However, the Wisdom Tree and Burbank Peak have not always been part of the protected land of Griffith Park. Prior to 2010 the land just west of the ‘H’ of the Hollywood sign’s letters was not part of Griffith Park. The land was once owned by the famous entrepreneur Howard Hughes, who planned to build a beautiful home for actress Ginger Rogers (Pool 2006). The land remained part of Hughes’ estate until 2002 when a group of investors from Chicago purchased the 138 acres with intent to build five estates (Pool 2006). The news of these plans shocked many, causing immediate action to be taken. The “Save the Peak Campaign” along with generous donations from 50 states, 10 countries, councilman Tom LeBonge, Aileen Getty, Tiffany and Company Jewelers, Stephen Spielberg, Tom Hanks and a final \$900,000 from Hugh Hefner to raise the \$12.5 million dollars saved the land. It was purchased and donated to Griffith Park (CNS 2010).

This expansion of Griffith Park protects the land and tree from development, providing a protected space for hiking, climbing and exploring. Without Griffith’s initial donation of the space and the protection of the land, the Wisdom Tree may not exist as such an integral part of local Los Angeles folklore. The establishment of this space as one of importance provides motivation for exploration. The Wisdom Tree is an important place which allows for the differentiation caused by social, economic, political, geographic and other pervasive categories to be overcome. The community associated with the tree is one based on common interest and an ethos of acceptance.

It is important to note that this area lacks a written history. The Los Angeles Wisdom Tree instead has a unique oral history. Some claim to have met the man who planted the tree, though some call him John others Jim. Others know nothing about the tree's history except the fact it survived what many call simply 'the fire.' The fire occurred in 2007 when two young boys lit fireworks in apartments on the outskirts of Griffith Park. The fire destroyed much of the park, including Dante's View, a local hiking spot, the bird sanctuary, and threatened the Griffith Observatory. All but one tree was destroyed on Burbank Peak — the Wisdom Tree.



Image 1: The Los Angeles Wisdom Tree

This fire created the silhouette of the Burbank Peak, which so prominently displays this lone tree standing above the city. It was this fire which initially created a curiosity about

the tree. People could now see that there was a destination atop the hill, and soon began climbing to it. Prior to the fire there was not a single path to the tree, let alone the multitude which exist today. One informant remembers there being only a small trail, likely made by animals such as coyotes or deer, which guided him in the right direction.

Though, he explained that it only took him so far, he had to navigate through the charred brush native to Southern California to reach the tree on his first hike.

### *Significance of Trees*

The Wisdom Tree became a destination many longed to reach. While mountain peaks are typical hiking destinations, trees have also been noted as destinations. Trees have a long history of importance to people, both in daily life and ritual contexts. Lists exist on the internet of famous or important trees. Some trees are famous for their “demographics.” For example, Arbol del Tule a Montezuma Cypress in Oaxaca has the stoutest trunk in the world (Touropia n.d.). General Sherman, a giant Sequoia in the Giant Forest in the Sequoia National Park in California, is one of the largest trees in the world, measuring 36.5 feet along the base (Touropia n.d.). Methuselah, a Bristle Cone Pine in the White Mountains in California, is believed to be the oldest living non-clonal organism at 4,845 years old. The oldest clonal organism is Old Tjikko a Norway Spruce tree in Sweden—9,550 years old (Telegraph Travel n.d.). The Tree of Life in Bahrain is famous for being 400 to 500 years old and for growing in the middle of the desert (Touropia n.d.).

Tales, legends and lore such as the Tree of Life being the location of the Garden of Eden are also common. The Cotton Tree in Freetown, Sierra Leone is associated with a group of African slaves who held a Thanksgiving service at the tree when they returned home from fighting the British, and subsequently gaining their freedom, in the American War of Independence (Touropia n.d). The Boab Prison Tree in Derby Australia is believed to have been used to lock up inmates awaiting sentencing in the 1890s (Touropia n.d.). The Major Oak in Sherwood Forest in England is believed to have been where Robin Hood and his outlaws slept (Touropia n.d.). The Major Oak was even voted Britain's favorite tree in 2002 (Messenger 2010).

The Lone Cypress is in Monterey, California, which is famous for being a single tree on a ridge and one of the most notable stops in Pacific Grove (Touropia n.d.). This tree is believed to be about 200 years old and has become a symbol of the northern California coast (Messenger 2010). A chestnut tree in Amsterdam has come to be known as the Anne Frank tree because the young girl described it in her now famous diary (Messenger 2010). The Anne Frank tree is a symbol of hope and inspiration. An elm called the Survivor Tree, survived the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, despite being badly damaged (Telegraph Travel n.d.). These trees carry importance based on their history and symbolism.

Traditions of leaving things or tying things to trees are found cross-culturally, for example, tying cloth and clothes to Cloutie trees in Scotland and Ireland. Cloutie Trees are typ-

ically next to sacred wells. Individuals tie cloth or clothing to the tree after taking water from the well to ensure health (Cloutie Tree n.d.). In Israel, the Druze tie rags to trees for a variety of reasons including to mark a road to a blessed tree or marking the blessed tree, pacifying a tree's spirit, marking the visit to the tree, transferring illness to the tree, breaking an oath, or asking for permission to take fruit from the tree (Dafni 2002).

Furthermore, trees like the Bodhi Tree in India have deeply-seated historical and religious importance. It was believed Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, spent a week staring at the tree in gratitude after having achieved enlightenment. The tree became a sacred spot, even in Buddha's lifetime. And, despite the original tree dying and being replaced, it continues to be a place of pilgrimage (Messenger 2010). Religious practices associated with trees are not uncommon.

“Trees have always been regarded as the first temples of the gods, and sacred groves as their first place of worship and both were held in utmost reverence...” (Dafni 2007).

The Cedars of Gods, in Lebanon, hold deep historical and religious ties, mentioned in the Bible 170 times. Julius Caesar, Herod and Alexander the Great used these Lebanon cedars for timber (Telegraph Travel n.d.). Historically, sacred trees exist in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, modern Paganism, Druidism and indigenous religious traditions.

However, for the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to focus on non-religious motivations. The practices, symbolism and characteristics that are associated with famous trees

have been an important connection to the Wisdom Tree. The commonality among human beings to be so closely linked to trees for a multitude of reasons both cross-culturally and through time has been firmly established in historical writings, examples I mentioned above and modern practices.

The importance of trees within our own culture can be seen in both fictional writing and cinema. The Whomping Willow in *Harry Potter* (2002), Treebeard in *Lord of the Rings* (2002), Grandmother Willow in *Pocahontas* (1995), the apple trees in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the Oak in front of Boo Radley's House in *To Kill A Mocking Bird* (1960) and even Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964) show the connection of trees to modern popular culture. Richard Horan wrote an entire book, Seeds (2011), about the trees that inspired famous American writers. People connect with trees easily and casually.

Annually Christians bring trees into their home to decorate for Christmas. The Christmas tree phenomenon spills into other holidays; Halloween, Valentine's Day and Easter trees are also common decorations. There is a trend toward having large trees or branches as centerpieces in weddings. Casual local traditions, such as decorating roadside trees with Christmas decorations, or throwing bras and underwear onto specific 'bra trees' from the chair lift at ski resorts remain understudied, but ever-present. The incorporation of trees into the home, important life events, mass media and meaningful trips shows the importance of trees to individuals. The Wisdom Tree is just a small piece of a long standing tradition to incorporate trees into daily life, important rituals and in some cases, grants

special trees personhood. The Wisdom Tree is not simply a place to hike, but an important symbol for many.

## SECTION 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The Wisdom Tree is the locus of a community of people who connect through the contribution and exploration of a tool box at the base of the tree. The tool box has been converted to a wish box. Individuals leave notes, prayers, wishes, art, and a variety of other things in this box. I have utilized various theories to theorize the meaning of the tree, box, and visitors' journey to the site. This project makes use of an eclectic combination of different theories which reflects a current approach to investigating modern phenomena in cultural anthropology.

First, this process is clearly a tradition. This tradition is not unique as there are many examples of places that are crucial to social connections, community ties, pilgrimage and shrine building. However, this exact manifestation is a tradition unique to this tree in Los Angeles. Additionally, I utilize pilgrimage theory, specifically the healing properties of pilgrimage to explain the motivation for the journey. I use a Turnerian analysis to assert this place as one of community, specifically a community in which spontaneous *communitas* occurs. I argue the Wisdom Tree is an example of anti-structure in which the restrictive qualities of urban society are released allowing for spontaneous *communitas* to manifest. The community formed is created through the actions of pilgrimage and tradition. Further, this community is what Benedict Anderson would have called an imagined

community (1983), as this community does not exist in the physical sense, but instead on a cognitive level. Interactions are not personally dealt, but manifest through the shrine that is the wish box at the base of the tree. Further, individuals feel this connection associated with *communitas* because of this imagined community formed around this pilgrimage tradition.

### *Tradition*

Tradition is a complex concept that is interpreted in a variety of ways to explain many pieces of culture. Tradition can be used as a mechanism for individual expression, group cohesion and reinforcement of socially imposed norms. To begin with, I would like to reference a rather simplistic, but holistic definition of tradition by Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens in Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and their Traditions (2011):

To folklorists the concept of tradition has a much broader conceptual framework than the conventional idea of tradition. Mainstream definitions bring to mind something generations old, passed from an elder to a youth, who then becomes an elder and passes the tradition down to a youth, who then passes it down, and so on. Certainly much folklore is shared this way, but tradition for folklorists entails a cultural understanding of a process of text that is shared within the community, perhaps from generation to generation, but it is more likely shared among those who are current members of a folk group. Traditions may perhaps even be invented within a group as a way to convey and express beliefs to other members of the group or other groups. The concept of tradition and the ways our understanding of it has evolved are central to the study of folklore. [Sim and Stephens 2011: 69]

This definition encompasses tradition's ability to morph and mold itself. Tradition is ambiguously defined because at its core, tradition is ambiguous. Tradition is conceptual, as it is ideas which stimulate action. It is not what we do, but how we do it, that defines a tradition. Only with a cognitive understanding of the tradition can one act out, fulfill or present a tradition. I will be using two separate perspectives to explain the tradition that is occurring at the Wisdom Tree. I believe this tradition has both occurred before, throughout time and is emergent. This specific example has been crafted by this community of individuals to be claimed as their own. Tradition is both in the past and the present. We act out historical examples of tradition, as well as consistently modify and produce it. As humanity, society and expressions change; traditions change.

The act of shrine building, the process of pilgrimage and the connections individuals feel to nature are not new. These traditions are cross-cultural and consistent throughout time. Altars and shrines have been included cross-culturally in a multitude of religious worship for thousands of years (Beezley 1997: 91-93). Altars and shrines provide a place for interactions between the individual and the sacred there by allowing the establishment and maintenance of a relationship with the sacred (Magliocco 2001: 8). "Sacred places, in almost every case, demand offerings," (Carmichael et al. 1993: 1) and in the case of the Wisdom Tree, these offerings are often notes, sometimes notebooks, pens, pencils, or a wide array of objects. I am not declaring the Wisdom Tree to be a universally accepted sacred place, nor am I denying it may be sacred to some who traverse the landscape to reach it. Instead, I am drawing attention to the fact that many sacred spaces that include

shrines exist cross-culturally and interactions occur at altars. I believe the Wisdom Tree to be sacred to some, though only a small fraction of those who visit it. Those who find this place to be sacred are those who have created and maintain this community. I believe the shrine or altar at the tree to be informal and ever-changing. While it is a tradition to visit this space and leave things, there is no ritual act aside from the consistency of visiting pilgrims to the space and action of deliberately leaving things.

Shrines are typically placed at what “the western world classes as ‘natural’ features of the ‘landscape,’ such as mountain peaks, springs, river, wood and caves,” (Carmichael et al. 1994: 1) or, in this case, a tree. For example, in James S. Griffith’s chapter “A Mountain and A Shrine,” in Beliefs and Holy Shrines (1992), Griffith explains the Tohono O’odham Nation’s practice of shrine building on a mountain, Baboquivari, in the Altar Valley in southwest Arizona. This place is believed to be the home of I’itoi, the creator of the Tohono O’odham people (Griffith 1992: 15). People leave arrows, a prayer stick with an eagle’s feather, yucca fibers, cigarettes and blue glass beads as offerings to I’itoi (Griffith 1992).

The Children’s Shrine is another such location for the Tohono O’odham Nation. The story says that once, long ago, an instance of a farmer angrily chasing after a badger, then digging a hole, caused a great flood. Because badgers are not to be chased after, nothing put in the hole would stop the water from flowing. A medicine man then claimed that two boys and two girls would need to be sacrificed in order for the water to stop (Griffith

1992: 23-4). The shrine that memorializes this story and has been cared for for centuries. It is now protected from vandalism by a fence. This shrine is renewed every four years in a four-day ceremony (Griffith 1992: 26).

While these examples from the Tohono O'odham Nation are not directly related to the shrine building processes at the Wisdom Tree, I believe examples such as the Baboquivari shrine for I'itoi and the Children's Shrine to be representative of the existence of shrine building as being ideologically connected, socially important and cross-culturally found. The Tohono O'odham shrines illustrate both individual and group connections to nature. The maintenance of these stories of place and traditions associated with these stories are genuine human traditions.

In "Sacred Beliefs and Beliefs of Sacredness," Jane Hurbert (1994) explains the concept of sacred typically implies restrictions, "and generally means that something that is said to be sacred, whether it be an object or a site (or person), must be placed apart from everyday things or places, so that its special significance can be recognized, and rules regarding it obeyed" (1994: 11). The Wisdom Tree, as mentioned previously, is a natural feature standing apart from the landscape not only existing within the small piece of preserved natural land surrounded by urban development, but standing as the only tree along a long and prominent ridge seen all around Los Angeles. I question, however, the rules of this space as the rules seem to be changing as the population that visits the tree changes

in age. As the tradition transforms, the rules follow suit. The lack of unified structure allows for alterations to the free space.

Typically shrines are built in special places tied to an ideology or religion, such as in the examples given above. These historical examples are unlike the Wisdom Tree as there is no singular ideology represented in the wish box shrine. While the Wisdom Tree is treated as sacred by this community, the place is not understood to be a sacred place, in large part due to the unconventional composition of the shrine, and the absence of clear ideological unity.

Sacredness is typically associated with religion as the word, which is derived from Latin, refers to the restrictions related to Gods (Hubert 1994: 11). There is not a singular ideology, no unified code or set of rules established to guide these individuals. Instead, there is an overwhelming sense of acceptance as many different religions are represented in notes and more commonly, there is spiritual tone, though a truly ambiguous nature to the ideology of the space.

Historically shrines have been religious, and indeed, many modern examples of shrine building are also overwhelming religious in nature. Contemporary shrine building and memorialization have received scholarly attention in recent literature. As seen in Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World (2008), a variety of contemporary shrines are discussed. The first chapter in the book, “Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?”

the book's editor, Peter Jan Margry discusses the prevalence of non-religious, non-confessional or secular pilgrimage (Margry 2008: 13). Margry introduces Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World as a volume about "the phenomena of 'non-confessional pilgrimage' and the issue of religious pilgrimage versus non-religious or secular pilgrimage" (Margry 2008: 13). The phenomena of these new contemporary non-religious pilgrimages are violently colliding with the traditional religiously motivated, historical accounts of such journeys. Margry argues that it is productive to include both religious and secular journeys within the term pilgrimage because, at its core, pilgrimage is the transcendence into the sacred, individually and collectively (Margry 2008:17).

The interpretation of the definition of religion has been restrictive to the classification of some journeys as a pilgrimage. Margry defines religion as "all notions and ideas that human beings have regarding their experience of the sacred or the supernatural in order to give meaning to life and to have access to transformative powers that may influence their existential condition" (Margry 2008: 17). Thus, Margry defines pilgrimage as, "a journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physical healing or benefit," (Margry 2008: 17). These definitions provide a more inclusive framework for non-religious journeys that have spiritual or non-religious, but still transcendent qualities. Margry's stance is crucial in the case of the Wis-

dom Tree as it is a non-religious pilgrimage— though there is as Margry explains, a transcendence into the sacred both by individuals and a group collectively (Margry 2008: 17).

Because pilgrimage is historically so deeply tied to religion, the cases in Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Modern World (2008) give contemporary examples of memorials and special locations that individuals travel to. The examples in the book are representative of a similar process to what is occurring at the Wisdom Tree. For example, Daniel Wojcik’s “Pre’s Rock: Pilgrimage, Ritual and Runners’ Traditions at the Roadside Shrine for Steve Prefontaine,” discusses an example of a shrine assembled at a rock for a runner, Steve Prefontaine, who was tragically killed in a car accident just as his career peaked. Individuals leave personal objects and important symbolic pieces to honor the runner, who was at the time of his death, the most famous runner in the United States (Wojcik 2008: 201). Wojcik explains, “Pre’s Rock is not only characterized by traditions of memorialization, but... for some individuals it is a place of pilgrimage, reverence and spirituality,” (Wojcik 2008: 203).

Additionally, Wojcik asserts that Prefontaine’s life has many elements of an American folk hero:

...he rose from the ranks of the common man; he was endowed with seemingly super-human powers of physical strength and endurance; he had a personal magnetism, exceptional vitality, and lived life with a gusto; he was a rugged individualist and confronted the elite establishment; he boasted and performed feats of audacity and daring, yet was good-natured and kind hearted. [Dorson 1977: 199-243].

While the Wisdom Tree is not an American folk hero, I would argue that the tree embodies some of the same metaphorical qualities. The Wisdom Tree was planted in a rugged terrain, with little rain and an increased susceptibility to wild fires. It not only survives in such a rough environment, but thrives. The tree then survived a wild fire that destroyed nearly everything for miles around it. This fire is what brought such attention to this tree, making it a singular break in the streamlined silhouette of the rounded hill on which it sits. Those who visit the tree project upon it the power to heal, help, and most obviously, grant wishes. The tree has become a symbol of strength and vitality as it sits above the city, providing people with something to both figuratively and literally look up to. One informant explained, “Every time I drove the busy 101 freeway or was stuck in traffic, I could look up and smile when I saw the distant outline of ‘my’ tree as a sentinel of peace over hectic urban life. I knew I would make the pilgrimage again as soon as I could.”

The pilgrimage to Pre’s rock, and consequent shrine that is consistently maintained, operates similarly to the Wisdom Tree, in that the motivations to honor, encounter or experience both Pre’s rock and the tree are rooted in the projected understanding of both Pre’s character and the Wisdom Tree’s lore.

Wojcik’s example of Pre’s rock is important to recognize as a non-religious, but in some way spiritual place, where individuals make a purposeful visit, to connect with, or honor something in which they believe. The individuals who visit Pre’s rock most definitely be-

lieve in the power and strength that Prefontaine carried in his life, and Wojcik's research would suggest that others may connect to something beyond the memory of Prefontaine, instead a more spiritual connection, that provides individual growth and healing (Wojcik 2008). This may be a connection to what would be considered a social ancestor, someone who comes from the same community, runners for Pre, hikers for the tree, which provides a role model, or a place for introspection, support, someone or something from which to draw strength.

Another example from Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World, Deborah Puccio-Den's "The Anti-Mafia Movement as Religion? The Pilgrimage to Falcone's Tree," discusses a tree planted in memory of a judge, his wife and three bodyguards who were assassinated in the 'Capaci massacre' in 1992 (Puccio-Den 2008). While this example differs greatly from the Wisdom Tree in the motivation for the pilgrimage and the tradition's history, the mechanisms are similar. Further, it is a documented example of a tree being used as a shrine. The tree was named the Falcone tree to honor the life of the anti-Mafia judge, who ferociously investigated the Mafia throughout his career (Puccio-Den 2008). The tree became a shrine for individuals to express their political ideas. While unlike the Falcone Tree, the Wisdom Tree is not a place of political expression, it is a place of personal expression.

At the Falcone Tree, flowers and letters accumulated, and as Puccio-Den argues, the "writing is... a legitimate object of study for the social sciences" (Puccio-Den 2008: 51).

Puccio-Den analyzes drawings and writings as “vehicles for political expression” to “show that these little bits of paper and minuscule acts have contributed widely to establishing the anti-Mafia movement as a cause and a group organization” (Puccio-Den 2008: 51). In a similar fashion, the Wisdom Tree has become a place people journey to, to contribute objects, drawings and letters, which I argue also forms a community. The Wisdom Tree is not focused on expressing any political purpose, but instead expresses individuals’ ideas, wisdom, hopes and regrets. Puccio-Den’s research provides an example of another tree which provides a space for individuals to unite in tangible, written expression. More importantly, Puccio-Den’s use of the drawings and writing as “vehicles for expression” is crucial. The notes, drawings and objects left at the Wisdom Tree are the community’s voice in the same way that the writing at the Falcone Tree provides a means of expression.

In the example of the Wisdom Tree, the shrine is not a distinct and labeled shrine, instead a destination more akin to a pilgrimage site. Individuals build a collection of items and notes, though there is not a singular purpose, worship or manifestation of the representation. There is no unification in the notes’ meaning, purpose, or tone. The shrine is not in memory of someone or something. Rather, the shrine consists of notes that express individual and group accomplishment of reaching the destination, letters and wishes written to the tree asking for personal growth, and confessions to a community of individuals who contribute their time to make the journey to the tree and read the notes.

The pieces simply exist here for as long as they last. Magliocco explains, “altars are ephemeral art. They are often set up to be seen only for a few hours, the duration of a ritual, and then taken down. Although the individual items on the altar might be used again, they will be used in different combinations” (Magliocco 2001: 10). Notes are contributed and left for anyone to use, change, take or destroy. I do not believe individuals see this collection as a shrine, though it operates as one. Individuals unconsciously contribute to this shrine of sorts, not to honor any tale, memory, or fulfill religiously associated practice; but instead to establish themselves as having reached this place. They were there. They are a part of this box. They are part of this community. It constantly changes as notes come and go, or are destroyed by water, sun, or wind. Objects that are brought also come and go, the only consistent piece of this shrine is the occurrence of notes. But because of the fleeting quality of the contributions, and lack of overall unification of the pieces offered to this tree, the shrine’s meaning or theme is ever-changing.

### *Emergent Tradition*

Emergent traditions are a means of cultural movement through time. If tradition did not change, we would exist in the same expressive culture forever. There would be no new art, music, or practices. This often raises questions of authenticity. Can a tradition be authentic if it changed or is changing? Is this a tradition or simply a trend? Culture and tradition are not static. By making tradition and culture stagnant objects, we reduce their importance and power. Tradition and culture change and adapt as individuals explore and

create. Thus, emergent traditions are “traditions in the making,” the evolution of creation and the means for modern cultural expression. Emergent traditions allow individuals to break free from the constraints of social structure and order to express something new and creative that is representative of change in culture throughout time.

I believe the tradition of pilgrimage to the Wisdom Tree is an excellent example of an emergent tradition. Individuals take the common occurrence of hiking in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park and make meaning out of it. The process of trailblazing that had to occur to make this tree accessible, the introduction of a wish box and the notebooks, objects and written words themselves, are creating, altering and maintaining tradition. I believe that this example of an emergent tradition is closely associated with agency and Henry Glassie’s view of tradition and the actor.

In *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (2003), Henry Glassie’s chapter “Tradition,” explores the interaction of players with their surroundings, and traditions. As Glassie explains, “If tradition is a people’s creation out of their own past,” which I believe it to be, “its character is not stasis but continuity; its opposite is not change but oppression, the intrusion of a power that thwarts the course of development,” (Glassie 2003: 177). If traditions were not altered by the actions of the individual via performance, or in a word, agency, tradition would not develop. The static quality of expression would end it. Thus, the Wisdom Tree has undoubtedly been altered by those who visit it. Its name

has changed, its silhouette, its history, and irrefutably the meaning of the Wisdom Tree changes with each different individual's interpretation and usage of this place.

As I will elaborate later, the Wisdom Tree is utilized by two different group of people, both an older (35+) and younger (18-34) generation, which, as one would assume, causes disagreements about the usage of the space. The younger generation typically uses the space as a place to hang out or party. One interview mentions, "If we go late at night we don't bring water, we bring beer." However, the older generation resists those who believe it's a place to party. The younger generation often leaves trash, beer cans, bottles or remnants of camp fires. The older generation despises these actions as they believe them to be destroying this important place. It is not that the older generation does not drink or party, but instead, the older generation does not view this space as the place to do so. The individual as an actor creates and alters the traditions in this place. The usage of the space has a great amount of power in determining its importance and meaning of place.

Further, the Wisdom Tree is a place of community. While many pilgrimages occur in a processional manner, the Wisdom Tree is a place traveled to in both groups and as individuals. The individual's action helps define this place as one of pilgrimage, because it is often the individual who writes the notes contributed to the box. These notes are the foundation for my assertions of spirituality within the place, cementing the importance of the tree to these people. The individual creates and maintains this tradition through their own agency, as an actor.

Margry addresses the issue of individual pilgrimage in “Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?” arguing that the social relationships and motives were being ignored in favor of the performative character of the group, not the individual (Margry 2008: 21). Glassie mentions both Dell Hymes and Richard Bauman in their understanding of the creation of individual lives as performances (Glassie 2003: 184). This perspective of creation as performance connects both communication and phenomenology. This performance occurs within time and place, but also transmits information, communicates culture, tradition and norms. Pilgrims communicate individually to the group. There is an individual voice that is being projected to a group. The group acts within these projected norms that are expressed by individuals. The group is creating the tradition as individuals. It is the individuals performance as a pilgrim and a community member through contributions that allow for the unification of the group in this tradition. For example, the Wisdom Tree welcomes individual hikers, who traverse the trail gaining insight and experience that influences and reinforces their sense of individual spirituality. However, there are also many small groups who travel to the space; these people communicate the expectations within the space, the role of those who visit the tree and together, perform a role in relation to the tree and space.

## *Pilgrimage and Healing*

As explained by Jennifer Westwood, “pilgrimage exists in a multitude of variations. For all the work religious historians, anthropologists, sociologists and geographers have devoted to it in recent decades, there seems to be as yet no clear, overall picture of its nature” (2003: xi). In the case of Victor and Edith Turner, whose research I will be referencing later, pilgrimage was ritually and religiously rooted. However, in the case of the Wisdom Tree, I believe the practice of pilgrimage to be spiritually expressed. There is no religious motivation for this movement as the wish box is not a religious shrine. This place has no religious association and further, there is absolutely no evidence of any singular or dominant religion. Instead, one partakes in the journey to this space because of its identification as a place of meaning, one of healing. Many individuals cite this place as one which allows for healing and personal growth.

Individuals find healing characteristics in the Wisdom Tree. This can be further elaborated with Susan Greenwood’s participatory thinking (2009). Greenwood explains that ‘participation’ means an active belief in things that would be considered illogical, outside of the rational world, or part of the supernatural. This practice of participation requires a suspension of logical thought and an engagement with the possibility of the impossible within the universe. Participation in the magical world view enables individuals to experience the supernatural. Therefore, individuals who travel to the tree with the belief that there is a possibility of a healing experience are more likely to find one. Those who

choose to engage with their surroundings and the possibility of the experience of the Wisdom Tree to provide answers are participating in a magical worldview. Greenwood's participation is also grounded in experience and the ability of a human being to become open to things beyond the easily understood, logical or rational experiences of everyday life. Healing is fueled by participating in the magical world view.

Additionally, for some pilgrimage is going home. The concept of 'home' is unique to human beings among primates (Tuan 1977). Home is a place of healing and recovery for humans (Tuan 1977: 137). Pilgrimage is often related to a religious holy land or a homeland. Like tradition, pilgrimage is a vastly expressed though not easily defined phenomenon. Regardless of definition, pilgrimage provides healing qualities.

In Pilgrimage and Healing Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkleman outline six attributes of healing that are as follows :

- 1) a physical journey with a social, symbolic and physical effect;
- 2) an act of personal empowerment;
- 3) an assertion of the individual's identity in relationship to sacred 'others' that integrates self within collective models;
- 4) the particularizing of individual suffering within broader frameworks that provide meaning;
- 5) a sense of social solidarity from an active connection with a community of fellow pilgrims; and
- 6) alteration of consciousness, eliciting psychophysiological dynamics conducive to supporting a range of bodily healing responses. [Dubisch and Winkleman 2005: x]

The healing dynamics of pilgrimage are important to this specific project. Due in part to the lack of religious association, but strong connection to spirituality, the healing attribut-

es of pilgrimage are innumerable as there is no singular ideology. These dynamics provide a framework for both individual healing, introspection and growth, but also for the connection of fellow pilgrims to one another. While there is typically a unified ideology, the freedom of belief allows for a larger population to experience healing through their journey. The community associated with this place has unified due to their freedom of expression. As outlined in Dubisch and Winkleman's fifth point, "a sense of social solidarity from an active connection with a community of fellow pilgrims," (2005: x) the interactions that occur in the wish box and at the tree provide the opportunity for a community of support that can avoid the restraints of social identification. At this place, these people are simply fellow pilgrims. This fact creates social solidarity in the collective consciousness (Durkheim 1915). Rather than the obvious and visually recognizable difference, we are limited to the difference in our words, hand writing and the messages we choose to share. These words are indicative of a unified understanding of this space as one of importance, accomplishment, respect and community. Dubisch and Winkleman's points will be further elaborated in my data section.

### *Space and Place*

This free space of expression was not discovered, but created. Space and place anthropology provides a clear explanation of the establishment of place through the discovery of space. Yi-Fu Tuan's Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977), explains how place is differentiated from space: "Place can be defined in a variety of ways.

Among them is this: place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest” (161). Individuals see this single tree at the peak of this sloping hill and feel the desire to know this place. It is now a place as “space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning” (Tuan 1977: 136). Individuals use their means of agency to provide themselves the opportunity to attach meaning to space. Simply recognizing the tree as something different from the mountain, or more than just the scene before them, but as a destination, provides space with the meaning of a place. The establishment of this area as one of place further allows individuals to assign their own personal meaning. The Wisdom Tree has been crafted into a place of free expression through individual actors creating it as such.

This space is a specifically important factor in the definition of it as the tree is on a peak in Griffith Park, which is itself surrounded by the city of Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a dense urban landscape. When standing atop the Burbank Peak, where the Wisdom Tree is located, individuals have a feeling of being completely surrounded by Los Angeles. Human beings are very connected to their sensory experience and cognitively expand on their understanding.

Tuan uses an example by William James to illustrate this point: “Consider the notion of vastness. The vastness of an ocean is not directly perceived. ‘We think the ocean as a whole,’ says William James, ‘by multiplying mentally the impression we get at any moment when at sea’” (Tuan 1977: 16). Individuals traveling to this place can experience a

Image 2: View from the Wisdom Tree of Universal City and beyond.



Image 3: View of Lake Hollywood, downtown Los Angeles can be seen in the left corner. The Pacific Ocean can be seen on the far right.



Image 4: View of (from left to right) North Hollywood, Burbank and Glendale.



feeling of seeing all of Los Angeles, a city that stretches on forever. The almost 360 degree view at the tree provides a near reality of seeing the entire city. But individuals connect the space of Los Angeles to this place, the Wisdom Tree.

Further, the recognition and pursuit of this space, identifies it as one of place. As Keith H. Basso explains in Wisdom Sits In Places (1996), the intersection of geographic space, language and culture are understudied. Utilizing his own research on a Western Apache tribe in Arizona, Basso reflects on the connections between the history and symbols associated with a place within the language and culture of a people. The wisdom associated with a place comes from knowing and understanding the space as whole. As Basso so eloquently explains in Wisdom Sits in Places :

Thus, through a vigorous conflation of attentive subject and geographical object, places come to generate their own fields of meaning. So, too, they give rise to their own aesthetic immediacies, their shifting moods and relevancies, their character and spirit. So, even in total stillness, places may seem to speak. But as Sarte makes clear, such voices as places possess should not be mistaken for their own. Animated by the thoughts and feelings of persons who attend to them, places express only what their animators enable them to say like the thirsty sponges to which the philosopher alludes, they yield to consciousness only what consciousness has given them to absorb. Yet, this may be quite considerable, and so it is, as everyone knows, that places actively sensed amount to substantially more than points in physical space. As natural 'reflectors' that return awareness to the source from which it springs, places also provide points from which to look out on life, to grasp one's position in the order of things, to contemplate events from somewhere in particular. Human constructions par excellence, places consist in what gets made of them - in anything and everything they are taken to be - and their disembodied voices, immanent through inaudible, are merely those of people speaking silently to them-

selves. And on numerous occasions, audibly enough, their voices are those of people speaking to each other. [Basso 1996: 108-109]

The Wisdom Tree has become a place, a space of significance because people have identified it as such. People have learned the folk legends about the tree, they recognize the history and the practice of tradition. Basso's assertion of intersection of place, language and culture are crucial to the manifestation of tradition through expressed material culture (i.e. the notes in the wish box). These notes are a representation of language and culture intersecting in a place. There is a clear connection to this land and tree that has created a personality for this tree and this space. The Wisdom Tree is an intersection of language, culture and geography. The Wisdom Tree is a name, a thing to write to, given the power to grant wishes, provide support, be a shoulder to lean on, cry on, confess to, and grow from. This place has been established as a destination through the meaning inscribed by ritualized walking. This is a tradition unique to Los Angeles, but cross-culturally found. Pilgrimage engages both the individual and the group, providing the place for individual growth and group connection.

### *Homeland*

Another interesting piece of space and place theoretical work is the concept of homeland. Tuan explains that homeland is common. Throughout history, different cultures and periods have connected to city and countryside alike, though in different ways. Tuan explains

that cities are admired for their shrines to gods and local heroes, while nature is a place of nature spirits (1977: 158). Tuan asserts that connections to homeland are more invested in cities as people do not live in their sacred natural places (1977: 158). However, in the case of the Wisdom Tree, individuals can connect both to nature and the city in a single trip. By making the journey to this place individuals can see the all-encompassing view of Los Angeles while still connecting to a natural environment. The process of hiking up the trail requires one to be moved from the ground, surrounded by the city, to the peak above it. This experience allows one to look down at all that so typically surrounds them thereby providing a feeling of superiority and possibly ownership. There is no greater way to feel as though you belong than to stand in a place that allows you to see the path from which you've come. Pilgrims can both reflect on the ties to their homeland, or as Tuan explains, shrines to gods and local heroes, and yet still connect to nature, existing in the anti-structure. So this place is one of anti-structure, as will be elaborated later, and of social structure. Individuals at this tree can connect to their spiritual modes of expression, which are innumerable as there is a multitude of ideological expressions. Though, the tree still provides connection to the dense urban city of Los Angeles.

The most iconic landmark in Los Angeles is the globally-recognized Hollywood sign. The Wisdom Tree is just two peaks away from this landmark. And, as Tuan explains, "homeland has its landmarks, which may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefield or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of loyalty

to place” (1977: 159). Thus, I believe the connection to the Hollywood sign provides locals the ability to have a more authentic place to identify with. This is the ‘real Los Angeles,’ while still being a place that many travelers stumble upon. Angelenos can feel the privilege of the local knowledge of this place, but still, it remains connected to an international symbol of the local identity of Los Angeles. The Wisdom Tree is an authentic symbol of their home, while the Hollywood sign is the culturally relevant and understood symbol of their homeland.

The key aspect of Tuan’s ideas of homeland is the recognition that homeland is connected to a visual experience of important and significant images. Home is a concept, not an indefinite space. Home, just as tradition, can change, because home is dependent on context and perspective, though, many individuals site the Wisdom Tree as a place that reminds them of home. The processes of both walking to the tree and experiencing the view at the tree, provide individuals with time to see the path from where they’ve come, as well as the place where they live. The 365 degree view allows me to see my home. I can literally see my house from the Wisdom Tree. Personally, when I reach the tree, I can see each individual neighborhood I frequent. I can find the street I drive to the trail on, I can find the high school I graduated from, the freeway I take to school, the building my grandmother works in downtown and the coffee shop I spend hours doing research in. This place allows individuals to connect to the land and to the space, recognizing it as a place, their home.

This ability to recognize home is crucial in understanding the community building that occurs at the tree. Because there is a lack of differentiating social categories, unity lies in the similarity of each travelers' experience. Los Angeles is an important control. Each of these individuals was at some point in Los Angeles. All of these people have made it to this place and the ability to connect through experience allows for *communitas* to occur.

### *Anti-structure*

Victor Turner, a symbolic anthropologist and an interpretivist, utilizes Arnold van Gennep's The Rites of Passage (1960) to explain the transformational stages of ritual. The process requires isolation, a liminal phase and finally re-inclusion. This concept explores the process of removing oneself from structure and existing without it in a liminal phase, that is neither here nor there, this nor that. "The term *limen* itself (is) the Latin for 'threshold,' selected by van Gennep to apply to the 'transition between'..." (Turner 1982: 41). As Margry explains, "the liminal and transitional character of pilgrimage temporarily eliminates the pilgrim's normal situation and status, and in consequence spontaneous, egalitarian ties are created which Turner refers to as the group experience or 'communitas'" (2008: 21). This liminal phase that is neither society or something outside of the structure of society is what Turner calls, anti-structure. Turner asserts in From Ritual to Theatre that anti-structure is not a structure reversal but instead:

the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely

conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as a class, caste, sex or age-division. [Turner 1982: 44]

This concept of anti-structure allows for the phenomena of *communitas* to occur. In connecting this space with meaning, providing attachment and therefore converting it into a place, also presents anti-structure. As Tuan explains, “place is security, space is freedom,” (1997: 3). The place, the Wisdom Tree, provides a security of community, while allowing for freedom of expression to manifest in the anti-structure of the space.

### *Communitas*

Turner coined the term *communitas* to explain the spontaneous occurrence of universal syncretic experience. *Communitas* has been categorized as ideological, normative and spontaneous. Ideological *communitas* is Turner’s attempt at theoretical concepts to describe spontaneous *communitas* (1982: 48). And normative *communitas* is an attempt by a subculture or group to maintain the relationships of spontaneous *communitas* (1982: 49). Thus the most basic principle of *communitas* can be explained in Turner’s definition and outline of spontaneous *communitas*. Spontaneous *communitas* as explained by Turner occurs as:

a deep and rather intense style of personal interaction. ‘It has something magical about it. Subjectively there is in it a feeling of endless power.’ Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people - friends, congeners - obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which

is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its intersubjective illumination. [Turner 1982: 48]

The existence of this community at the Wisdom Tree is indicative of the “essential us.”

The personal interactions within this place are not physically personal, but committed through the tangible artifacts within the box. Despite the lack of interpersonal interaction, the feeling of removal from problems exists. I believe the spirituality that is expressed within this space demonstrates the freedom from the encumbrances of structure. This allows for personal empowerment, and through empowerment of the individual, the empowerment of the group. The disarmament of individuals also falls within the purview of *communitas*. Turner further explains:

when the mood, style, or ‘fit’ of spontaneous *communitas* is upon us, we place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness. We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic... way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. [Turner 1982: 47-8]

The honesty of the notes and responses demonstrate a lack of these ‘pervasive social categories’ and roles of societal structure. Individuals shed the identities projected upon them by society and allow for personal expression, introspection and evaluation. The result is a freedom which provides the opportunity for a union of fellow pilgrims in a free space. As explained by Thoreau, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” (1970:9). The ability of each individual to grasp a physical object, with another individual’s expression, in a free space, with no ob-

vious differentiating social categories, allows for a connection in the most basic way. These people are connecting to the words of another's experience, seeing themselves in them, feeling sympathy, empathy, comfort, and a union. This sense of community is therefore indicative of *communitas* as it crosses boundaries of socially-sanctioned structure in Los Angeles. However, the manifestation of *communitas* requires anti-structure.

### *Imagined Community*

The anti-structure of the space and the experience of a liminal identity also point to the ability of the space to provide community ties. Dubisch and Winkleman's assertion of a connection to fellow pilgrims, in the case of the Wisdom Tree, is directly connected to what Benedict Anderson (1983) would call an imagined community; the bond felt among pilgrims, as explained by Dubisch and Winkleman, is actually an imagined bond. Anderson explains the phenomenon of nationalism as beginning initially in the unification of religious beliefs. Religious communities still work in this way. Christians believe themselves to be brothers and sisters, though no biological or true kinship ties exist. The unification of their belief system makes them one in the same. They are both a community, people who meet regularly in small groups to practice their beliefs, but also an imagined community of Christian individuals who exist globally. I believe this example of religion helps to illustrate the phenomenon occurring at the Wisdom Tree. The unified understanding and practice of religion is similar to the understanding and practice of hiking to the tree and contributing to the box. The individual pilgrims partake in the trek to the tree ei-

ther singularly or in small groups, similar to how individuals worship. There is a large group of people, however, who also go to this place and participate in the action of contributing to the wish box that are isolated from these other contributors outside of physical notes.

This is an important piece of the phenomenon occurring at the Wisdom Tree. I believe that the group of individuals who travel to this box are connected through the contribution and readership of notes in the wish box. This community is not connected via physical contact or social interaction, rather by the interaction through material objects in the wish box. Therefore, the community exists in thought only. Community members will rarely meet, often only in passing and without planning. Even then, only a small fraction of members of the community will ever come face to face. Notes and responses are made anonymously, or in first name only, removing the need for physical contact or connection. This community exists only in the minds of these people as the physical interaction is replaced with the interactions that occur through the material items within the wish box. The community exists in material objects, detached from the individuals themselves. The box is a representation of a community that only exists within the tangible metal box at the tree.

The practice of pilgrimage to the Wisdom Tree is based in tradition, the human tradition of pilgrimage and shrine assembly, and the local-emergent tradition of urban escapism and individual expression. The manifestation of the wish box was an action of agency, or

as Glassie (2003) would have one believe, performance of membership in this imagined community. The healing attributes of this pilgrimage journey provide a greater sense of individual connection and spirituality.

This project is rooted in the tradition of pilgrimage to this place and the action of contributing to the shrine in the wish box. People have throughout time travelled to places to build shrines, pay their dues, pray, explore, heal and grow. But this specific example is unique to Los Angeles, to this urban landscape, the small lump of nature, surrounded by city. This particular case cannot be found elsewhere because it has been born from the region based on the social structure, population and landscape. This tree is a destination due to the particular history associated with this site. The happenings have moved it from being simply a space to a recognized and glorified place. And further, it is a symbol, for many locals, of home.

The meaning projected onto this tree and land, to the journey of coming to this place and the process of participating in the tradition of contributing to the wish box, has formed a community. This community is imagined. This community exists only in the tangible representation of the physical notes put in the box. Spontaneous *communitas* remains consistently because of those notes and the relinquishment of differentiating social categories required to connect these seemingly unconnected individuals. I believe this place also provides connections where in-

dividuals who may pass each other on the street, of the same or similar class, profession or age, but due to the restrictive, urban organization, or disconnected Los Angeles existence come together in a unified experience.

The natural world is one of anti-structure. Griffith Park is not void of structural encumbrances; it is filled with the social restrictions of politically imposed laws which enforce structure. Though the small trail that removes one from popularly-traveled roads, the pilgrimage journey to the Wisdom Tree is a liminal experience. Individuals are neither in the structure-rich Los Angeles urban landscape, or reached the freedom of the anti-structure of the tree.

First, pilgrimage is clearly a tradition that is cross-culturally practiced. Pilgrimage and shrine building exist throughout history and in an abundance of ways. This tradition is also a Los Angeles tradition. This emergent tradition is crafted specifically within the local landscape and with the influence of social organization and population of individuals. The recent expansion of pilgrimage to include secular and non-religious pilgrimages allows this journey to this place to be included and recognized for its ability to provide transcendence into the sacred. The non-religious spirituality evokes healing which has been documented by Dubisch and Winkleman (2005) as indicative of pilgrimage. These healing qualities also examine the connections made between fellow pilgrims. Utilizing a Turnerian analysis of this phenomena, I argue the community to be one of spontaneous *communitas*,

possible due to the liminal journey to the place that is the epitome of anti-structure  
abandoning the restrictive and pervasive social categories that differentiate these  
individuals within the typical urban social structures.

### SECTION 3

#### METHODOLOGY

To ensure that I investigated both the community associated with the box, and those who simply take the pilgrimage to the space, I utilized textual analysis and interviews. I spent an afternoon in November 2013 collecting photographs of each note, notebook and object in the wish box. This sample is limited, since notes in this sample are dated from spring 2013 to the days before I collected them in November 2013. Nevertheless, I believe this sample to be a representative cross-section as during later trips to the site, I found more notes with similar themes. I believe a sample of more than 1,200 photos is representative of the major themes that are present within this space. Not every note supports my assertions of a place of importance, spiritual connection or even community. Both my sample and new notes found at the tree, consistently represent the themes that I have found to be significant and indicative of a place of importance to the community associated with the space.

In order to substantiate my claim of the Wisdom Tree being a place of non-religious spirituality, I have transcribed my sample of notes in order to both obtain word and phrase frequencies as well as code the document for analysis. In a single-spaced document, formatted in Times New Roman, 12-point font, the transcribed notes fill nearly 100 full pages (about 45,119 words). The word and phrase frequencies, which will be discussed in the data section below, provide evidence to support both my assertions. Data collected

through interviews also support my claims. Additionally, I took various types of field notes. I combined notes written at the site with reflective notes written after a visit to the tree, as well as jottings (Bernard 2011a) of overheard conversations, interactions, and connections that I made while walking on the trail.

I have conducted a total of 21 interviews with informants, individuals who are at least 18 years old, have visited the tree and were willing to talk with me about their experiences. I have chosen to use the word, 'informant' to describe the individuals I interviewed because I believe it is the most accurate way to describe their role within my project. These individuals informed me of their experience and knowledge, therefore informant was more fitting than respondent, collaborator, consultant, or other terms that are used to describe the interviewer-interviewee relationship. In my interviews, I asked a series of seven questions and collected age, gender, ethnicity, and religious identities of each informant. This data was used to compare experiences to determine if there were any differentiating factors among age, gender, ethnicity or religious identity. Questions included: How did you learn about the wisdom tree? How often do you visit? What is your path of travel? Which trail do you take? How do you feel when you visit? Do you make wishes/leave notes/contribute to the wish box? Do you have any stories about the wisdom tree? Have you heard any stories about the wisdom tree? These questions remain open-ended enough as to not restrict individuals from sharing any experience, though provide some guidance as to what it is that I am currently investigating. I shared only that I was pursuing research on the tree and was interested in their experiences prior to the interview as to

not lead questions. I utilized the uh-huh and nodding probes, though individuals I spoke with often were very interested in sharing their experiences and responded well to the questions without the need for use of probes (Bernard 2011b).

In my interviews I utilized both the informal and semi-structured interview. Informal interviews occurred in passing on the trail. To maintain structure and consistency during interviews but simultaneously allowing individuals to share any story they may feel is important, semi-structured interviews were utilized. As explained by Sabina Magliocco, "... by examining a group's expressive culture and aesthetics, we glean more clues about its appeal than through statistical or psychological analyses" (2004:9). The data collected in my textual analysis are important and I believe the interview data provide an accurate representation of the experiences of the space. I utilized informal interviewing; occasionally though, I chose to formally conduct unstructured interviews because as Bernard explains, "There is nothing informal about unstructured interviewing, and nothing deceptive, either. You sit down with another person and hold an interview. Period. Both of you know what you're doing, and there is no shared feeling that you're just engaged in pleasant chitchat," (2011b: 157). I believe it is crucial to both provide informants with the knowledge of your intentions and avoid any bias you may carry as a researcher (Becker 1970; Floyd 1970). Being that I am a strong proponent of environmental conservation and protection, I have strong beliefs about how the space should be used. My project as a whole is intended to share the importance of this space in an effort to motivate more people to protect this land. I made an effort to remove my personal biases from my research

and collection of data. It is important, however, to acknowledge my personal motivations in my presentation.

I intend to be both reflexive and reflective in my methodology. By combining the outcomes of my qualitative interviewing and quantitative word analysis, I provide a well-rounded data set to support my assertions. I utilized Lila Abu-Lughod's practice theory (2014) to avoid a static representation of culture. Instead, I acknowledge the unavoidable consequence of freezing this interpretation with the context of time. By making clear this tradition will continue to adapt through time to those who perform it, I hope to avoid generalizations about this specific tradition.

Additionally, I utilized participant observation to verify both the interview and note data. I traveled to the tree nearly once a week for four months, and about every two weeks for two months after that. I continue to visit the tree, though more infrequently. I ran into complications when the trail I used was closed to the public. A guard stood at the road which led to the Sunset Canyon Ranch trailhead. The restricted access to this trail not only greatly restricted my ability to get to the tree, but the ability of many hikers who also wished to reach the tree.

Prior to the trail closure, I made sure to visit at different times and on different days to see both the population en route to the tree and those using the space around it. I have kept a

journal of my own experiences and intuitions as I have moved from an outsider to a pilgrim of this place.

I believe the presentation of data to be the most crucial aspect of my methodology. However, my identity as a local hiker, nature lover, and a pilgrim of the Wisdom Tree, I found that the boundaries between emic and etic perspectives blurred during the course of my fieldwork; I was forced to contemplate my position as a researcher. As explained by Magliocco, “The trouble with categories such as ‘emic’ and ‘etic,’ ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ is that they presume identity to be fixed and essential, rather than the shifting, negotiated, contextual construction we know it to be,” (2004:15). This was a constant struggle in the beginning stages of my project. I had not realized that I could move between the two categories. I was an insider, a local, a hiker and a spiritual individual. At the same time, I was a researcher, new to this hike and trying to be objective in my view. When I realized that these categories were dependent on context, I felt free to step outside of such constraining labels, and experienced the pilgrimage as an insider and outside simultaneously.

With this new position in the field came the responsibility of addressing a bias associated with this fluidity. The reflexivity of Ruth Behar (1993) helped me to address this issue. Her work taught me to incorporate my own experience in my writing, a strategy that prompted me to examine my perceptions and recognize my biases. Further, it is important to draw attention to the human quality of the social sciences. My words are just that,

mine. I am only capable of my subjective interpretation of my experiences (McCarthy Brown 2001: 18-20). Therefore, this project should be understood as my best attempt at representing this tradition while acknowledging the limits of my fieldwork and my fluid membership of the Wisdom Tree community and academia.

Assuming community members experiences are similar to my own is dangerous, but a mixed methodology is one way to balance these perceptions of the space and experience (Magliocco 2004: 15-17). However, the most important aspect of this tradition is the community associated with the practice. And, the unified practice has stemmed from a connection of experience. The spiritual and healing qualities of this Wisdom Tree have united individuals, motivating them to this space and providing my justification for including myself both as a member of the community and an informant within this project.

And, to ensure that my voice does not overshadow those of my informants, I have chosen to open my project to response. I modeled my research after Elaine Lawless's reciprocal ethnography (2000), providing informants with my presentation of data, the initial drafts of this thesis, and allowing them to respond to its assertions. I will include these responses within my data section.

The following section contains the data I have collected using this methodology.

## SECTION 4

### DATA

#### *Paths*

When the Save the Peak campaign successfully raised enough money to add the land adjacent to the Hollywood sign to Griffith Park, the Wisdom Tree became part of Los Angeles' most well-known recreational park, although the tree did not live in solitude prior to being added to Griffith Park. There was once a cluster of Monterey Pines atop that hill, though the cluster did not have a trail leading to it.

Today, beside a large monument displaying the names of those who donated the money to save the Cahuenga Peak there lies a small foot path. This path leads across the back of the Cahuenga Pass to the Burbank Peak where the Wisdom Tree sits. This is the same path that was once just a trail made by an animal, possibly a coyote or deer. It is now an established trail, hiked by many, and often discovered by tourists who have hiked to the Hollywood sign. This is the trail I was first introduced to and the trail I took each time I went to the tree. I began my hike at Beachwood Canyon, this merges with the Sunset Canyon Trail, meeting Mulholland and finally a paved road which accesses the Hollywood sign. At the last stretch of this paved road, as it curves from the back side of Mount Lee, to the front, just behind the fenced and video monitored letters, there is a large stone with a plaque. This monument is slightly hidden as trees obscure the twist of the path. Despite

the obscurity, the traffic through the area, both tourists visiting the sign and locals hiking to the tree, many new people find this particular path and explore where it leads.



Image 5: The trailhead on Mount Lee leading to the Cahuenga Peak and Wisdom Tree

Early one Saturday morning, I drove up the winding residential road to where I meet the trail to the tree. I quickly found parking because it was still too early for most Los Angeles to get out of their beds. The fog was in the air, dwindling, but lingering. I walked up the steep hill to the trail and made my way, slowly into nature. The trail begins just off a residential street, away from the hustle of the urban streets of Hollywood, but still close enough to the city to be surrounded by smog and visible reminders of the city. I felt the air growing lighter, and my lungs filling deeper. The first part of the hike is a slow gain.

It's only when you diverge from the trail to the Hollywood sign, moving on the smaller trail toward the Wisdom Tree specifically, that the hike becomes challenging. To reach the tree one must climb the Cahuenga Peak, the tallest peak within Los Angeles. As the sun began to shine and as I moved closer to the tree, I felt less exhausted. Once I arrived the summit of the Cahuenga Peak, I noticed how the trail slowly slopes downward before reaching the tree.

I have been stopped many times by both locals and travelers who have given into their curiosity, but have grown exhausted due to the strenuous nature of the trail, asking where it leads. This trail runs along the spine of the Cahuenga Pass. Cahuenga Peak is the tallest point in Los Angeles, and the trail requires you to climb straight up its side. Each time I make the final turn toward the trail head from the paved road, the image of the peak is daunting. However, the strenuous nature of the trail does not stop people from reaching the tree. Often when asked what is at the end of the trail, eyes pop with curiosity and excitement at hearing, "the Wisdom Tree."

This trail is the longest, at about 5.22 miles round trip. Shorter trails are most cited by those I interviewed. A trail beginning at Wonderview Drive, which runs along the Lake Hollywood Reservoir was the route of one informant who began visiting the tree shortly after the fire.



Image 6: Map of trail taken via MapMyHike app

Some prefer this more strenuous trail up a set of switchbacks from Wonderview Drive. Another trail along Forest Lawn Drive requires trespassing. The path begins at a break in a chain link fence. This trail was made to reach the Burbank Swing. A tree on the hill's slope, far lower than the Wisdom Tree, has long been endowed with a rope swing which teenagers have hung, used and replaced for at least a decade. From the swing, a trail to the side of the hill is met and the final stretch of this trail is the same as the one at Wonderview Drive. These two trails have a unique set of dangers: rattlesnakes, though they are throughout the park; trespassing, as both trails have at least a small portion which is privately owned land and finally a homeless man who has set up camp along the trail. A handful of people have mentioned the man when interviewed. A few informants commented on rumors he has a gun, others said he is friendly and just trying to survive a rough time in his life. Regardless, his presence deters some from using that trail.

These three trails are the most cited and frequented, though, many of the people have trailblazed their own unique routes to get to the tree. One man told me of the path he and his friends have developed from the Griffith Observatory. The group moves up the mountain directly above the observatory, Mount Hollywood, and follows the backbone of the mountains. They move from water tower to water tower, peak to peak until they reach the Wisdom Tree. The trip takes them about four hours to complete. This is an excellent example of how individuals create their own pilgrimage path. This is also crucial as the Sunset Canyon route has been closed. Individuals and groups have found ways to access the tree despite the imposed restrictions to a public place. It is important to recognize that this trail is not the only way to reach the tree. The access was not revoked in order to keep people from getting to it. This restriction does effect the population going to the tree, use of other trails, and the ability for the tree to simply be ‘discovered.’ However those who are already aware of the tree are willing to trailblazed a new path. These people are utilizing the multitude of trails to ensure they reach the tree, and in the case of the path from the Griffith Observatory, to spend more time in nature.

I recall that specific Saturday, as I left the tree, headed back down, I felt myself grow heavier. I moved as quickly as possible to escape the space between the Wisdom Tree and my house. The hike back is far less challenging, but I felt compelled to rush. As I reached the bottom of the trail, walking toward the residential street where I had parked, I could smell the smog, the air was heavy with the exhaust of the cars frantically searching for parking, competing for curb space, or a driveway to turn around in. I felt complete dis-

gust watching the competition between these people, the pollution their vehicles were expelling and the tension that was palpable due to their frustrations. But I realized that this intense competition was for that freedom I had just experienced. They too were attempting to get on that trail and away from urban life.

### *Observations*

Following the narrow, but now well-established trail there is a steady elevation gain until you meet the arch of the Cahuenga Peak. The tallest point in Los Angeles, the Cahuenga Peak is the most daunting part of the hike including a few areas where large boulders must be climbed over to continue on the trail. Once at the top of the Cahuenga Peak,



Image 7: View of the Wisdom Tree from the trail

there is a slight decline toward the Burbank Peak through a meadow-like landscape filled with native brush. Just before reaching the Wisdom Tree, with it clearly in sight, there is a slight incline toward the Burbank Peak. The flat plateau of space is cleared in an oval shape. The tree sits on a small ledge before rolling hills. Areas of rocks surround the tree, but are often moved. The tree sits closest to Burbank on the peak, but the majority of the space lies on the side looking outward to the Pacific Ocean and metropolitan Los Angeles (see Images 2-4 on page 41).

I have spent many days observing the interactions of both people with other people and people within the space. Based on these observations I have concluded this is a place where community, individual achievement and adventuresome wandering meet. Individual agency provides motivation to reach this place, the willful act of exploring based on curiosity, which in turn has created this unique community.

For example, one Friday afternoon while at the tree, three women made their way to the GIS marker for the Burbank Peak, just 20 feet from the tree itself. When they reached their destination, each woman took off a backpack and opened it, removing a small bottle of wine and sharing a corkscrew; the women sat and enjoyed their beverage with one another. They spent more than an hour sitting and talking. This was clearly a moment of connection between these women; they discussed the day, their weeks, family, friends and the relaxing quality of the space.

Similarly, a group of young people, three male and one female, arrived just as those three women were leaving. The boys joked they would leave the girl alone. She ignored their playful teasing and moved to the far corner of the flat plateau of the space. She was out of view, hidden among the brush within the curves of the mountain. The boys then did leave her. She sat for nearly 30 minutes alone in silence staring outward.

The view from the top encompasses many things: ocean, dense suburban grids, lakes, mountains, cities, trees, brush, houses, roads and trails can be seen from this one point. This is an all-encompassing view of what Los Angeles is. And yet, even with views of the Pacific Ocean, Lake Hollywood, Toluca Lake and a large part of Griffith Park being the most obvious surroundings, this tree creates a feeling of connection to nature that does not exist away from it. Dense urban surroundings overcome all other glimpses of a natural environment. But, in this space, there is a connection that allows a separation of this tree from the land which surrounds it — both urban and natural. This is conducive to personal inspiration, social connection and spirituality. It is common to see an individual, a couple or even a group of people sitting or standing in silence, simply looking outward, in all directions. There is a sense of accomplishment, home and belonging and of ‘smallness’ that occur when one stands and stares. It is a moment of reflection, a silence that somehow speaks.

Furthermore, individuals create their own space, contributing items and rearranging the surroundings. Many people have carried chairs to the tree. A folding-style camp chair was

there for a long period of time before disappearing. And a large wicker chair stood by the tree for a weekend. A couch once stood at the summit. A small ladder was once resting on the tree's trunk. Today a small green trash can with a lid, bags, and the message LOVE EARTH painted across the front has been left at the tree. While some things are obviously purposefully left at the tree, other times things are simply left. A broken styrofoam ice chest stood next the tree for a time. A bundle of what appeared to be bed sheets were tossed just below the tree. People purposefully bring objects to this space, both for use in the space, but also to contribute to this place. It is both meaningful and accidental in contribution, meaningful items are purposefully left, meaningless items are purposefully left and items are being unintentionally contributed by simply being left.

There have also been what one informant calls 'games' with the rocks in the area. Originally, after a wildfire fire, there was a small wall of rocks surrounding the tree. Since then, rocks are moved regularly. People stack them, pile them and make shapes out of them. A large peace sign was constructed next to the tree. During a time in which there was no wish box, a pile of larger rocks was left just below the tree. People began stuffing their notes into the pile. Also, while the wish box was missing, a few individuals tied their notes to the tree's branches. The tree's branches have been written on, carved and climbed, which many visitors see as disrespectful.



Image 8: The wish box at the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree

### *Wish Box*

The metal wish box is covered in both decorative paint designs and personal additions. The most important of the inscriptions on the box, “My wish is for this wishbox (sic) to remain here,” is written in black ink on the inside of the lid. As previously mentioned, this wish was not granted.

One man who has been hiking to the tree for nearly 20 years remembers the first box. He described it as a military ammo box. This is not uncommon to find at a summit. (To prevent confusion, I will refer to the first box as the ammo box and the box I used for my

data collection as the original wish box). Often, ammo boxes or journals are left at a summit to log those who have reached the destination. Other times trail journals are left along long trails, such as the Appalachian Trail. Some trail journals are also kept by those who take long backpacking journeys along these trails. The man mentioned that he was not surprised when he saw the box, but was intrigued when he began reading the notes. These notes were not simply a name with the corresponding date of the hike. Rather, these notes were confusing, he remembers them as something someone on drugs would write. This tradition of more elaborate messages created this wish box tradition at the Wisdom Tree.

The initial ammo box has since disappeared. There is a tradition of notebooks and note writing at the tree. There was a single composition book. A lunch box filled with notes replaced the composition book. Next, the wish box was placed at the tree when the lunch box went missing. However, early February 2014 brought a new box. Almost immediately there was a notebook, magazines, beads, some pens, and a growing collection of notes. This box followed suit and soon went missing. A replacement 'wish bag' took its spot for a brief time, containing a small notebook and a few notes. As of March 15, 2014 the original wish box, with what appears to be all of the original contents was sitting beneath the Wisdom Tree with new additions, notes and a new notebook. A few weeks later the wish box was joined with an ammo box filled with notes dating far later than those in the wish box. The wish box contained notes from early spring of 2013 to March 2014. Boxes seem to move from the space, but have a magic quality of returning. This seeming game

of wish box stealing and replacement shows the importance of this object. In its absence it is missed and replaced by those who frequent the tree.

People become fascinated with reading these letters and spending time putting a piece of themselves into the collection within the box. This tradition of exploring and contributing to the wish box overcomes its absence. People do not care about the physical object, rather the importance of the tradition associated with it. So much so, it has slowly built a community: a community of people who may have never met, but are connected and remain together in this box.

### *Objects*

The box is not simply filled with note books and paper. There is a variety of objects that are left both in the space and in the box. The objects in the box seem to have no rhyme or reason. I believe this array of objects to be a representation of the diversity of people who visit this place. Coins of various types from different regions, a fractured piece of bone which has been written on, a rubber ducky, dog shaped beads and more conveniently, water bottles and protein bars are among the objects. Additionally, at various times of the year people decorate the tree. For example, Christmas ornaments are hung from the tree in December, tinsel is strung though the tree's branches and a miniature tree, itself decorated itself, was hung off a branch. Paper hearts were hung for Valentines Day.

## *Experience*

In interviews, individuals have mentioned a disconnection for the urban setting below. One woman commented, “I loved to hike out there and be the only person standing there alone... like the tree, yet fully surrounded by millions of residents, freeways, and all of Los Angeles. Kind of awe inspiring and gave me a sense of belonging in L.A. while standing apart as in individual.” This is a place of calm energy that relaxes people. Many informants mention a feeling of accomplishment, awe, relaxation, positive energy, peace and serenity. All interviewees described the experiences as positive, somehow healing or personally gratifying. And, in analysis of the notes in the wish box, even when individuals wrote about negative experiences, they were reflected upon in a positive way. All notes that reference the experience of the tree were bright and optimistic. In the cases where negative, painful or personal experiences were shared, the tree was explained to be a place of healing, reflecting and peace. Many mention the struggle to climb the mountain, but the reward of reaching the Wisdom Tree.

The experience of reaching the tree can be both personally cathartic, but also empowering to the group or community. One man mentions, “There are a lot of people that go up there. You can feel them. You don’t feel alone even if you are. Like when you are hiking up there you think to yourself, talk to yourself but when you get there you recognize you are no longer alone.”

He and many others have mentioned taking other people to the tree. He said they always go and touch the tree, the bark of the trunk, or a branch. Another man mentioned that people are always blown away. It is not uncommon to watch people walk to the tree, placing a hand on a branch, or taking a moment to touch the bark of the trunk. This is a moment of connection, to not only the space, but the tree itself. However, this also leads to individuals who climb the tree. There are tales of people camping out high in the tree's branches.

One key aspect that has emerged as I have conducted my interviews, related to the experience of the space is the implicitly understood rules of the tree are being lost as this place grows in popularity. Perhaps an explicitly stated code is necessary to protect this space as a special one for those who connect with it beyond just a place to hike. One man explains some people, "don't know the meaning of the tree... some people just don't respect it."

By contributing objects there is an increase in the trash that is scattered through this space. To most people, "it's just a spot, a good view" the man finished. To the people who feel a connection to the space, the growing popularity is frightening as it could ruin what makes it so special and meaningful to them.

I believe this sense of agency, that provides individuals with the motivation to escape the structure of urban life may also be influencing the changes to the space. Agency brought the wish boxes to the tree. But, in acting out the tradition, individuals are also using their agency to challenge that tradition. By introducing new objects and people to the space,

human agency alters the tradition at the tree. And, the implicitly understood rules are no longer enough. One man commented, “It’s something you don’t want to share with everyone. It’s something to be respected and a lot of people in L.A. wouldn’t.”

Through interviews and observations it appears that the older generation (35+) have a fear of this place being disrespected, whereas younger individuals (18-34) seem to have modified the usage of this space to fit their needs. The older group sees this place as special, to be protected. Those individuals do not condone climbing the tree, having fire pits, camping, smoking, carving the branches, or leaving objects or items at the tree. These individuals see danger in climbing the tree, as it could damage the branches. The carving and writing on the tree also damages the tree. Fires are simply unsafe in such a dry and fire prone climate. Even the most watched and controlled fire could easily spell disaster for the tree. And leaving objects and at times simply trash, pollutes their pristine piece of hard to find Los Angeles nature.

While the older generation finds serious issues with the youth’s usage of the space, the young people are simply having fun. Many people mention how great a place the Wisdom Tree is to party. These people feel the same connection to this place and are protective of it in a different way. These people want to make this a comfortable and cool place to hangout. Leaving objects, chairs, couches, is simply a way of creating a more comfortable environment to spend time in. Camping at the tree is a way to be connected to it longer, and in a more meaningful way.

Many young people I interviewed mention drinking at the tree, or people who specifically go to the tree to use drugs. One girl recalled a friend disappearing for his birthday. When he finally got in touch with her, he explained that he went to the tree, made a hammock and drank a bottle of cough syrup. He spent the day high, both literally and figuratively, in the tree. Others simply mention bringing coolers of beer to the tree, or going specifically to smoke marijuana. While it is generally the younger generation (18-34) who mention this behavior, it is, logically, not only this age group drinking or smoking at the tree. Instead, I believe the younger generation utilizes this space as a place for social connection, an escape from authority. Conversely, I believe the older generation (35+) is using this as a place of personal spiritual experience.

This type of conflict is common. Many places of pilgrimage and heritage sites have similar issues. Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis have written of a similar conflict at Stonehenge among Pagan groups (2004). Usage of a space is a complex issue that is interpreted differently by each group who intends to use a space. As tradition transcends generational divides, the human actor modifies traditions through time. The acceptable use of space is determined by the individual actor. The tradition, being enacted, is controlled by those who perform the role as expected. Thus, the older generation is interpreting appropriate behavior in a different way than the younger generation. This can be explained by the fluidity of tradition and the agency created by the individual actors.

## *Notes*

One afternoon, while collecting images of the notes in the wish box, a young man and woman approached the tree. They seemed hesitant to approach the box, although I encouraged them to look through the letters. They explained they had never before been to the tree. They took a seat next to me on the rocks that surround the base of the tree. They touched the pages, looking briefly at them, not reading them, but taking a moment to simply look at them. They were immediately fascinated with this overflowing box of handwritten pages. The woman said, "I don't know if I should read these or not," she looked at me and then finished, "but I feel like if they spent the time writing it, someone should read it." I nodded and smiled. In one interview a man voiced his hesitance in reading the notes, wondering if it is too intrusive to read what other people have written. Another man told me he always reads them because he wonders why other people go to the tree and what it means to them. This concern, the worry of being too intrusive or disrespectful, is important. There are no Wisdom Tree police. This is not a high school diary that a worried mother has found. These notes are public. While access to the notes is restricted to the people who hike to the tree and spend the time to read them, these notes are freely available to any able-bodied literate person who takes the initiative to hike to this place and dedicate time to read the words on the pages.

I believe the notes to be the most crucial piece of this project. The notes themselves are what create this tangible communitas, as they are the sole means of communication and

interaction among a group of people who would otherwise not interact, creating this community that is only imagined (Anderson 1983). While the verbal lore and story telling provide individual meaning, the notes form the community.

As I previously mentioned, notes vary from personal words to open public statements. I utilize the Introduction from Pilgrimage and Healing by Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman (2005) to outline the various types of healing that occur through pilgrimage journeys, providing samples of letters which demonstrate these examples. I believe their explanation of the healing practices of pilgrimage help provide a framework for my assertions of this place as one of pilgrimage, spirituality and community.

Dubisch and Winkelman cite Scheper-Hughes and Lock in the term biopsychosociospiritual to describe the all encompassing nature of pilgrimage (2005). The physical, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions are all interconnected in the case of pilgrimage. The following are the healing dynamics cited by Dubisch and Winkelman followed by examples of notes demonstrating these dynamics:

1) a physical journey with a social, symbolic and physical effect

In a letter to the Wisdom Tree, “It definitely was a challenge getting here... my heart was heavy and my lungs were hard to fill. Being here now, my heart is now filled and my lungs are light. My eyes run out of space to see, but there’s still room to feel.”

2) an act of personal empowerment

“At this point, I am deciding that I will make the conscious effort to live my life in a way that will improve my sense of self. I will not let others

overwhelm or absorb my sense of self. I have to continue to be creative in inventing my sense of self. I will discover visions of growth and happiness throughout the process and will live a life of happiness/love/health and success”

- 3) an assertion of the individual’s identity in relationship to sacred ‘others’ that integrates self within collective models

“So blessed to be alive and in the place I am. You are God. Appreciate the little things in life.”

- 4) the particularizing of individual suffering within broader frameworks that provide meaning

“I might be in a bad place but this makes it seem worth while. I can just hope for the best”

- 5) a sense of social solidarity from an active connection with a community of fellow pilgrims

“This shit needs to get better.”  
And in response, “I hope it got better”

- 6) alteration of consciousness, eliciting psychophysiological dynamics conducive to supporting a range of bodily healing responses

“I found a blunt inside this box and smoked it. Always will the 3 of us will (sic) love this spirit tree”

These examples are simply that, examples. There are many more notes that could be used as examples for each of these six categories.

Furthermore, through transcribing the notes found, eliminating only illegible entries and the few contributions that were not in English, I have analyzed word and phrase frequencies. Focusing on the relevant terms, I have found the most frequent words to be: ‘love,’

‘wish,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘time,’ ‘happy,’ ‘hope’ and ‘thank.’ Their mentions are as follows, love-506, wish-505, life-354, tree-335, wisdom-193, time-169, happy-126, hope-113 and thank-103. These words are not religiously rooted, nor ideologically focused. While the word ‘god’ is found a total of 78 times; religious language is far less frequent. In an unfiltered list, meaning common words such as ‘were,’ ‘here,’ ‘to,’ ‘us,’ etc., were not filtered

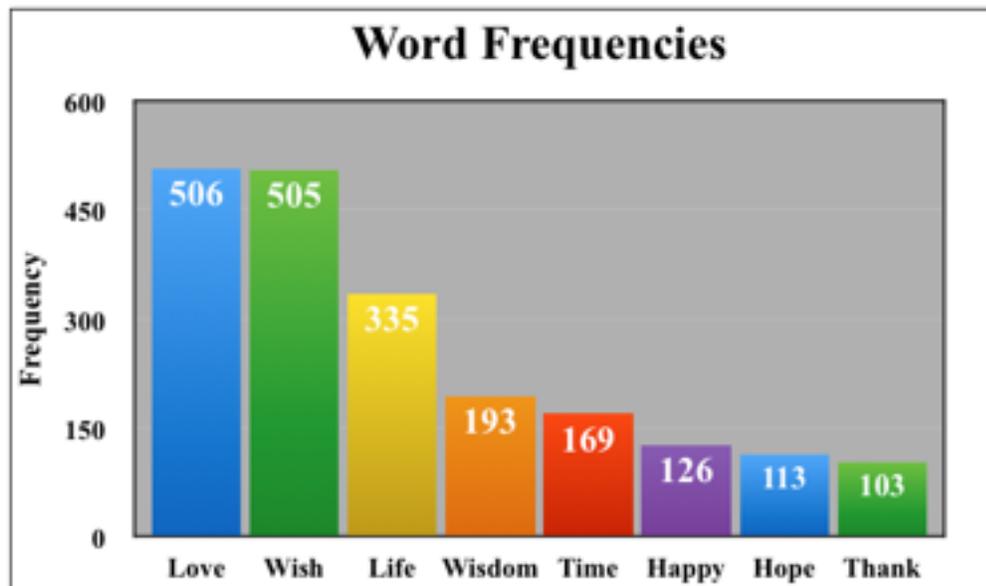


Figure 1: Word frequencies based on textual analysis of notes in the wish box

out; ‘love’ is the 14th most frequent word, with 506 occurrences, where as ‘god’ is 90th with 78 occurrences. Furthermore, focusing on Christian religious language, as Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States, religious language such as the words, ‘Jesus,’ ‘prayer,’ ‘lord,’ ‘heaven’ and even ‘Christmas,’ are far from the counts of non-religious language. ‘Jesus’ is the 318th most frequently used word with a total of 18 mentions. ‘Lord’ is mentioned 9 times, ‘prayer,’ ‘heaven’ and ‘Christmas’ are all mentioned 5 times. The words Christ, savior and church are never mentioned. Thus, the total of this religious language, including the frequencies of the terms: God, Jesus, prayer, lord, heav-

en and Christmas, amounts to a total of 120 mentions. 120 instances of religious language versus the number one non-religious word, love with 506. The occurrence of obviously religious language is far less common than that of non religious language.

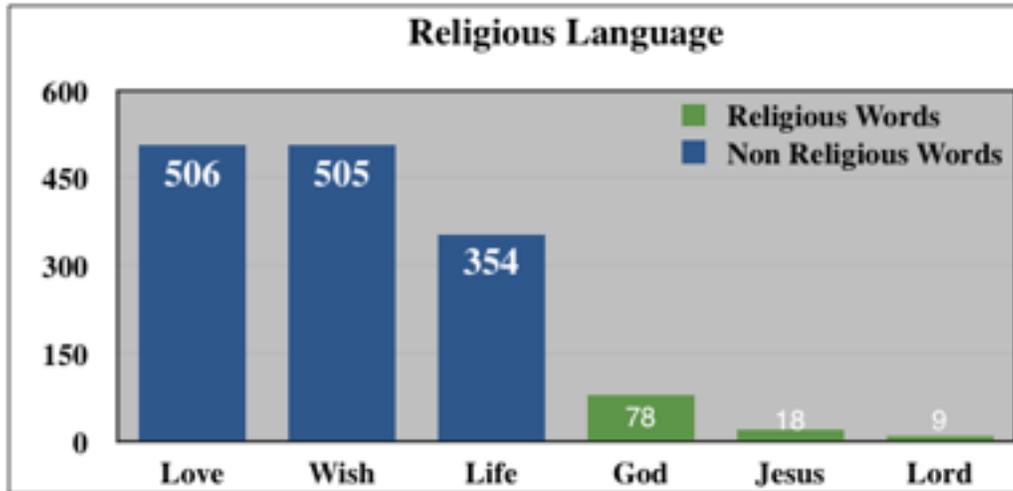


Figure 2: Chart of frequency of religious language within the notes in the wish box

The recent 2012 Pew Survey on Religion, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” has found that 32% of Americans now identify as “spiritual but not religious.” The spirit of the community that centers around the Wisdom Tree seems to be in exactly this category: “spiritual but not religious.” Through my textual analysis of key words such as: ‘wisdom,’ ‘happiness’ and ‘love,’ these intangible ideas are more frequent than the religiously associated: ‘prayer,’ ‘God,’ ‘Jesus,’ ‘heaven,’ ‘lord,’ etc., seemingly supporting this non-religious spirituality found by the Pew survey (2012).

The top five phrases are as follows: “I wish,” “to be,” “wish for,” “wisdom tree,” and “I love.” Additionally, the most popular word, with a total of 2196 mentions is ‘I.’ ‘You’ is mentioned 924 times, ‘me’ is mentioned 409, and finally, ‘we’ is mentioned 266 times. This demonstrates a clear focus on individuals, I, me, you; compared to the collective, we or us (mentioned just 72 times). Again, 3,529 words that are representative of the individual versus the 338 mentions of the group.

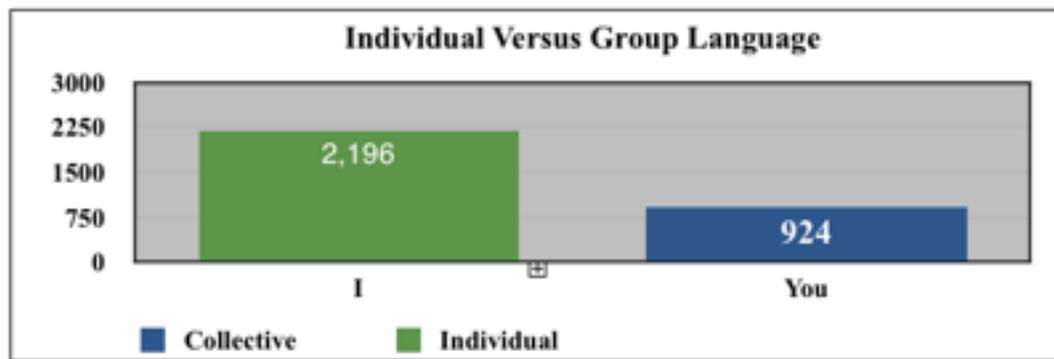


Figure 3: Chart of individual versus group language based on textual analysis of notes in the wish box.

This points to this as a place of individual connection as the key words and phrases are singularly voiced. While this is seemingly contradictory to my assertions of this place as one of community, it in fact supports my ideas. While these notes are singularly voiced, they are collectively understood. Individuals leave pieces of themselves within the box, notes written by themselves, for the community. Individuals write the notes, individuals read the notes and individuals respond to the notes. The process of writing notes and responding to them is not a group activity, rather the collected contents of the box, the combined words are what is representative of this community.

Two notes in particular stand out as a representation of the community at this tree.

I will never say that I have quit. You will never hear those words. I will fight and run and work and cry but I will never quit. I will love and I have lost, but hope will always shine through. I love this city. I love the views. I am strengthened by its beauty. I stand here healing, I stand here open. Mostly, I am thankful for all of you. -LC

This not only demonstrates the individual connection to this space, but the power individuals give the space to heal. The pilgrimage to the tree allows for individual growth and healing. And, the final line, “Mostly, I am thankful for all of you,” shows the connection to the group of pilgrims which partake in the journey to reach the tree. Because this note exists in the box beneath this tree, its audience is limited to the group of people who not only make their way to the tree, but take the time to read the wish box’s contents.

Another excellent example of this connection:

What a weird thing, writing something in a book of other people’s hopes, thoughts, wishes and prayers. As I read through the other messages, I couldn’t help but lament the amount of longing in this city. However, at the same time it seems hopeful to leave things for others to find; some serious, some funny, some snarky, cheesy or creative. I thank everyone that has left something in this box for being you; and though I may never know you and we may not get along if I did, thank you. It is people like ya’ll that make the world worth living in. I hope you find what your [*sic*] looking for, from the bottom of my heart. If you do- please let me know. Always remember what you do matters. [Anonymous message, Wisdom Tree, November 14, 2014]

This shows the importance of the connection in this space. These people do not meet one another. They are living in ‘imagined community, (Anderson 1983)’ and likely they will only come face to face with a small fraction of people who identify as part of this com-

munity, but may still feel a connection with their fellow pilgrims. More importantly, these people recognize that they are part of an imagined community. The interactions that occur through the contributions of notes and the readership of the pilgrims who travel to the space constitute a community that exists only intangibly. This group manifests through words written on a page, providing support for one another, maintaining their bonds through the perpetuation of the tradition of the wish box. A tangible community manifests in the written pages.

### *Interviews*

People claim to connect to something in this space, at this tree. When interviewed people have commented: “At the tree its hard to explain, it feels good, peaceful, earns its name, there is a presence, you learn something,” “I get upset, not about the tree, but about the people who don’t appreciate it... I am protective,” “it taught me to be different, have no purpose and break rules, but to pursue something that I am glad I have pursued. It set me where I wanted to go.” People clearly connect to this space, protect this place and grow from their experience.

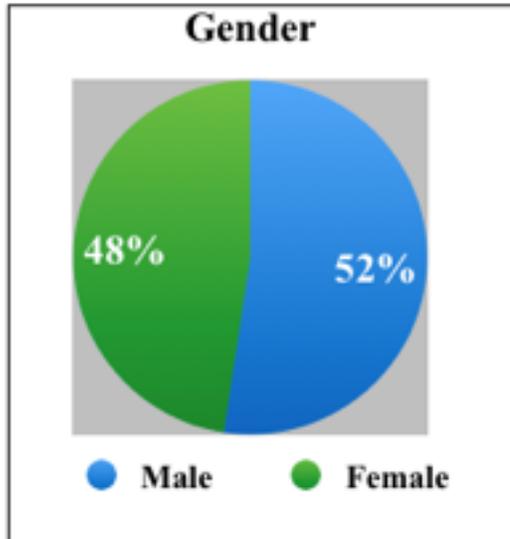


Figure 4: Gender representation in interviewees

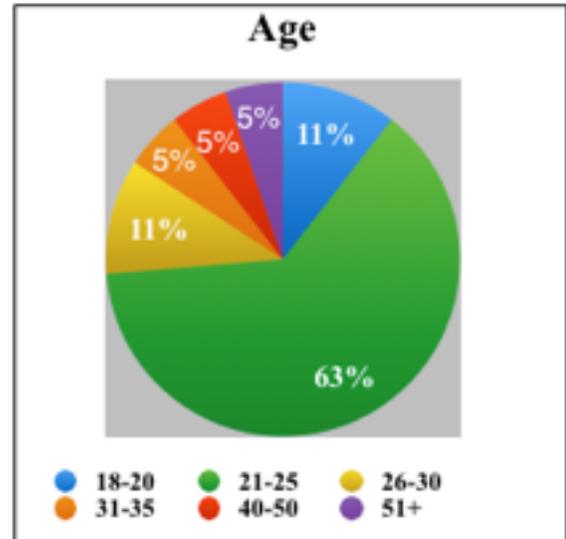


Figure 5: Age representation in interviewees

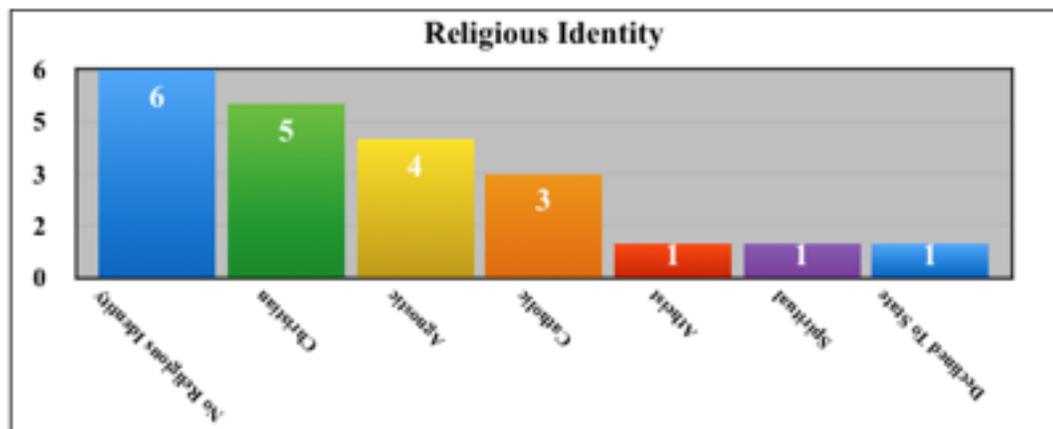


Figure 6: Religious identity represented in interviewees

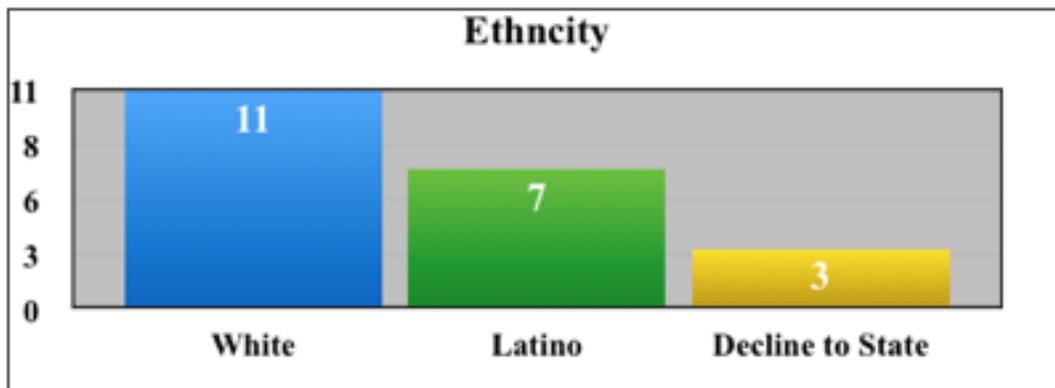


Figure 7: Ethnic identity represented in interviewees

Interviews have provided a wide range of feedback from a varied sample. Of the 21 interviews I conducted, I spoke with 11 males and 10 females, 11 of which were White, seven Latino and three declined to state their ethnicity. The majority of the interviews, 12 were conducted with individuals 21-25. Two individuals were 18-20, two were 26-30, one was 31-35, one 40-50 and one 51+. Religious identities varied; six respondents claimed no religious identity, five were Christian, four were agnostic, three Catholic, one atheist, one spiritual and one declined to state.

The sample was collected through volunteers willing to discuss their experiences, who were at least 18 years of age and who had been to the tree. The sample was collected through both a note I left at the tree with an email to contact me if individuals were interested in sharing their experiences, and a snowball sampling from initial interest.

The interviews have provided some context to the tree's history. I have heard many folktales of its emergence, what has been termed 'the fire' and some interesting personal accounts. It is believed that a man by the name of Victor Hennrey, though in other stories his name is Vince, John or Joe, planted the tree about 20 years ago. He was an arborist and his mother had given him 20 Monterey pines she purchased from a local grocery store in Burbank, just below the Burbank Peak. Some people have told me tales of a man who would come each day and water the tree. Others say it became a tradition to carry up jugs of water for the tree to be watered.

Furthermore, Wisdom Tree is just one of many names. Letters of gratitude are addressed to ‘wisdom tree,’ ‘tree of life,’ ‘the lone tree,’ and ‘wishing tree,” but still others call it the ‘Magic Tree,’ ‘Buffalo Tree,’ or ‘Couch Hill.’ While ‘Buffalo Tree’ was simply a nickname created because two girls thought the tree looked like a buffalo on the hill, both Magic Tree and Couch Hill have stories of their own. One man explained in an interview, “I will not call it Wisdom Tree, I call it Magic Tree, because it’s a spiritual place, a place of growth, wisdom is too limiting, too narrow, I think it’s more about exploring.” He told me the name emerged because when he first began visiting the tree, about 17 years ago, there was no box. And when a military style ammo box, as mentioned previously, was placed at the base of the tree many of the notes made no sense. He thought immediately that people must have been on magic mushrooms when they were writing their notes to contribute to the box. The name stuck with him.

Couch Hill is another interesting detour from the typical Wisdom Tree tales. At one point a young man and his friends carried a couch to the space. They claimed it as a new hang-out. Before long the couch was destroyed, likely by animals, and ripped into a million pieces. Nevertheless, the group continued to hike there regularly. In the flurry of panic leading up to the successful acquisition of the land by the state in the Save the Peak campaign, the group of young friends who had claimed Couch Hill were planning a party. The group assembled, throwing a large party which was the subject of short three minute film, “The Human Party.” The group carried up generators, speakers, ice chests and lights

and had a gigantic party celebrating what could have been their last hoorah at their hang-out. They even installed a zip-line from one peak to another: the zip-line was soon removed. This isn't the only party that has occurred in this space. Every year a large group of about 40-50 people go to the tree for Fourth of July. They spend the night watching the fireworks from all around the Los Angeles area. Two other informants mentioned Fourth of July as a time that heavily populates this place. July 4th incites a party atop the hill. Individuals bring beer and blankets. One woman mentioned there was almost no place to stand in the plateau of space because there were so many bodies. She explained how worth the hike, and overwhelming amount of company, were because you can see the fireworks from each individual city. She compared them to 'mini explosions.'

These types of gatherings, while seemingly harmless, are of concern to many who love this space. Again, the freedom of the anti-structure within the space is allowing for manipulation of the implicitly assumed rules. One man was upset about "The Human Party" because the group had lit a fire. As mentioned previously, the fire in 2007 that devastated Griffith Park nearly killed the Wisdom Tree. Ironically, it was the fire that destroyed so much of the park that piqued the interest of many, creating this place, the Wisdom Tree. The implicitly understood rules of respecting the space are interpreted differently by different individuals, and more broadly, by different age groups.

It was after the fire that the couch emerged and the Human Party happened. After 9/11 a flag pole was installed just behind the plateau. However, the when climbing to the tree

from the back side, on Wonderview Drive, the flag competed visually with the tree. Before long, the flag pole was cut off the monument. One man commented, “when I saw it I thought it was an interesting idea, but why there? This place already has an important meaning for a lot of people.” Similarly after a tragic accident in Burbank in which five young people lost their lives, many notes contained the phrase, “Burbank’s Angels.” People utilize the space for mourning. However, the installation of a flag pole was negatively received, despite its seeming good intention. While the notes mentioning the Burbank Angels were left in their place untouched. This demonstrates the rules of the space. The notes followed the traditions of the space, whereas the flag pole was a foreign object, obstructing the natural silhouette of the hill, inserted into the landscape artificially. This artificial and non-traditional addition was removed despite how disrespectful it was to remove a symbol of national pride, national strength and memorialization for innocent victims of a terrible tragedy.

Alterations to the space have seemingly never gone well, and changes never last long. The couch was destroyed, the flag pole and zip-line removed. A small pine tree was planted near the flag pole, though some people have mentioned they are unsure who would do such a thing. The Wisdom Tree is known as the only tree on the hill; one man mentioned “I thought of planting a tree, but I thought it was kind of selfish.” The manipulation of this space is harshly criticized by those who wish to protect its meaning. The location of the tree, in Griffith Park, surrounded by dense urban space, makes this natural landmark only more important. Alterations to the space infringe on the composition of the

place, as it is special for its detachment from development, society, man. This place is unique in its calm quality that resists the chaos of urban life. People flock to this tree in search of serenity, relaxation, answers and support.

Despite the seemingly idyllic quality of the space, there are hints, however at a darker side to the tree. As with many places of restricted access there are rumors of ‘dark practice’ such as ritualized sacrifice or Satan worshipping (Ellis 2000).

A factual tale of a stabbing suspect camping at the tree brings a dark cloud to this beautiful place. One man I interviewed interacted with the suspect. He hikes in the area at night often, with his brother. The two go and sit, spending about 45 minutes talking and watching the city lights emerge after the sun has set. They always wear headlamps and prior to this occasion had never seen another person. It was a tradition of theirs, a means of brotherly bonding.

One night the two made their way to the tree, but noticed a man standing, unlit, next to it. My informant explained, if he had wanted me to know he was there, he would have had a light so they stood clear. “My brother was really worried, but I assured him the people that come up here are here for good reason, but this guy had an aura about him.” They went and sat near the remnant of the flag pole, which is out of view of the tree and behind some shrubs. They figured they’d give the man his space. Just as they were leaving, he no longer saw the man. Believing the man had left, my informant approached the tree and

the man who had apparently been lying down, jumped up. My informant told the man he was sorry, looked into his eyes, and walked away. A few days later, without his brother, my informant returned near sunset. The man he had seen a few nights before was sitting looking out at the sunset, almost as if he was meditating. “But I knew he wasn’t the type to meditate,” my informant explained. He knew he was planning on staying the night again; this man was living at the tree. “I knew there was something up, he wasn’t a hiker, he didn’t have a backpack, or sleeping bag. It was strange.” A few weeks later my informant received a call from his wife. She explained there was a manhunt in Griffith Park, a stabbing suspect was on the loose. After calling the police and informing them of all he knew, he heard the man was caught in San Francisco. “It was a weird moment, it reminded me that we are in the middle of a city.” It is easy to become jaded to the environment surrounding you. Despite the kind community associated with the tree, the smiling faces you pass on the trail, and the sweet notes at the tree, this place is still in the middle of Los Angeles. Los Angeles is not known as the world’s safest city. The truth of the matter is, Los Angeles can be very dangerous. This further proves the feeling of disconnection from the city as one stands at the tree.

Many use the tree as a means of escape. In one interview a girl, mentioned that when she first met her boyfriend they spent many afternoons hiking to the tree. It was a place of escape that allowed the two to bond, but also was free and close. She claims the two have been easily 100 times and went for about 2 weeks straight one summer. She explained, “I love getting to the top, when you see the tree and the trail leading to it and I don’t have to

hike anymore, it gives me a second wind and I jog up, it's cool to look at the view, beautiful when there are clouds. I love going up there.” The two spent a lot of time chasing that view and the long trail to the top provided time for discussion and really getting to know one another. It allowed the two of them to bond through their experience and mutual enjoyment. Despite the fact that many hike there with others and a community has formed around the tree, many informants mention their favorite part of getting to the tree is when they are there alone.

### *Reciprocal Ethnography*

In order to provide a multi-vocal and minimally biased interpretation of this data I provided informants with the opportunity to respond to my initial draft of this thesis. I presented all informants who had shared their contact information with the opportunity to review the write-up in its entirety, responding to three questions relating to the authenticity of the analysis and use of information they had provided. Additionally, I provided them the opportunity to provide any other comments or feedback they chose to include. Of the 21 interviews 17 people were contacted. Of seven responses indicating interest in responding, five individuals provided responses and comments. All five responses supporting my assertions of community and pilgrimage. One comment mentions,

The data you used that I recognized as based on my comments was accurately represented....I thought you captured the community very well, and some of its evolution as well. ... I thought that your cross cultural comparative analysis was very good and thorough as well as quite enlightening.

Another mentions,

I read your research paper and found it to be very meaningful and scholastic. I think you did an excellent job worthy of a Master's thesis. Your quotes and references added a much deeper level than I expected from this work. You were insightful about the views of those younger and older. My quote was accurately portrayed. This was an accurate representation of the diverse people who visited the tree. MOSTLY, AFTER READING YOUR THESIS, I AM COMPELLED TO HIKE TO THE TREE AGAIN SOON....and try to see it as more than just "my" tree, my symbol of raw nature existing in a man-made city, but as a composite of so many others views and experiences...

While five responses is a rather low number, I believe the responses represent rather different part of the community. Both the younger and older generation, male and female, religious and non-religious individuals of different ethnicities responded. The ability of the community to respond to this research is an attempt to provide their voices to this analysis, perpetuating a sense of unending communication. It is not my voice solely that speaks of this community, instead, the group as a whole.

## SECTION 5

### ANALYSIS

In my analysis, I have utilized Victor Turner's research on anti-structure and definition of *communitas*. Victor and Edith Turner studied pilgrimage in a more ritualized and religious context, their assertions of abandonment of mundane life, such as conflicts, difficulties, guilt and 'occasions of sin' are applicable to this project.

As mentioned previously, Victor Turner asserts in *From Ritual to Theatre* that anti-structure is not a structure reversal but instead:

the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as a family, lineage, clan, tribe, nation etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as a class, caste, sex or age-division. [1982: 44]

I believe nature, in and of itself, to be a representation of anti-structure. As the definition outlines the 'normative constraints' are reduced or eliminated in this space. It is the exact opposite of the constructed and organized cities which contrast it. Standing atop that hill, the structured grid of organization, stratification and environmental manipulation is clearly visible. From the peak, one has a sensation of being physically removed from and lifted above the urban space below filled with the 'pervasive social categories' and 'corpo-

rate groups' of which Turner mentions. It is the perfect escape from the rigid structure of the city, the ultimate anti-structure, allowing individuals to reflect onto themselves.

This liberation is what contributes to what Turner has termed 'communitas.' As outlined previously, Turner's category of spontaneous communitas is explained as:

a deep and rather intense style of personal interaction. 'It has something magical about it. Subjectively there is in it a feeling of endless power.' Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people - friends, congeners - obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as 'essentially us' could sustain its intersubjective illumination. [Turner 1982: 48]

Turner further explains,

when the mood, style, or 'fit' of spontaneous communitas is upon us, we place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness. We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic... way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. [1982: 47-8]

Through the contributions to the wish box, individuals both form and maintain a community of sorts. People do not directly interact, but can partake in the personal interaction through the contributions and reading of notes in the wish box. The honest notes and responses are indicative of this anti-structure and communitas. The ritualized action of creating and maintaining this community through the pilgrimage to the Wisdom Tree and the leaving of messages and physical objects creates what I am calling "tangible

communitas,” as the physical objects in the box are a manifestation of Turner’s communitas.

Through this sensation of connection, contribution, readership and response within the wish box, a community is created. It does not manifest physically, but is instead imagined (Benedict 1983). This place, the Wisdom Tree, and the space the wish box creates, is a spiritual one. People connect deeply to this landscape, feeling obligated to partake in pilgrimage to the site, and leave pieces of themselves there. The collection of such, within the wish box, creates and maintains this imagined community. This example of communitas is unique in its quality because the community does not exist outside of the physical, tangible box in which it is contained.

I believe this project to be important in the field of folklore as it delves into a type of tradition that has not been previously documented. While the practice of pilgrimage is universally found throughout history, within many cultures, this specific example of pilgrimage to the Wisdom Tree is unique to Los Angeles. Historically, pilgrimage is often associated with religious traditions. A recent trend toward non-religious spirituality in America can be seen in this tradition. This unique piece of Los Angeles folklore shows how individuals connect to nature in spiritual ways despite a highly-dense urban landscape. It is a place of spiritual connection that defies religious association and other differentiating human categories. People unite at this tree, in nature, while being entirely surrounded by the urban landscape of Los Angeles.

I believe it is simply the universality of the human condition: living a life of which we are not entirely in control and experiencing it, love, loss, happiness or helplessness. People unite here, forming a community that disregards the restrictive social qualities of age, sex, gender, race, nationality, economic status, profession, class, history or assigned labels. This community has manifested through the holistic understanding of what it is to be human. Sympathy, empathy and understanding provide these people connections necessary to support one another through the struggles of daily life, personal growth and development as well as larger ideological, spiritual and sometimes religious journeys to find themselves. As Henry David Thoreau said, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” (1970:9).

## SECTION 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE

In conclusion, I have established that the practice of trekking to the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree is a form of pilgrimage and a local urban tradition. While pilgrimage is a tradition cross-culturally found, this emergent tradition is unique to Los Angeles. The wish box operates as a shrine of sorts. The contributions to the box reinforce the tradition at the tree and the tree's importance. The tree functions in the same way a folk hero does; it has been personified and assigned qualities of a hero and has been given an oral history that provides deeply respected characteristics. This tree has developed its own local legends which perpetuate this tradition. Generations share the space, though they disagree on its usage. However, the Wisdom Tree is a non-religious place of spirituality, personal growth and community.

I have learned many things while conducting this research, both about the community and myself. But, I believe the most important lesson and most crucial piece to the development of this community is the empathy that exists for others who are simply dealing with the human condition. There are letters filled with the struggles of growing up, moving on, finding oneself, grieving, searching, praying, wishing and hoping. The optimism of some notes provide support, while other notes validate feelings of hopelessness, depression, abandonment and regret. Responses to notes communicate support and inspire a feeling

of belonging. The wish box is filled with the truth of human existence, the notes and objects have made possible the emergence of this sense of community.

This project also contributes evidence of a larger phenomenon. There is a movement geared toward a reclamation of land. Public space has become a rather contested idea as the privatization of public land grows to be only more problematic and more so in urban spaces. As explained by Shepard and Smithson, “Public space... is claimed like a battlefield, mourned as a dying species, embraced as the very incubator of democracy” (2011: 5). There is a dire need for activism to protect and reclaim space that is unregulated and truly free to all. Because human beings react both consciously and unconsciously to their surroundings, their experience of place is consistently changing due to increased regulations of space (Hiss 1990).

Additionally, place attachment is a critical and a large part of the human experience. One’s work place, community and home all have crucial importance in one’s conscious and subconscious actions (Altman and Low 1992). The ability to freely explore, enjoy and express oneself within a place requires public space in which to do so. The continued privatization of public space is restricting and reshaping the perceptions of one’s surroundings, but also personal lives and consciousness (Low and Smith 2000).

In response to the limitations associated with public space, a social movement has begun across the country. Communities are motivated to retrieve public space from the restric-

tive, often criminally-enforced regulations, that make public space feel private. It is crucial that the communities associated with public space, for example the community at the Wisdom Tree, be acknowledged as important. This recognition can contribute to the protection and establishment of open public space which is so invaluable to all human beings. The ability of the Wisdom Tree community to be created and maintained hinges solely on the space remaining open.

Even as I conclude this research, however, I am being contacted by my informants, people who are so deeply attached and protective of this space, because they fear it is in danger. Many new trails and park features have been proposed at Griffith Park. This expansion is seemingly positive, making this space more accessible. This is problematic because the expansion of this park would no doubt expand the need for regulation of the space, and funds for enforcing rules. Park Rangers, police officers, city workers, and others, would be required to maintain these established trails, picnic areas, and parks, and this would require bigger budgets.

The threat to the Wisdom Tree is indirect. There is no legislation proposed to privatize this space; there hasn't been since the land was donated to the City of Los Angeles. But these attempts at expanding the accessibility of public space truly only operationalizes the privatization of the space through regulation. The beauty of the Wisdom Tree's community is the unregulated freedom that has allowed this community to blossom. The problem of diminishing public space in urban areas cannot be wholly solved in one fell swoop, but

research such as mine, drawing attention to the importance of unregulated public space and the positive outcomes of it remaining unregulated, can speak to this issue, providing a voice to those who are so deeply connected to these places.

The Wisdom Tree is far more than simply a hiking destination. This is a space that has so deservedly become an important place for many. Locals and travelers alike find peace at the top of the Burbank Hill. This lone tree disconnects individuals from the ‘pervasive social categories’ and rigid structure of urban society, allowing for introspection and release. This research is limited in time, as traditions are ever-changing. Nevertheless, I believe I have provided an accurate representation of the community at the tree as this specific time. I spoke with a specified number of community members, and I investigated a limited number of notes. I believe that while this tradition will change, it will adapt in relationship to those who visit the place, but in general it will still operate in much the same way it operates today. I believe the Wisdom Tree is associated with a character that was developed by individuals who felt abandoned, alone, and restricted. This tree has become a friend, a shoulder to cry on, and an ear to listen to the voices of these pilgrims. The community associated with this tree gives it life. The Wisdom Tree is a single break in a smooth hill’s silhouette. It is a symbol of hope and support that exists for those willing to climb upward and out of the city below.

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