

# TO THE OTHER SIDE WITH BEES

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KEYWORDS

honeybee, angels, companion species, immortality, parallel world

DOI

[10.54916/rae.126044](https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.126044)

DATE OF PUBLICATION

29/09/2023

ABSTRACT

The mythical bee flies over and throughout human history, leaving traces of coexistence between insect and human cultures in numerous writings and artworks. Bees have been documented in multiple forms, evidencing the human fascination with their life. Today, people are facing the reality of semi-feral bees vanishing from their hives: the ever-living bee colonies featured in the literature of the past have gone extinct. *The Other Side* aural space is an artwork by Ulla Taipale that offers an opportunity to listen to a selection of literary excerpts associated with the honeybees' immortality and their ability to communicate across parallel worlds.

We think we have the blood of angels in us. In action how like an angel.

The paragon of animals. But if any species has the blood of angels, the bees do.

Johanna Sinisalo,  
The Blood of Angels, 2011

## Lost Eternity and the Origins of Human-Bee Cultures

Our curiosity and our need to understand other forms of intelligence have brought about, among other interests, the study of the life of bees in different centuries and cultures. Many thinkers, creators, philosophers, and scientists have shown an interest in the ingenuity and the extraordinary capacities of bees, in addition to the properties of honey, propolis, and wax, for healing and as preservatives. Since ancient times, these insects have also been associated with immortality and the ability to communicate across parallel worlds.

The mundane reason for the human interest in bees is thanks to the precious products they produce. Honey, the viscous substance created and stored by various species of bees, is the most concentrated natural source of sweetness. The literature around bees and their life emerged first in relation to the coveted honey. The first literal evidence of the collecting and appreciation of honey is said to be a Sumerian<sup>1</sup> love poem that describes the bride and bridegroom's encounter at their bedchamber as "honeysweet" and "honey-filled" (McGee, 2004, p. 647). In classical Greece and Rome, honey was a rich source of food and culture, and the Greeks related its consumption to ceremonies for the dead and the

gods (McGee, 2004). Since then, numerous mythologies and legends in cultures around the world have referred to the honeybee, *Apis mellifera*. Humans and honeybees have a long history together, and in territories with prolonged and severe winters, bees only survive thanks to the beekeepers.

## Literature and Thought on Bees

In his works, Aristotle writes about 581 species of animals. After humans, bees are the most cited species. He considers the beehive as a microcosmos, and by studying the hive's activity, he tries to extrapolate his observations and understand the Universal Cosmos. Aristotle did not pretend to offer practical instructions or scientific studies around beekeeping or bees, but instead, he presented a metaphysical view of the Universe (Tavaillot & Tavaillot, 2017).

Aristotle finds bees are prudent, political, and divine beings by nature. This makes them very close to humans, though he thinks that humans must cultivate themselves and rehearse to reach the level of the bees (Tavaillot & Tavaillot, 2017). The best demonstration of their divinity, for Aristotle, is the continuity of the species and the way he thought the bees reproduce: without copulation.

Antiquities poet Virgil (70–19 BC) dedicated the fourth book of his work *Georgics* (29 BC), to apiculture. Many of the methods and practices he describes are still used in contemporary apiculture. As a farmer, Virgil had a practice-based agricultural vision for his beekeeping. However, at the same time, he made philosophical notes, observations, and direct comparisons between the societies of bees and humans. The

trans-disciplinary approach of Virgil (ca 29 BCE/2001) coincides to my mind with Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright, and poet who lived almost 2000 years after this Roman poet. They both were beekeepers but could see beyond these insects as mechanistic production animals.

The spirit of the Industrial Revolution hit beekeeping practices in the late 19th century and the ideal of efficiency affected ever since. As a result, also the stories around the bees changed. Majority of the bee-related literature published before the Second World War did not foresee the major problems of now—the parasites, sickness, and big losses of colonies in different parts of the world. And since people became aware of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD)<sup>2</sup> in 2006, many bee-related novels and films speculating the reasons for the vanishing bees were written and recorded. Science fiction and fiction novels of the 21st century cannot miss the fact that bees are endangered, not to mention scientific and non-fiction literature. Novels such as *Enkelten verta* (The Blood of Angels) by Finnish science-fiction writer Johanna Sinisalo (2011/2014), *History of Bees* by the Norwegian writer Maja Lunde (2016), or the famous episode of the Netflix series *Black Mirror*, "Hated in the Nation" (Brooker, 2016) reflect the alarming situation, and speculate on our long-lasting coexistence with bees and a future without them. Little by little the imagery and literature related to the life of bees were converted from a cornucopia full of life, discovery, and never-ending possibilities, to that of grey despair.

I started urban beekeeping activities in 2012 within the *Melliferopolis*<sup>3</sup> project, together with artist and researcher Christina Stadlbauer. The objective of *Melliferopolis*



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*-Honeybees in Urban Environments*<sup>4</sup> is to study the life of bees, other insect pollinators, and humans in cities, combining artistic and scientific research and mediums. The project bore fruits of many kinds and various outcomes; from different artistic interventions and exhibitions to an international community of creative bee enthusiasts. One of the outcomes of *Melliferopolis* is *The Other Side* aural space, a site-specific artwork based on artistic research of the author and installed in a public place outdoors. It was exhibited for the first time in 2016 at the Linnunlaulu district in the heart of Helsinki, offering visitors the possibility to listen to bee-related literature at carefully selected sites outdoors using an internet application.

After Helsinki, the work has been exhibited in Barcelona, Geneva, and the Italian village Topoló.

The second edition of the artwork was installed in the historic Poblenou Cemetery in Barcelona, commissioned as part of the *Beehave*

exhibition (Millà, 2018). In 2019 the work was commissioned by the Swiss art organisation, *Utopiana*, in Geneva, and in 2022 *The Other Side* took part in the *Estazione di Topoló* art festival in Italy. In each place, a selection of text fragments could be listened to by using an augmented reality application, *Arilyn*<sup>5</sup>, through a visitor's smart device. The texts are now available in English, Catalan, Spanish, and Italian<sup>6</sup> and readings are made by native speakers. To activate and listen to the audio recording, the visitor must scan a sign plate with a tailor-made illustration<sup>7</sup>, featuring flower and bee ornaments. The artwork has its own website<sup>8</sup> since 2020.

## Bees on the Other Side

*The Other Side* artwork has been inspired by the novel *Blood of Angels* by Johanna Sinisalo, a Finnish science fiction author. A family tragedy and the decline of the bees intertwine in the novel, offering a great amount of knowledge of bees by telling a

story, in which the protagonist is able to shift between two parallel worlds assisted by a dead queen bee. The world where the dead human beings and the live bees are moving from “our” world, is named by Sinisalo as *Toinen puoli* (The Other Side). *The Other Side* is described as a double of the real world but free of negative influence of human living, seem as harmful for bee colonies. *The Other Side* offers for the pained and stressed bees an alternative place to live.

The novel speculates with paranormal or psychic explanations for vanishing bees, challenging the scientific or rational reasoning about the mysterious and disquieting phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Given that bees have universally been attributed powers that help find their way to intersect parallel worlds, the author asks if the medical or scientific explanations of CCD are the only ones to be considered.

A meeting of Finnish beekeepers is narrated in the Sinisalo novel, where different explanations around CCD are discussed. An older beekeeper questions the name given to the phenomenon and renames it PPB, meaning Piss-Poor Beekeeping. His theory is that bees have got tired of the lifestyle they are forced to experience and have taken off. If this was a conscious collective decision, asked the other beekeepers, where were they going? (Sinisalo, 2011/2014, p. 93). Are “vanishing” bees migrating to the existing Other Sides?

It's pretty obvious that if there are such things as portals, doors, thin places between parallel worlds bees are perhaps better equipped to find them than any other creature. They've probably found myriad gateways over many millennia, endless untouched worlds, and colonized them without humans. (Sinisalo, 2011/2014, p. 193)

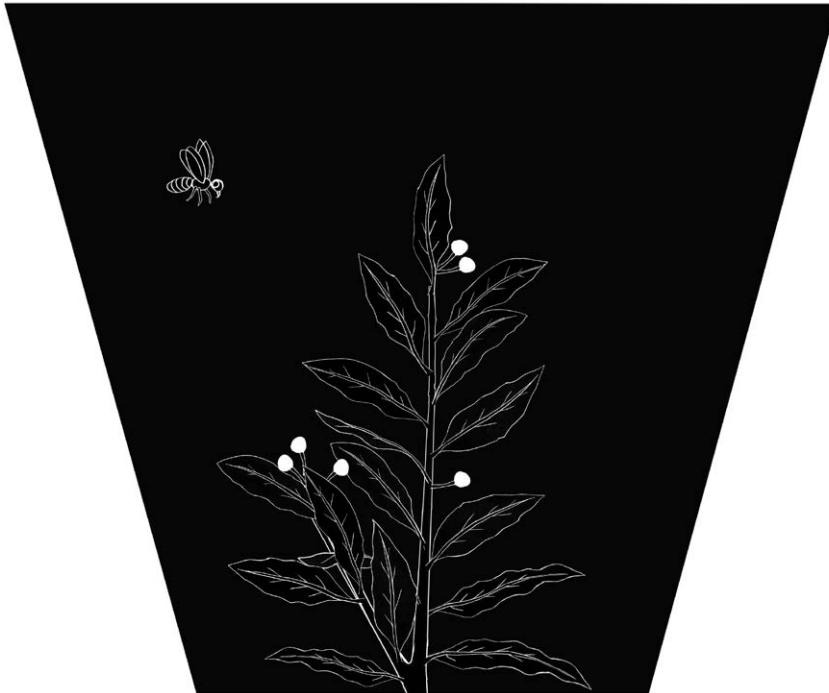




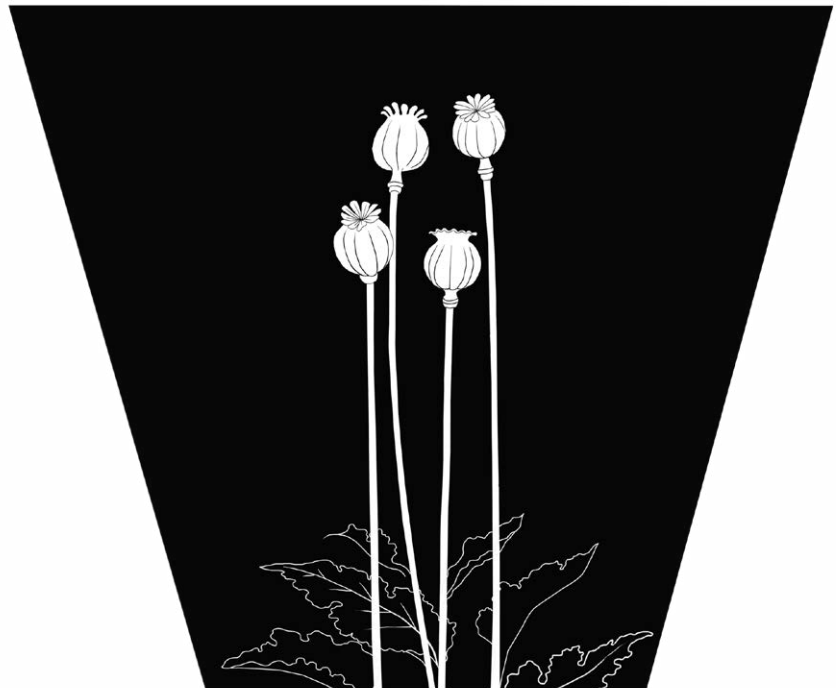
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## Angels vs Bees

In 2018 The Joan Miró Foundation Barcelona commissioned *The Other Side* aural space to be exhibited as a part of Beehive exhibition, curated by Martina Millà. The connections of bees to other mythological creatures, and in particular angels, lead me to think of a Poblenou cemetery in Barcelona as a perfect site to install the artwork. As an exhibition site, the cemetery is also easy to access and a silent place for listening. In that cemetery, many graves are guarded by an angel.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catalan bourgeoisie families commissioned the most skilled sculptors to decorate their pantheons and tombs, and often, the figures represented angels—the messengers between the God and Humanity. The cemetery of Poblenou was the first graveyard outside the limits of the town and was founded in 1775. For their contemporaries, the

graveyards were places for social encounters, and the pantheons from 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolized the wealth and status of those buried beneath, as well as their ideologies. Cemeteries were exhibitions and museums in the open air (Fossas & Luque, 2015).

I had plenty of different angels to choose from: There are hundreds of them in the cemetery of Poblenou. The selection of the seven angels was made by considering the dialogue between the text, the angel figures, and the location of the angels, in order to create a well-thought-out path through the cemetery.

*The Other Side* aural space at Poblenou cemetery attempts to create an opportunity for a sensitive listening experience in the heart of a big noisy city. The further the visitor enters the cemetery, the stronger the intimacy between the

narrator and the receiver. Inside the walls of the *necropolis*, the city pace calms down; the traffic and busy crowds take a back-seat.

The invitation to make a solitary walk between lined dwellings built for dead humans, facing angel figures sculpted in stone, and to listen to tributes written in different styles and from different times, on bee's intelligence, immortality, her faculty to judge, her stamina and other virtuosities, is not an inconsiderate act. During the visit, the normal activity at the graveyard goes on; fresh flowers reveal the recently buried co-citizens, the maintenance works of the graves and buildings continue, and random encounters with mourning family members or friends of the deceased occur. The pace and tone are different on *The Other Side*, and the selected text fragments, illustrations marking the walking path, as well as the voices of the readers transmit respect.





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The composition of the elements for each visit varies. Whilst the route map, recordings, signage, and contents of the text fragments always remain the same, the light, temperature, quality of the sound due to the smart device, and the encounters with other people in the cemetery are always different. That makes the work truly site-specific, and each visit is a unique experience, even though the place remains the same.

The state of the angel sculptures at Poblenuou cemetery varies and has often deteriorated because of their exposure to the weather and chemical compounds of the atmosphere and rainwater. The raddled angel wings remind us metaphorically about the lifespan of the bees. Their lives can be measured by the stroke of wings, by kilometres flown. During the summer, during the frenetic period of collecting nectar and pollen from the flowers, the worker bees only live for some weeks. The wings wear away, and without their flying apparatus, they die. The studies reveal that the death occurs following approximately 500 miles<sup>9</sup> of flight (Skinner, 2010).

From the offset, my existing general knowledge of popular beliefs related to bees and angels made me situate *The Other Side* artwork in a cemetery full of angel sculptures. Later, the need for deeper understanding and clarification of the origins of the repetitive similarities between these two-winged creatures took place. It led me to question the randomness of those affinities and to ask if bees and angels, in the end, are one and the same—one in matter and substance and another in spirit.

Bees and angels are both cited in the *Bible* numerous times. However, bees, which are constantly present in the *Old Testament*, disappear completely when Jesus enters the story. He is then given the exclusive rights to communicate between God and humanity—and the bee, among other beasts, is reduced to an earthly being. Bees are still featured in writings and parables of Christian philosophers as small life guides or role models for humans. However, they are taken away the exclusivity that they had in pagan times (Tavaillot & Tavaillot, 2017).

The existence and materiality of bees is an indisputable fact, and since Antiquity, they have commonly been referred to in mythological writings.<sup>10</sup> Angels, though, are mythical beings, as there is no scientific evidence or material trace of their real existence. In the history of Christianity, the angel has been a controversial figure. Angels' ranking as between God and people, their appearances to people, and people as active players in relation to angels, have caused differences in opinion. Their existence is granted (due to their presence in the *Bible*), but the reflection around angels has not been encouraged by the church because the speculations around them are considered to lead to heresy (Utriainen, 2014).

Angels are described as spiritual beings who don't eat or excrete. They are genderless, pure souls, represented in art as clean-cut ethereal figures or childish chubby cherubs. There is a certain ambiguity around their sex, comparable to the confusion Aristotle and his contemporaries had about the gender of the bees. Fashions have changed through history; the first angel representations were male, then they converted to genderless, and from the 17th century, their figures changed to feminine ones (Seppälä, 2015). During the same epoch, human science discovered that the queen and worker bees are female. In artistic manifestations, angels appear with and without wings.

### **The Common Urge for Angels and Bees as Companion Species?**

Angels are getting popular among people searching for spiritual anchors, comfort, and



enlightenment in a troubled world. Keeping bees is a way to reconnect with nature and with the incomprehensible. Both angels and bees provoke fear and respect in human beings. I have been told stories about personal encounters with bees in moments of grief, danger, or death, bringing consolation or courage through their presence. The same kind of stories are being told about human-angel encounters (Seppälä, 2015). Both happen unexpectedly but transmit positiveness.

In her novel *The Blood of Angels*, Johanna Sinisalo (2011/2014) compares bees with angels. She describes the intelligence of bees and their ability to manage and keep the life of the colony sustainable:

If I had to name a product of evolution that could be a result of intelligent design it would be the bee. The importance of bees for the ecosystem of the entire planet is so significant, so essential, that it is as if they were custom-made especially for the task.

We think we have the blood of angels in us. In action how like an angel. The paragon of animals. But if any species has the blood of angels, the bees do.

The wisdom of bees is the wisdom of the super-organism. Even I don't mourn the death of my individual cells, sloughing off from the walls of the arteries, ceasing to function, moving on in the great circle of life. What's more important is that the organism, the entirety of it, is preserved. The hive, the tribe, the society. The ecosystem.

Individuals have to be sacrificed in order for worlds to continue. Bee colonies don't hesitate to throw out damaged individuals if they don't know enough to leave on their own.

Bees - individual bees -  
know when to leave the nest.

And the entire super-organism knows when to leave, too, if it's forced into a corner. It has great understanding and even greater abilities. (p. 213–214)

Not only Johanna Sinisalo but also Maurice Maeterlinck (2003), as well as the founder of anthroposophy, Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), exalt in their literary works the bees' lack of individualism and their ability to make decisions for the colony's good for future generations. While our society tends to categorize honeybees as production animals and solely highlight the utilitarian values of these insects, these authors bring to light the philosophically and spiritually rich connotations of bee life - their supernatural capacities and their value as a *companion species* (Gane, 2006). Following Haraway, bees can be considered companion species, but they are also production animals, lab animals, and wild animals, and they need, in many of the places they live, a human to live with. Possession—property—is about reciprocity and rights of access. "If I have a dog, my dog has a human," writes Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003, p. 53–54). If I have a beehive, my bees have a human. But are bees better without me? How to convince the bees to stay with us, we who totally screwed up the earthly systems and are probably not appropriate to be called **beekeepers**. Who is keeping, and what?

## The Extinct Eternal Bee and Mourning the Loss

An old folk tradition from New England advises of the importance of *Telling the Bees* (Rumens, 2012). A poem by John Greenleaf Whittier describes this tradition, which has variations in many cultures around the world. The poem was published for the first time in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858 with the following foreword:

Telling the Bees is a remarkable custom, brought from the Old Country, formerly prevailed in the rural districts of New England. On the death of a member of the family, the bees were at once informed of the event, and their hives dressed in mourning. This ceremonial was supposed to be necessary to prevent the swarms from leaving their hives and seeking a new home.

A fragment of the poem:

...Just the same as a  
month before,  
  
the house and the trees,  
  
the barn's brown gable, the vine  
by the door,  
  
Nothing changed but the  
hives of bees.  
  
Before them, under the  
garden wall,  
  
Forward and back,  
  
Went drearly singing the  
chore-girl small,  
  
Draping each hive with a  
shred of black

Trembling, I listened: the  
summer sun

Had the chill of snow;

For I knew she was telling the  
bees of one

Gone on the journey we  
all must go!

(Whittier, 1858)

The poem, written in the 19th century, still takes for granted a certain eternity of the bee colony, which, contrary to the limited human life span, used to continue its existence “eternally,” meaning that the bee colonies used to last and pass from one human generation to another. Immortality is not taken for granted now and many other things changed from the times of Whittier, too. The gender and age distribution of beekeepers changed: young women are increasingly interested in beekeeping. However, companion species-thinking already existed and can be found, for example, in Steiner’s writings from a hundred years ago. Steiner predicted the problematic nature of the turn, seeing how modern beekeeping practices manipulated the long-standing lifestyles of bees and changed their status from companion species to honey production workhorses. In contrast, the life expectancy of humans increased. Beekeeper and artist Christina Stadlbauer, who has observed bees in urban environments for over ten years explains her experience like this:

But now we experience something totally different. It is very rare that the beekeeper can say that the colony is eternal...

... The hive was eternal, and the beekeepers were passing away, and the hive passed from one

beekeeper to another... Now, the people get older and older and older, and the bees die off like flies.

(C. Stadlbauer, personal communication June 4, 2018)

Causes for bee death are now multiple, and in many cases, the general reason for the weakened bee population and the elevated death rate is the deterioration of the world and the loss of habitable environments. Following the ideas of Haraway, the bees’ new life situation can be the loss of their home, a damaged environment, or many environmental changes at the same time. They react to the changed world and fly to *The Other Side*. Human people mourn their disappearance but do not yet have the means to get them back. The capacity for mourning is not a human specialty. People and non-human people do not only mourn the loss of companion species but also places and lifeways (Haraway, 2016, p. 38).

The previously cited poem by John Greenleaf Whittier was later adapted by British writer Jo Shapcott to a new version of the same old custom. This poem can be found as a part of *The Other Side* aural space.

*I Tell the Bees*

He left for good in the early  
hours with just

one book, held tight in his  
left hand:

The Cyclopedia of Everything  
Pertaining

to the Care Of the Honey-Bee;  
Bees, Hives,

Honey, Implements, Honey-  
Plants, Etc.

And I begrudged him every single  
et cetera,

every honey-strainer and cucum-  
ber blossom,

every bee-wing and flown year  
and dead eye.

I went outside when the sun  
rose, whistling

to call out them as I walked  
towards the hive.

I pressed my cheek against the  
wood, opened

my synapses to bee hum, I could  
smell bee hum.

‘It’s over, honies,’ I whispered,  
‘and now you’re mine.’

(Shapcott, 2011, *I tell the Bees*)

This version paints a new picture of beekeeping: the female storyteller or poet takes over a hive of a male beekeeper, who is probably older than she is. This shift can now be observed among many modern beekeepers. More of them are urban women, while earlier, keeping bees was practiced almost solely by the generation of masculine bee hobbyist seniors (Seppälä, 2015). In this poem we can still feel the eternity of the hive while the ownership is passed from a male beekeeper to a female one who, instead of efficient animal husbandry, prefers talking to the bees and hanging out with them. Steiner’s writings talk about a special “soul-relationship” between the “bee-father” and his bee colonies:

Think of the bee-father, the bees do not see his approach as men would do, the bee “senses”—if I may use this expression—everything that emanates from him—how all this



is constituted. The bees get used to this and should the bee-father die they must re-adjust themselves, and this means a great deal to them.

(Steiner, 1923, p. 28)

Steiner's thinking is aligned with Haraway's companion species concept, just that in his time, most of the beekeepers were men, and he refers to a relation between beekeepers and the bee colonies from that perspective.

## Conclusions and Discussions

As Rudolf Steiner preached to workmen in 1923, keeping bees following modern practices would cause their disappearance within 80–100 years (Steiner, 1923). The bee as a species is not yet extinct, but the *eternal* bee will take some time to re-migrate from the other side, and this might happen only after humans go extinct. One of the companion species of the bees, the people, can do without honey, but they cannot do without pollinators.

The migration of the bees to the other side needs to be prevented, not by raising barricades but by learning from mistakes. The concept of *staying with the trouble*, by Haraway (2016), advises us to study critically past experiences and radically change our practices and strategies when dealing with the bees and the living surroundings in general. Quick and easy solutions and remedies will not help, the change shall be systematic and considerate of the environment holistically and in collaboration with other species.

Unexplained phenomena, such as the disappearance of bees, do not make people feel comfortable.

Rational explanations for the commonly named Colony Collapse Disorder are still not found despite the efforts and money invested. It was not yet possible to explain the mysterious occurrence that converts something extremely tangible and alive to intangible—what was once a material, buzzing beehive, now transformed into a void cavity and an empty space. This has brought about speculative thinking with alternative explanations for the phenomenon.

With the question of the linkage between bees and angels, we are in front of the unknowable. From an agnostic point of view, something that is not proven false can't be declared untrue.

Sañjaya Belatthaputta, the Indian ascetic teacher, philosopher, and contemporary of Buddha, was asked about the existence of another world—*The Other Side*—after death.

I don't think so. I don't think in that way. I don't think otherwise. I don't think not. I don't think not not. If you asked me if there isn't another world... both is and isn't... neither is nor isn't... if there are beings who transmigrate... if there aren't... both are and aren't... neither are nor aren't...

(*Sutta Piṭaka*, n.d./1997, Evasion, para. 2)

To consider that bees and angels would be the same might not be true. However, we can find similarities in the way bees and angels appear as a medium for human effort towards a deeper understanding of life, and the quest for wellbeing or at least surviving mentally and physically in our epoch. Some people stretch out to invisible angels and their energy. Others get intoxicated by the scent of a beehive.

*The Other Side* artwork reflects the current era, with humans looking for reconnection with nature and unearthly phenomena, materially and spiritually, hands-on and hands-off. The essay combines various knowledges such as natural scientific, religious, philosophical, and fictive. This richness of the disciplines arises from the bee topic which must be considered and studied holistically. *The Other Side* is a long-term project which continues its development: in every new site and installation the aim is to add in new literary excerpts and keep the site-specific character of the project. The material to study and explore is endless and new literature around the bees will be generated now and in the future.

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## Endnotes

**1** 4500–1900 BCE

**2** The CCD is a phenomenon that occurs when the majority of worker bees in a colony disappear and leave behind a queen, with plenty of food and a few nurse bees to care for the remaining immature bees.

**3** *Apis mellifera* = honeybee in Latin, Polis = city in Greek

**4** See [www.melliferopolis.net](http://www.melliferopolis.net)

**5** [www.arilyn.fi](http://www.arilyn.fi)

**6** Readings by Emilia Esteban Langstroff (Catalan), Andrés Marin Jarque (Spanish), Kira O'Reilly (English), Antonella Bukavoz (Italian) and audio recordings by Kirill Lorech and Valerio Bergnach.

**7** The illustrations were developed in dialogue with Spanish illustrator Andrés Marin Jarque.

**8** [www.theotherside.fi](http://www.theotherside.fi)

**9** 500 miles= 804,672 km

**10** Examples of bee related mythologies are for example the Finnish mythology Kalevala and Greek mythology Aristaeus.

## Figures



Figure 1. Taipale, U. (2018). Visitors at *The Other Side* at Poblenou Cemetery in Barcelona, as part of the *Beehive* exhibition, curated by Martina Millà at Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona.



Figure 2. Antonyan, O. (2019). A detail of *The Other Side* at the Cemetery of Kings (Cimetière des Rois), Geneva, as part of *1000 Ecologies Biennial*, curated by Anna Barseghian.



Figure 3. Taipale, U. (2022). A visitor at *The Other Side* listening space at Topoló, as part of *Estazione di Topoló* art festival, curated by Moreno Miorelli.



Figure 4. Marin Jarque, A. (2018). Sign illustration for *The Other Side*. To listen to the text fragment from *The Blood of Angels* (2011/2014) by Johanna Sinisalo. Please scan the sign using the free Arilyn app.



Figure 5. Marin Jarque, A. (2018). Sign illustration for *The Other Side*. To listen to a text fragment from *The Secret Miracle* (1943), by Jorge Luis Borges. Please scan the sign using the free Arilyn app.



Figures 6–9. Taipale, U. (2018). Lotta Petronella at *The Other Side*. Poblenou Cemetery, Barcelona.