

Natural Communities, Ecological Conclusions

This backward order of things—first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about—may seem odd, or even perverse, but it is, I think, at least most of the time, standard procedure in cultural anthropology.

Clifford Geertz, Preface to the 2000 Edition of *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Where, then, are we?

At the end of these five chapters, our course has wandered widely and through much varied terrain, tracing the arcs of several sets of loosely-related ideas, and pursuing them down not a few rabbit holes. But, to what end? If Muir and Næss are to be believed, the walk itself may prove a salve for the soul, but even they had destinations and struggled to make sense of what they saw along the way. Bearing this in mind, there are two observations with which I would like to close, one academic, one less so.

The first is an assertion about the nature of neopaganism in North America, really a claim that it is a neopaganism of nature. The waves of paganism that arrived on these shores from Europe were those of mystery cults, of rituals and rites with thousands of years of inherited history. This is the inheritance of Ficino, of Bruno, of Swedenborg, but it

is only part of the story. Those traditions broke against the rocks of the New World, fracturing into patterns that scattered both across the continent and back across the ocean by the end of the nineteenth century, adhering wherever they found sympathetic surfaces. The return to Europe is important: neopaganism is more similar than different on both sides of the Atlantic, and while the discrepancies show most starkly when the contemporary is seen through the lens of historical roots, a practitioner from New England is likely to feel comfortable in Old England as well.

These pools of acceptance were largely marked by the presence of a vitalism that was couched in terms of the natural world. Whether the roots of the vitalism were seen as internal or external—bodily or worldly—the mystery had moved outside, if perhaps, in Muir’s words again, “only to go back in.” This process has resulted in a set of neopaganisms recognizable as much for their insistence upon the primacy of a relationship with the natural world as for anything else.

This insight is not original—it builds both upon the general scholarship of Wouter Hanegraaff, but also upon an extension of the claims made by Steven J. Sutcliffe and Chas S. Clifton. But it is a nuance that is often overlooked both in neopagan accounts of their own development in America and in academic assessments of their history. The wide expanses of America, Muir’s glaciers and sequoias, were a critical component in their survival, especially in the face of the growing dominance of a scientific rationalism that threatened to eradicate all forms of mysticism in its wake.

The One and the Many or, But We Were Promised Hovercars

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*

The final point I wish to make returns us to the metaphor of ecology, and to its broader meaning. One of the tensions running through this paper is between the individual and the community, whether seen as Muir's struggle to create a life that supported both his need for thousand mile walks and his commitment to a larger public good or as Margulis' work to disprove the notion of the individual—and its evolutionary equivalent, the selfish gene—in favor of the bacterial masses that live inside each of us or as Haraway's railing against the reification of the unusual individual by Deleuze and Guattari or as the difficulties encountered by the New Age in conquering the narcissism that seems to accompany it at every turn.

This tension is real, and it is one that can be viewed throughout human history in almost infinite variety. It has been, and will continue to be, evaluated in many different ways, with pronouncements at all points along the continuum it forms. But the notion of ecology demands an important transformation where, in photographic terms, the depth of field is radically expanded. What was originally a scene dominated by a few figures in the foreground, their outlines clearly delineated against the backdrop, flattens out into a landscape where it is no longer possible to isolate one figure from another with any certainty. Where does the river end and the delta begin? The delta and the sea?

Muir's gift was to let Emerson's invisible eye move through him without

refraction, allowing him to expand his view out towards the horizons instead of contracting back towards an anthropomorphically reduced suburbia. The radical nature of this move is precisely part of what has left it on the fringes of American thought: the notion that nature is not there for us, for the taking and the taming, remains fundamentally opposed to the continued expansionist triumphalism that has its roots in the colonial moment and its current tendrils in the sprawling freeway-side mall. These are static structures, dead and ultimately untenable precisely because they lack the vital principle, the constant chemical churn and change that Lovelock realized denotes the presence of life. We see this in abandoned lots quickly grown over with the first wave of hardy weeds, in the never-ending construction needed to maintain the concrete and steel arteries of transportation, in the staggering dependence of contemporary society on a surprisingly fragile network that enables the global flow of information and media.

Science itself, still hailed as the white knight of a conquering rationalism, is struggling to maintain its stability on two fronts. First, internally the sheer complexity of it all remains overwhelming. We have glimpses—often important glimpses—into how things “really are,” but the dream of a Grand Unified Theory (GUT), the holy grail of theoretical work in the 1970s and 1980s, has largely been abandoned or, at least, understood to be put off for future generations. Just as the bacteria inside each of us complicate the question of individuality and its relationship to the history of the species, the GUT of science is no longer filled with objects from the world of Newton, Descartes, and Hume, billiard balls of specific weights whose velocity and momentum allow precise, calculated results. Quantum uncertainty and genetic complexity rule in their stead and while this does little to

undermine the everyday utility of Newton's brilliance—the Mars rover Curiosity's current explorations of the dusty emptiness of the red planet attest to this—we are left understanding that such things may no longer be seen as wholly sufficient for understanding the world around and inside of us.

Second, the role of scientists themselves seems to be undergoing what is best seen as another turn of the spiral, a slow and often unwitting return to the recognition that expanding the realm of knowledge is work performed on the edge of the unknown and the unknowable, and walking the fine line between falsifiability and madness is neither easy nor likely to lead one in predictable directions. While the reaction of some—and these are the ones that drew Midgley's attention—is to reverse direction into either the self-aggrandizing realm of scientism or into flights of fancy that would make Muir proud, others are finding that science and complexity are necessary bedfellows, that what we know and what we aspire to know interact in surprising ways more reminiscent of Newton's fascination with alchemy—to which he devoted more of his life than physics—than to his volumes of mathematical formulae. Capra's physics remain suspect, but his recognition of the vital interactions of science and other forms of belief remain highly relevant. There is a mysticism in science and without its embrace, we are in all likelihood approaching the practical ends of what it can accomplish—in support of this I would offer Sagan's passionate claims to the power of the unknown, to the mysteries yet unsolved as he gazed into his oddly pronounced billions and billions of stars in the cosmos.

The close of the twentieth century has left us profoundly uncomfortable with our relationship with technology. We are dependent upon it, even addicted to its fruits, but we

are also deeply aware of its dangers despite many attempts to blind ourselves. We resist this discomfort in significant ways, from celebrating its various successes to the way we structure the boundaries of knowledge itself. As an example of this latter point, consider the demographics of those that contribute to the English language version of Wikipedia (by far the dominant, and the model used by other linguistically grouped contributors). It is trite to recognize that human history has never seen a more efficient gathering of data than Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger's pet project, but it is equally important to note just how bereft Wikipedia remains of hermeneutic sophistication. This is data assimilated by the privileged for the privileged, and filtered through the fine mesh of an assumed rationalism, triumphant in its demands for proof and citations. Which is not to deny the intensely utilitarian value of the site, but knowledge without interpretive meaning remains a dangerous thing.

In the end, this is where technology has failed us. For all the spectacular, life-preserving and survival-enabling successes in medicine and infrastructure, for all the progress in the global quality of life that has been seen (and not for one instant losing sight of the distance yet to go), it is increasingly clear that turning to technology for our happiness leads us down a cul-de-sac of unmet expectations, lined with *Likes* and tweets, poorly lit photos and ubiquitous product placement. This realization has left us a bit bereft and can, I would claim, be seen as part of our current structuring of the notion of apocalypse as being an absence—explained or not—of the technological utopia that was assumed to be well on its way.

Culturally, we are obsessed with what comes after that event, from the long-

running television series *Lost* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to S.M. Sterling's "Emberverse" books and the legally-questionably similar television show *Revolution* to the massive phenomenon of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and their film adaptations to the televised version of Robert Kirkman's graphic novel, *The Walking Dead*. While simple climate change is a more likely cause than a sudden eruption of zombies or an inexplicable alteration in the laws of physics that prevents combustion from releasing sufficient energy to run an engine or fire a gun, each of these struggle with the question of how to reconcile the loss of the modern world with survival in dramatically changed circumstances.

However we evaluate the New Age, its successful transformation of the idea of apocalypse from something dependent on the unpredictable tendency of the world around us to intrude into our human routines in devastating ways to something that is held within each of us as a psychological structure that must be overcome to further human development remains a brilliant achievement with far-reaching implications. While enabled by its historical continuity with other parts of Albanese's American metaphysic, this change brought the demons inside to roost in our psyches. The problem is the world is still out there, and its destructive nature is still as capricious as ever. Gaia remains Margulis' "tough bitch," ultimately uncaring about any specific form of life in favor of the phenomenon writ large.

It is this largeness that I hope to have shed a little light on in this thesis, the notion that while a single species tends to be irrelevant to the larger story, communities of species—ecologies—remain the star of the show. We only exist in the plural, somewhere between the postmodern trope of "always already" and Margulis' bacterial colonies; we

only exist in conversation with others, other cultures and other traditions, other communities of behavior. This is the learning that neopaganism offers, that after we struggle with the complex issues of authenticity and agency that accompany the incorporation of others into ourselves, we are left with the possibility of plurality, with the intermingling of innumerable single organisms that is at the heart of evolution itself. This is the ultimate optimism that guides Starhawk from coven to meeting room, and that makes sense of the simultaneous appeals to the Goddess and the meeting agenda.

Once established, ecologies adapt. Individuals come and go, and the most any can do is leave a small mutation that is carried forward. But the community remains, and it is only seen through this wider lens that how any of it matters—from the microscopic to the planetary—can truly be seen.