

The Goose

Volume 13 | No. 2


Article 31

2-24-2015

Unlearn, Rewild: Earth Skills, Ideas and Inspiration for the Future Primitive by Miles Olson

JOSE-CARLOS REDONDO-OLMEDILLA

Universidad de Almeria/ University of Almeria

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)
Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

REDONDO-OLMEDILLA, JOSE-CARLOS. "Unlearn, Rewild: Earth Skills, Ideas and Inspiration for the Future Primitive by Miles Olson." *The Goose*, vol. 13, no. 2, article 31, 2015,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss2/31>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

***Unlearn, Rewild: Earth Skills, Ideas and Inspiration for the Future Primitive* by MILES OLSON**

New Society Publishers, 2012. \$15.95

Reviewed by **JOSÉ-CARLOS REDONDO-OLMEDILLA**

In *Unlearn, Rewild*, Miles Olson succeeds in presenting the virtue of bridging the gap between our present-day technoculture and more primitive forms of culture. Striving for a balance between old and new ways is an almost impossible task for our time, but it is also essential. The work is in line with texts that aim to explore the truth about humanity, the meaning of our place within nature; it is an exercise in relocation. As we know, truth is a subjective compromise with the good—in some ways it is more like a process in time than an absolute fact. With this in mind, *Unlearn, Rewild*, behaves sometimes like a philosophical treatise and sometimes like a survival guide, remaining short to the promise of its subtitle.

I must confess that in spite of my reasonable knowledge of classical culture and a familiarity with Latin and Greek terminology, the first time that I heard the word “biophilia” was in an episode of *The Nature of Things*. I heard David Suzuki’s voice using the term to describe the human need to connect with all of the other species that share our planet. Suzuki presented the proven benefits of spending time in nature, and tenderly spoke of our innate and natural predisposition to be happy when in contact with nature. We know that human beings experience a kind of pleasure when we explore, manipulate or wander in, or wonder at the natural world. E.O. Wilson said that biophilia is an evolutionary feature—it is in our genes, it is a mark, a human imprint that makes us meaningful because we

need other species to live. This is precisely the philosophical thread that makes us connect with Miles Olson’s *Unlearn, Rewild*.

The book’s accompanying explanatory subtitle *Earth Skills, Ideas and Inspiration for the Future Primitive*, is suggestive and acts as an appetizer for the book’s contents. Some readers may find that the subtitle faithfully presents the intent and philosophy of the book; for others, the explanation may remain lacking in something necessary to its full achievement. What is clear, however, is that Olson, through a simple philosophy, presents a *desideratum* for a naturalist regeneration. The book is formally divided into two parts: “Ideas” and “Endangered Skills,” each different in scope and nature. The first acts more like a kind of ideology, provided to sustain a naturalist vision of life. It carries out this task through different chapters such as “Sustainability and Wildness,” “What is Rewilding?” “Technology, Ethics and Freedom,” and “How to Walk Away from Civilization.” This section could be well understood as a philosophical survey and criticism of industrial civilization, and Olson’s suggestions for reform that aim toward sustainable future.

The second part of the text performs as a set of practical exercises that deal with the naturalist vision, or as practical cases for a naturalist-orientated person. Olson organizes the second part of the text into different chapters that follow an introduction. The reader encounters chapters such as “Learning How to Live,” “Honoring the Bodies of Animals By Eating them,” and “Feral Food Preservation: Unconventional and Traditional Methods of Putting Things By.” While the conceptual contribution of the second part of Olson’s book is not as rich as the first, it nonetheless provides many good examples to aid the broad exercise

of theorizing that the book aims for. Olson concludes by presenting what he calls “the future primitive,” an idea that tries to surpass time. This concept places the myth of progress in dire straits by declaring it “the underpinning of civilization.” It acts simply like a coda.

Some specialists like Sahotra Sarkar, Jessica Pfeifer or Anya Plutynski might criticize the naturalist realm where Olson’s philosophy is applied—presumably Vancouver Island— as it ignores other more variegated habitats and realms. However, the richest contributions of the book are that it offers itself to the reader with integrity and that it explores the idea of giving value to ancient wisdom as a modern philosophy of life. It is a work that suits the mélange of initiatives that proliferate in our society; where wilderness survival forums, general survival discussions, and forums on primitive skills and technology—including hunting, fishing, teaching on foraging and wild edibles, bushcraft medicine, survival kits and survival products, among others—abound. They are disciplines that unavoidably end in the gardening merchant, in the homesteading/survival product merchants, in the general outdoor gear merchants or in travel merchants. But where is the difference between the ‘exotic’ naturalism and the real one?

There are also some interesting literary echoes in Olson’s work. Sometimes Olson’s writing is Orwellian-like and smells of *Down and Out in Paris and London*: “Having spent many years as a drop-out, a squatter living with others on the fringe of this culture by scavenging, gathering, hunting and gardening, I have developed a unique perspective on the possibilities.” Sometimes, it is Thoreau-esque, reminding the reader of the transcendentalist writer and his experiences in the forests near Walden

Pond: “When I was 17, having just left high school and many years of heartbreaking boredom and bullshit, I spent a summer living alone in the woods on a small, isolated island. With no electricity, no running water, no people around, and lots of free time, I had one of the most intense experiences of unlearning in my life.” Another good feature is that Olson’s book is far from “yellow or gutter survivalism,” it presents the value of refreshingly old, sleepy conservationist ideas. It is a book that can nurture future nature lovers, or those that have just been hibernating.

If one were to maintain a particularly demanding stance, one could claim that *Unlearn, Rewild* is not a book for old nature *connoisseurs*. However, if we take a more flexible and generous view, we can say that it presents a refreshing perspective on old ideas. Olson suggests modes of resistance in response to what he refers to as “the culture of domestication” but the sabotage with the disciplinarity or the cultural jamming he proposes is occasionally lukewarm and results more in a soft saboteur arguing and pleading for more ascetic ideals to come forward. Put more simply, Olson’s book, as interesting a critique of civilization and guide to subverting it as it is, often lacks the kind of stamina required to fully move the reader in the long-term. Nevertheless *Unlearn, Rewild* is a book that offers flavours of unpreserved and feral reading, free from the rosy and domesticated political correctness that often disguises naturalist writing.

JOSÉ-CARLOS REDONDO-OLMEDILLA is an associate professor at the Department of Philology (English Studies) in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Almería (Spain) and professor-tutor at the National

University of Distance Education (UNED). He holds a PhD in English Studies and another PhD in Spanish and Latin American literature. His research interests and publications focus on comparative and cultural issues. He is working currently on new literatures in English and Spanish as well as issues involving globalization, the environment and cultural flows.