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The University of Montana

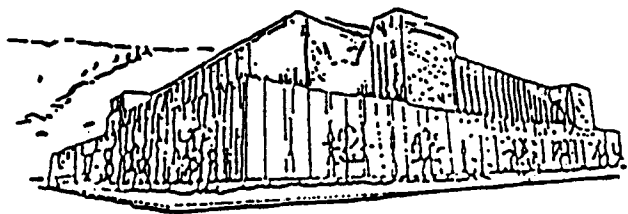
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**THE EMPTINESS OF "THE WILD": GARY SNYDER'S ECO-BUDDHIST
DECONSTRUCTION OF "SELF" AND "NATURE"**

By

David J. Kerber

B.S. Willamette University, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

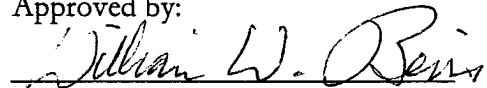
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Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2002

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English Literature

The Emptiness of “the Wild”: Gary Snyder’s Eco-Buddhist Deconstruction of “Self” and “Nature”

Chair: William W. Bevis 

I begin by reviewing recent critiques of Western philosophical traditions, which have mapped our contemporary estrangement from the natural world. Following this summary, a brief comparison of relevant Eastern and Western belief modes is offered, and Gary Snyder’s lifelong project is then presented as a potentially productive synthesis of Eastern and Western environmental perspectives. Snyder’s work as a poet and environmental thinker has asserted certain congruencies between ecological biology, Derridean deconstruction, and Zen Buddhism. Derrida’s *différance*, the structure of ecological biology, and the Buddhist non-concept of *sunyata* (“emptiness”) each contributes to what I define as Snyder’s eco-Buddhist project, and his unique notion of “the Wild” is the place where these disciplines and concepts overlap. “The Wild,” as a relatively recent term Snyder disseminated in his 1990 collection of essays *The Practice of the Wild*, does not appear to have a single fixed meaning for Snyder; rather, it appears to be an open concept or a work in progress that links together the first forty years of his eco-Buddhist project and that continues to inform his present curiosities. Within my exploration of this project and of the concept of “the Wild,” I examine Snyder’s statements of artistic and theoretical intent—as they appear in his prose work and in the interviews he has given over the years—and I offer close readings of a broad range of his poetry. Particular attention is paid to Snyder’s long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, since it tracks his poetic life over a forty year period. The paper concludes by questioning the political applicability of Snyder’s vision.

Abbreviations Used in the Text

GSR	Snyder, Gary. <i>The Gary Snyder Reader: Poetry, Prose, and Translations: 1952-1998</i> . Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999.
MRWE	Snyder, Gary. <i>Mountains and Rivers Without End</i> . Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996.
NN	Snyder, Gary. <i>No Nature: New and Selected Poems</i> . New York: Pantheon, 1992.
OW	Snyder, Gary. <i>The Old Ways</i> . San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore, 1977.
PCC	Snyder, Gary. "Poetry, Community, Climax." <i>Field</i> , 20 (Spring 1979): 21-35.
PW	Snyder, Gary. <i>The Practice of the Wild</i> . San Francisco: North Point, 1990.
RW	Snyder, Gary. <i>The Real Work: Interviews and Talks: 1964-1979</i> . New York: New Directions, 1980.
TI	Snyder, Gary. <i>Turtle Island</i> . New York: New Directions, 1969.

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I.

A PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

STUDENT: Is it because philosophers ask Why? And How? That they have been unable able to resolve the problem of human existence?

ROSHI: Their investigations take them away from themselves into the realm of diversity—this is how philosophers and scientists work—whereas the question “Who am I?” precipitates you into an awareness of your fundamental solidarity with the universe.

Student J and Yasutani Roshi, in *The Three Pillars of Zen*

Because I severed those so joined, I carry—
Alas—my brain dissevered from its source,
Which is within my trunk. And thus, in me
One sees the law of counter-penalty.

Bertran de Born, in Dante’s *Inferno*

In his influential essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. asserts that what people do about their natural environments depends on what they think about their surroundings. White’s essay also claims that the structure of the Western tradition, which has been largely shaped by Christianity, is antithetical to a harmonious relationship between humans and their natural environment. In a recent introduction to a book of eco-philosophical essays, J. Baird Callicott and Roger Ames caricature the criticisms White and others have aimed at the Judeo-Christian tradition, forming their arguments into a rough typology:

- 1) God—the locus of the holy and sacred—transcends nature.¹
- 2) Nature is a profane artifact of a divine craftsman-like creator. The essence of the natural world is informed matter: God divided and ordered an inert, plastic material—the void/waters/dust or clay.
- 3) Man exclusively is created in the image of God and is, thus, segregated, essentially, from the rest of nature.

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I wish to stay out of the arguments as to how, and to what extent, “nature” has been culturally shaped, so references this essay makes to “nature” will typically pertain to the sensuous world we tend to think of as separate or distinct from the human realm. This distinction is similar to the definition of “nature” Gary Snyder often uses as a communicable model with which to re-vision the meaning of the word itself.

- 4) Man is given dominion by God over nature.
- 5) God commands man to subdue nature and multiply himself.
- 6) The whole cognitive organization of the Judeo-Christian tradition world view is political and hierarchical: God over man, man over nature—which results in a moral pecking order or power structure.
- 7) The image-of-God in man is the ground of man's *intrinsic* value. Since nonhuman natural entities lack the divine image, they are morally disenfranchised. They have, at best, instrumental value.
- 8) The theologically based instrumentality of nature is compounded in the later Judeo-Christian tradition by Aristotelian-Thomistic teleology—rational life is the telos of nature and hence all the rest of nature exists as a means, a support system, for rational man. (“Introduction” 3-4)

Callicott and Ames' summary assimilates many of the major criticisms leveled at Christianity by environmentalists, philosophers, and those who feel the Judeo-Christian tradition has largely contributed to the human destruction of the planet. However, to place the vast weight of the blame for the West's destruction of the natural environment onto the shoulders of the Judeo-Christian tradition would be rather simplistic, as it seems the underlying rationale behind the Western world's mistreatment of nature has been the pre-Christian belief that humans and their intelligence are somehow separate from the natural world. It is only because humans have imagined the natural world to be disconnected from, and lesser in content to, ourselves that we have been able to treat it as we have. Such a view of the sensuous world has been primarily institutionalized in the West by the Greek Presocratic philosophers, whose early subject/object distinctions, which emphasized the trustworthiness of mind over experience, cleared a path for Plato's distinction between the ideal and the ideal's worldly forms: a metaphysical division that separates the mind from

sensuous experience.²

Within this Western philosophical tradition, the distrust of sensuous experience would later find expression in Descartes' mind/body split: close cousin and heir to Plato's earlier division. In the West, Descartes' mind/body split has created a dualism that constructed the body like any other object. The body, as a natural entity, then became describable in atomistic-mechanistic language, while the mind—although contained in matter—was often thought to exist separately from its physical location. For that reason, the rational intellect has often been considered a more reliable basis of truth and knowledge than sensuous experience, and from a Platonic-influenced Christian perspective, the human soul, residing temporarily in the body, appears otherworldly in nature and destiny. Because of these two belief lineages (the Judeo-Christian and Pre-Socratic-Platonic-Cartesian), sensory appearances and sensuous experiences have often been thought to lack eternal value or unchanging Truth. And as many environmentalists, philosophers, and other thinkers have become increasingly aware over the last hundred years or so, the world-alienating valorization of reason over sensuous experience has forced many of those in the Western world to critically examine this mode of experience in an effort to find alternative ways of relating to a physical world that has been subdued and damaged.

One of the most successful ways to gain perspective on a condition of this sort is to take an outside view of the situation. With this in mind, a powerful method of critique and

² A long line of recent philosophers, stretching from at least Nietzsche to the present, have tried to demonstrate how this particular distinction between the ideal and the ideal's forms has contributed to the Western world's distrust of sensuous experience and to our consequent estrangement from the sensuous world. The causes for this estrangement are numerous, however, and may include the emergence of agriculture at the beginning of the Neolithic period, the adoption of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets, the development of formal numbering systems, as well as other factors that may have been lost with time (or at least lost to my knowledge). A collection of many, if not all, of the above factors has likely combined to construct the various ways in which humans have come to distinguish their inner experiences as distinct from their outer sensuous experiences. By focusing on the subject/object distinction made by the early Greek philosophers, I have picked one manifestation of this distinction that is overtly dealt with by Buddhism and Gary Snyder's project.

insight the West might apply to itself with regard to the current environmental crisis is to compare its traditional hierarchical modes of dualistic thought with non-dualistic a modes of experiencing the world, as are found in the East.

Over this last century, the Western world has undergone immense intellectual changes due to the general acceptance and institutionalization of modern physics, ecology, and postmodernist thought, each of which asserts a new worldview more closely aligned with certain Eastern non-dualistic, process-oriented modes of experiencing the world. Consequently, the West is undergoing a paradigmatic shift away from its hierarchically dualistic approach toward a future that is still unclear.³ During this same period, however, a philosophically heterogeneous East has adopted many Western technologies and ideologies in an effort to compete with Western nations that have asserted their influence through imperialistic economies increasingly driven by these technologies. According to Callicott and Ames, this Eastern adoption of modern technologies, which are embedded in the Bacon-Newton complex of ideas—science as manipulative power over an inert, material, mechanical *res extensa*—has been nothing less than an adoption of the dominant Western paradigm; “technology,” they assert, “is not culture-neutral any more than it is value-neutral” (280). It would therefore be presumptuous to assume that an isolated West could approach an isolated East, as each has been melting into the other for some time now.

³ Rejecting epistemologies that depend on absolute subject/object distinctions, and stretching back in intellectual impetus at least as far as the Romantic project to reconcile spirit and matter, nature and human, conscious and unconscious, intellect and soul, most of what we would call postmodern thought accepts that a certain inter-relation between subject and object exists. This early Romantic blurring of the division between subject and object solidified in a scientific and philosophical paradigm shift that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and an increasing philosophical articulation that all human knowledge is interpretive helped establish a conceptual framework which asserts that the human mind can claim no direct, mirror-like knowledge of the objective world, as the object it experiences has already been structured by the subject and subject’s internal organization. As such, it is commonly understood that humans cannot know the world-itself but rather the world-as-strained-through-perception. This subtle distinction, however, is still far from a Buddhist non-dualistic mode of Being, since the belief that the world is largely a construct and that all knowledge is radically interpretive tends to stress the highly cognitive capabilities of the human being as distinct from the lesser cognitive capabilities of the animal, natural, world.

Although dramatic distinctions between East and West are currently fading at the pace of globalization, for the purpose of comparison, certain Eastern non-dualistic traditions of experiencing the world may be contrasted with Western dualistic philosophical traditions, offering important insights into the future of a globalized community that is damaging the planet.⁴ A West fundamentally organized around a hierarchically dualistic, Christian, and capitalistic system can learn much from certain Eastern, non-dualistic traditions whose core values, in many ways, mirror the principles of the modern sciences and the values of contemporary Western philosophies, which are also often at odds with the intrinsic values of the West's religio-economic paradigm.⁵

One such non-dualistic tradition of experiencing the world, which has had a sizeable impact on the mind of the West, is Buddhism. Buddhist texts and thought, in the hands of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and members of the Theosophical society, began to filter into the West in the 19th century and received a good deal of attention. Yet, as far as this paper is

⁴ As Yi Fu Tuan has shown in "Discrepancies Between Environmental Behavior and Attitude: Examples from Europe and China," there have existed glaring contradictions between professed ideal and actual practice regarding environmental attitudes in the East and the West. Tuan's pessimistic assertion that ideal and practice rarely meet lies in contradiction to White's claim that practice is formed from ideal. Both theories are rejected by Callicott and Ames as simplistic; rather, Callicott and Ames assert that societies' worldviews are tested in a process of natural selection as praxis fails or succeeds (279-289). From Snyder's syncretistic perspective, which I will soon discuss, a move toward *being-the-world* (as distinct from a sense of Being that is separate from the "outside" world) will change both one's ideal and one's practice, as ideal and practice coincide within Snyder's eco-Buddhist framework.

⁵ By drawing a connection between the Christian tradition, dualisms, and capitalism I do not wish to establish a causal relation between all three or between Christianity and capitalism, à la Max Weber, as there are many debatable theories about which thought-blocks grew up beside and with capitalism (e.g. *The Enlightenment, liberalism*, etc.). I suggest only the interlinking or interweaving of hierarchically dualistic modes of thought, the Judeo/Christian tradition, and capitalism with each other. Based upon their historical appearances, it is tempting to try to conjecture causality between these massive thought-blocks, but this sort of thinking is simplistic and eventually looks back to influencing factors that are beyond the scope of recorded human history. It is therefore rather impossible to trace the origins of influence on each of these thought-blocks, and it is difficult at best, if not impossible, to trace the criss-crossing of these thought-blocks with each other. The conjectural tracing of causality (the search for sources), particularly with regard to ideological fundaments, seems a traditional Western enterprise, whereas another perspective on this connection—the Buddhist belief, for instance, that impermanence is the fundamental truth of every existence and that everything co-arises with everything—might make one less likely to search for a stable source, since each source is understood to be connected to other sources. Within such a Buddhist system, the whole notion of source dissolves in a manner similar to that of the disassembling work of Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists.

concerned, Buddhist modes of Being have had little direct influence on the way the West has approached its separation from nature.⁶ An alternative tradition, however, which has directly integrated certain Eastern traditions of thought with the problem of the human separation from the natural environment may be found in the American reception of Buddhist and Hindu beliefs, beginning with the Transcendentalists. When, in the 19th century, Emerson attempted to dissolve the self with his transparent eye-ball, or when Whitman similarly intimated a certain dissolution of “self” in the opening lines of *Leaves of Grass*: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” an Eastern ideal of non-duality (no subject/object distinction) was sought in a Romantic effort to bring the individual into unity with God and nature. Largely emerging out of this American-Romantic tradition—with its emphasis on individualism, radical forms of social dissent, and the spiritual element of nature worship—the Beat thinkers of the 1950’s and 60’s (including Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, and others) renewed an American intellectual interest in Eastern religions, particularly the way in which these religions affected one’s approach to his or her natural environment. And by the time of the Beats—largely through the writings and lectures of D.T. Suzuki—Zen Buddhism had established itself in the American consciousness as the most recognizable and influential Eastern religion.⁷

In his 1967 paper, Lynn White Jr. highlights the importance Zen Buddhist thought might have as a means with which to critique a West he claims to have been largely

⁶ Nietzsche’s influence on so-called post-structural and postmodern thought cannot be underestimated, and because of this, his ideas have indirectly helped give shape to the current intellectual synthesis of Eastern and Western modes of Being.

⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the transmission of Buddhism to America, see Rick Fields *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*.

dominated by a Christian history of thought. At the same time, he offers a pessimistic outlook on Zen's applicability to the West:

The beatniks, who are the basic revolutionaries of our time, show a sound instinct in their affinity for Zen Buddhism, which conceives of the man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view. Zen, however, is as deeply conditioned by Asian history as Christianity is by the experience of the West, and I am dubious of its viability among us. (Callicott and Ames *xiv*)

In response to White's pessimism, I would argue that contemporary sciences and certain postmodern discourses have shown themselves to be congruent with, if not friendly toward, Zen Buddhism's basic non-dualistic, process-oriented tenets.

The philosophical groundwork, it appears, is laid for a synthesis or integration of Eastern and Western environmental ideals; however, the Zen Buddhist tradition, like other Eastern modes of Being, still differs greatly from those modes practiced in the West.⁸ The West has tended to take dualisms and turn them into binaries that have privileged one half of the dualism over the other (e.g. man/woman: in this case, man has traditionally been privileged as a result of Western patriarchy). On the other hand, the non-dualistic approach found in Zen Buddhism would deny that any separate phenomenon, such as "man" or "woman," could exist, as each term is part of an interrelated unity, while a non-hierarchical dualistic approach to the man/woman binary, as is found in Taoist thought, would stress that without the concept of woman there could be no concept of man: one half of the binary cannot exist without the other, they are part and parcel of one another, there is no privileging. A binary such as the subject/object distinction we make in the West (subject as

⁸ Zen is fundamentally an experiential practice and not an intellectual system. Only through practice can one actually *know* Zen. According to Shunryu Suzuki in *Zen Mind: Beginner's Mind*, "Zen practice is the practice in which we resume our pure way of life, beyond any gaining idea, and beyond fame and profit. By practice we just keep our original nature as it is. There is no need to intellectualize about what pure nature is because it is beyond our intellectual understanding" (124). Rediscovering one's original nature, which was always there according to Zen, is what Zen Buddhist practice *is*. Such an understanding, rediscovered through practice, is essentially a-intellectual and is based out of a non-dualistic approach many Westerners have a difficult time digesting and adapting to.

privileged half) is transcended for the Zen practitioner who is aware that dualisms are non-hierarchical, as in Taoist thought, and are sometimes useful illusions that can be disastrous if confused with our essential or original nature, which is non-dualistic.⁹ Zen, like other forms of Buddhism, asserts the illusion of this distinction by observing that the “I,” the ego from which the subject / object distinction springs, is merely a construction of the ego-mind.¹⁰ From a Zen standpoint, the mind and body are ineluctably linked.

From these basic distinctions a host of important differences emerge between Zen Buddhism and Western dualistic modes of Being, as they pertain to a worldview. The traditional Zen approach to the world perceives a holistic unity rather than atomistic parts. Zen sees an organic balance, wherein all things in the world are related in processes that proceed toward balance and harmony, rather than a chaos of disconnected particulars. Also, Zen perceives a de-centered existence that is without any God to give motion and meaning to the universe. As embodied in Zen, these Eastern modes of thought, which may have seemed radical a half-century ago, have already become somewhat mainstream among Western intelligentsia, and, as it now appears, the principles of modern physics and

⁹ “Every existence in nature,” says Shunryu Suzuki, “every existence in the human world, every cultural work that we create, is something which was given, or is being given to us, relatively speaking. But as everything is originally one, we are, in actuality, giving out everything. Moment after moment we are creating something, and this is the joy of our life. But this ‘I’ which is creating and always giving out something is not the ‘small I’; it is the ‘big I’” (65). Suzuki’s “small I” is here the ego, while the “big I” is Oneness—the awareness of one’s original nature.

¹⁰ According to Shunryu Suzuki in *Zen Mind: Beginner’s Mind*, “To stop your mind does not mean to stop the activities of mind. It means mind pervades body” (41). When the individual is no longer identified with the idea of his or her self, the entire relationship between subject and object, knower and known, undergoes a sudden and revolutionary change. It becomes a real relationship, a mutuality in which the subject creates the object just as much as the object creates the subject (Watts 120). Thus, when the individual no longer feels his or her self to be independent of the known, he or she no longer stands apart from experience—their self is nothing other than the totality of the things for which they are aware. To quote Shunryu Suzuki again: “When everything exists within your big mind, all dualistic relationships drop away. There is no distinction between heaven and earth, man and woman, teacher and disciple” (44). The mind which can be observed (the ego) is not the self, because the self is looking at this supposed self: “If you reflect on yourself, that self is not your true self any more,” says Suzuki (134). The true self or “Zen mind” is always with the things observed. One’s essential nature, or what is also called “original nature” by Buddhists, is this non-dualistic seeing and Being.

ecological biology seem highly congruous to the values of many postmodern philosophies and Buddhism.¹¹

In America, one of the vanguards of this syncretization has been the poet and environmental philosopher Gary Snyder. Over the last four decades or so, Snyder's unique and integrated approach to the environment has helped inspire a contingent of ecologists, environmental philosophers, scientists, poets, and readers to rethink the West's approach to the natural environment and to their modes of Being. Snyder's poetry and prose work have attempted to reconnect its readers with their natural environment in an effort that takes the form of a revived Romanticism, wherein Snyder acts as tribal shaman, cultural mythmaker, and the voice of the natural realm. Like earlier Romantic endeavors, his project aims to center Being in the world of nature, yet unlike Romanticism, notions of the divine are absent from Snyder's views on nature. And because the language of Zen organizes Snyder's vision of nature, nature is not at all what we tend to think of; rather, nature as Snyder conceives of it, is who we are—it is the entire frame of Being, which manifests itself to Snyder in the visions of ecological biology and Derridean deconstruction seen through a Zen framework.

¹¹ In a recent articulation of the similarity between certain postmodernist discourses and Buddhism, Robert Magliola, in *Derrida on the Mend*, has argued that Derridean deconstruction shares affinities with Nagarjuna's Mahayana Buddhism. In particular, Magliola claims that Nagarjuna's *sunyata* ("emptiness") is Derrida's *différance*, and that Derridean *trace* was previously "tracked" by Nagarjuna's second century c.e. doctrines (87). Such an argument is of particular interest, since I will try and show how the work of Gary Snyder links the basic tenets of ecology to the relation between Nagarjuna's *sunyata* (a fundament of many Buddhist schools of thought, including Zen) and Derridean deconstruction.

II.

DECONSTRUCTION AND SNYDER'S ECO-BUDDHIST VISION

Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene.

[. . .]

But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. Here is the difference between the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet"

Snyder has been criticized by many postmodernists for the increasingly didactic character of his recent poetry, which clearly attempts to communicate a discernable "meaning," yet because of the Buddhist approach he takes—in particular, his use of what Buddhists call "emptiness"—the ideologies he presents suggest the peeling away of ideologies. Zen Buddhism teaches of "emptiness awareness," which is the clearing away of all subjective intentions, habits, and fixed or preconceived ideas, as a critical component to the experience of enlightenment.¹² And within Snyder's *oeuvre*, reported experiences of emptiness by both the poet and the speaking voices in his poetry work to deny fixed conceptions or ideas.

Although there are those who might argue that the experience of emptiness arising from non-dualism is itself an ideology that has the ability to oppress, emptiness awareness is

¹² "Emptiness" is a non-concept in the sense that this awareness frees the individual of their of subjective intentions, habits, fixed or preconceived ideas about the world. All "things," within an emptiness awareness, are not "things" as we often think of them (as nouns); rather, they appear to be part of a non-dualistic and totalizing awareness of existence.

an open experience. It is a process of denying fixed conceptions or ideas, or as the Buddhist saying goes, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Emerson, using the metaphor of a conversation, similarly de-centers ideologies through a valorization of openness in his essay “Circles”:

When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker, to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men. (408)

For Emerson, like Snyder, the transitory character of ideologies reveals the impermanent nature of existence: “There are no fixtures in nature,” Emerson says “The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees” (403). This continual process of peeling away ideologies is not unlike what deconstruction does.¹³ As Snyder says in a 1992 interview,

The intellectual energy represented by “deconstruction” is potentially a very good one. Divorce it from the intimidating mystification and narrowness of its political agenda and put it in Mahayana terms, which would be “Deconstruction for all Sentient Beings,” not just deconstruction for alienated European intellectuals! Then it becomes very much a Buddhist exercise, always remembering that deconstruction means the deconstructing of constructions and the constructions are official mythologies, the official mythologies of occidental institutions for example. So to talk about the role of prehistory in determining the larger history of Japan is a deconstructive exercise. Getting to roots is a deconstructive exercise. And then questioning the meaning of roots is a further deconstructive exercise! (Rossiter and Evans 12)

Because mythologies, and the ideologies they often become, reflect the changing relationships cultures have with their natural environments—they cannot be fixed or

¹³ Deconstruction, by the very nature of its logic, deconstructs its own meaning, and in doing so validates the stripping away of beliefs as a new center of meaning. This deconstructed construction of meaning is for that reason comparable to a Buddhist awareness of impermanence. In other words, according to Buddhism, there is only the constant flux of phenomena, wherein no stable center can ever be located, and because of this, fixed conceptions or ideas about the entire phenomenal universe don’t match up with the experience of impermanence. To have an awareness that is congruent to impermanence then, one must learn to go beyond fixed conceptions and ideas—one must learn to have an empty mind. This Zen Buddhist perspective, however, represents the construction of a center, which, because it operates on logic similar to deconstruction, must eventually deconstruct its own meaning and therefore participate in its own reality: impermanence.

stable—and because there is the possibility of infinite skepticism inherent in the continual deconstruction of mythologies and ideologies, Snyder asserts that if the deconstructive exercise is “tied to the Bodhisattva’s vow, which is to work on behalf of all beings,” then it is not an infinitely receding skepticism; rather “[i]t has a pragmatic aspect, which is: at what point do we benefit other beings?” (Rossiter and Evans 12).

Snyder’s attempt to re-create a sense of wholeness and interdependence with the sensuous world through a continual deconstructive effort, which he connects in the above interview with the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna’s dialect of emptiness, is like the healing song of the traditional shaman who is always working on behalf of all beings. “Poetry,” Snyder writes, “within the civilized area of history is the fragmented attempt to recreate a ‘healing song’ aspect of the shaman’s practice” (*RW* 175).

Language, which has been perceived by Lacan and other postmodern theorists to act as a barrier to this healing process, becomes for Snyder the method by which he attempts to heal the split between the abstraction of how humans perceive Being and their “original nature,” which is nothing more or less than nature. As a poet, using language as his medium, Snyder says that he is always “steering a course between crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable nonverbal states—and the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language” (*GSR* 53). The “nonverbal states” Snyder refers to are non-linguistic moments of emptiness awareness, while “the gleaming daggers and glittering nets of language” overtly refers to language as the Jewel Net of Indra.¹⁴

In Hua-yen Buddhist literature, the Jewel Net of Indra is located within the heavenly palace of the god Indra and is a net of infinite dimension decorated with a single round jewel at each knot of the net. When one inspects a certain individual jewel in this net, he or she

will find within it a hall of mirrors reflecting all the other jewels. All the other jewels of the net act similarly, so that each jewel contains all the other jewels. Since any one jewel, along with all the other reflections in it, is reflected in each of the other jewels, an interpenetrative and reflective infinity is represented. All of this reflectivity happens simultaneously and without sequential order; thus, the association of language with the Jewel Net of Indra indicates that signs are jewels in the net of language. According to Ferdinand de Saussure this is true, as each sign is dependent upon other signs for its meaning. Each sign's meaning is therefore contingent upon the whole language net for meaning, since every sign is dependent upon other signs for its existence, thus there can be no true sense of signs deferring to other signs. This sort of logic, of course, correlates with Derrida's notion of *différance*, in which, because each sign is what it is by not being the others, and every sign involves the others, meaning (read "center" or "source") is infinitely deferred, and key philosophical dualisms, such as reality/appearance, being/nothingness, reason/unreason, and knowledge/ignorance, deconstruct themselves. In this Buddhist and deconstructionist logic, language is holistically structured just like an ecosystem, as all creatures are dependent upon other creatures for their existence, and each ecosystem is dependent upon other ecosystems for its survival and vice versa.¹⁵ From this perspective, what I would call an "eco-Buddhist" position, both language and humans cannot be thought of as outside of nature, since to do so would deny our mutual dependency upon other forms of life, while it

¹⁴ States of emptiness awareness are necessarily non-linguistic, since to be aware of a word is to have a fixed, therefore closed, conception of the nature of the signifier's signified or the signifier's possible physical referent.

¹⁵ My attempt to relate the logic of ecology and deconstruction to Buddhist logic does not equate an ecological and deconstructive sense of wholeness with a Buddhist awareness of wholeness. The wholeness perceived as a result of ecological and deconstructive logic is a cognitive perception of that analysis, expressed through language, while during a Buddhist awareness of wholeness, cortical processing is largely suspended, and the awareness is non-verbal. Although Snyder's project links ecological and deconstructive logic to Buddhist logic, the awareness of wholeness he speaks of, which is clearly Buddhist in character, cannot therefore be experienced logically.

would also construct a dualism that would privilege humans above other forms of life.¹⁶ Here again we see the overlap of Buddhist thinking and Derridean deconstruction, this time combined with ecological biology to suggest a radically interdependent vision wherein seemingly disparate ways of thinking add to larger whole.¹⁷

¹⁶ The necessary ethics of to how to live a life in a world where no human life is valued above other forms of life is an issue that is still widely discussed amongst Buddhists. It is also an issue that stretches well beyond the scope of this paper; however, a mainstream Buddhist response to this issue would assert that one should do the least harm possible in all aspects of his or her existence.

¹⁷ The very dissemination of Zen ideology into language, which—from a deconstructive-Jewel-net-ecosystem perspective—is representative of interrelatedness, indicates that meaning is given by those who read Snyder's texts and also by the world that envelops those who read the texts, not the other way around. Included in this de-centered approach, experiences of emptiness, which Snyder's poetry and prose seem to offer as a key to moments of emptiness awareness, are participated in by various individuals through various forms of religious and secular experiences. These cross-cultural experiences of a Buddhist awareness indicate Snyder's belief in the cross-cultural and pan-religious nature of emptiness. As evidence of this, I will later show how, in the poem "The Hump-backed Flute Player," a historical Native American, a mythical Native American character, a Buddhist scholar-pilgrim, and the speaker of the poem all carry experiences of emptiness with them.

III.

INTERRELATEDNESS AND SNYDER'S SYNCRETISTIC METHOD

The traditional or tribal shaman [...] acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth [...] The shaman or sorcerer is the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and more-than-human worlds, the primary strategist and negotiator in any dealings with the Others.

David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

Although I will use the Zen (non)concept of emptiness as a fundamental structuring key with which to unlock Snyder's project and organize a cohesive reading of it, I want to stress that there can be no causal starting point at which to locate Snyder's ideological roots. Because Snyder's poetry and prose often point to emptiness awareness as allowing for the experience of non-dualistic moments of unity, there can be no single ideology behind Snyder's project except the ideology of denying fixed ideas or fixed conceptions. As I believe Snyder would see it, to take a Zen perspective is to take an interrelated perspective toward every idea, intellectual discipline, object of study, or any other "separate" noun of which one can conceive. Zen Buddhism is not the only starting point from which to understand Snyder; rather, it is just one of the many ways with which to enter into the radically integrated scope of his vision. In order to begin to see the unusual place Snyder is coming from, the critic must see that all of Snyder's influences are part of a vision of existence that is you-me-Snyder-the-world.

Salman Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children* makes a statement to the reader which seems to encapsulate this personal sense of interconnectedness with space and time:

Who What am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all that have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that

happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come...To understand me, you'll have to swallow the world. (440-441)

In order to swallow Snyder then, one must swallow interrelatedness or interconnectedness, because to Snyder, "nothing is not related [...] everything is interrelated [...] there really are no fragments" (*Towards* 133).

From a similar Zen viewpoint, in order to understand anything you must not try to understand everything, for that is impossible; rather, in order to understand everything one must understand one thing: the self.¹⁸ According to Zen, to understand one's original, non-dualistic self is to understand the essential nature of everything: notions of an isolated "self" and all other fixed conceptions are abstractions that draw us away from our essential or original nature, which is interrelated, interconnected or knotted with everything else. Such a holistic Zen perspective acts as the fundament of Snyder's syncretized approach, and is primarily drawn from his years studying Zen in Japan, and his work as a logger, environmental thinker, teacher, prose writer, and poet.

In a 1973 interview, Snyder uses Buddhist terminology to express this sense of interconnectedness that often manifests itself in his poetry:

I find it always exciting to me, beautiful, to experience the interdependencies of things, the complex webs and networks by which everything moves, which I think are the most beautiful awarenesses that we can have of ourselves and of our planet. Let me quote something:

The Buddha once said, Bhikshus (monks), if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can

¹⁸ According to Shunryu Suzuki, in *Zen Mind: Beginner's Mind*, "Each one of us must make his own true way, and when we do, that way will express the universal way [...] When you understand one thing through and through you understand everything. When you try to understand everything, you will not understand anything. The best way is to understand yourself, and then you will understand everything" (111). This understanding of self is attained through an empty mind—one that is free from fixed ideas or conceptions about the world and existence: "Understanding," Suzuki says, "will come out of emptiness" (111). The word "Understanding" is not used by Suzuki to refer to an intellectual grasping but rather it refers to a non-dualistic awareness, which is often called "Zen mind," "big mind," or "mind of emptiness" by Zen practitioners. This Zen mind contains all of existence and non-existence in a non-dualistic framework of "and/is" logic that functions between polarities of presence/absence, real/unreal, nature/culture, etc.

understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha.

And again, that's one of the worlds that poetry has taken, is these networks, these laws of interdependence [...] imagination, intuition, vision, clarify them [laws of interdependence], manifest them in certain ways—and to be able to transmit that to others is to transmit a certain quality of truth about the world. (RW 35)

This interpenetrating, interdependent framework of Being expressed by the Buddha transmits the *Dharma*—a word that has no one general meaning, but which is often translated as “truth,” “righteousness,” “essence,” “doctrine,” “nature.”¹⁹ As Snyder succinctly says of the *Dharma* expressed by each *dharmā*, in a style harking back to Whitman's world-embracing vision in *Leaves of Grass*,

[...] a great poet does not express his or her self, he expresses *all* of our selves. And to express *all* of our selves you have to go beyond your own self. Like Dōgen, the Zen master, said, “We study the self to forget the self. And when you forget the self, you become *one* with all things.” And that's why poetry's not self-expression in those small self terms. (RW 65)

The above quote is also another way of saying what the Buddhist teacher Chin-k'ai says about expressing the relationship between the mind and *dharmas*: “All one can say is that the

¹⁹ In Buddhism, the term *dharmā* has other connotations as well. Phenomena in general, as opposed to noumena, are *dharmas*, as are the qualities and characteristics of phenomena. All qualities and characteristics of *dharmas* are also composite. In *The Buddhist Tradition: in India, China, and Japan*, A.L. Basham explains that “As a corollary of the fact that all things are composite they are transient, for the composition of all aggregates is liable to change with time. Moreover, being essentially transient, they have no Self or soul, no abiding individuality” (10). All phenomena (*dharmas*) are thus composite and transient according to Buddhism. That they have no Self or soul can not only be ascribed to the fact that a stable self is an unreality, but also to the belief in the dependent origination of things. According to Shu-chun Huang, in “A Hua-Yen Buddhist Perspective on Gary Snyder,” the Law of Dependent Origination (the Buddhist way of accounting for the cause of existence, which is also known as the Law of Co-origination) asserts that all phenomena are relative and dependent upon other phenomena for their Being (197). “Subjectively,” Huang says, “each *dharmā* does possess a form of its own. A *dharmā* is empty in the sense that, objectively, it is ‘without a self-essence’ and its ‘existence’ is composed of elements which disintegrate” (197). “*Sunyata*, or emptiness,” he elaborates, “is not equivalent to non-existence but is without an independent existence, for all *dharmas* are dependent upon causation. [...] From this viewpoint, all *dharmas* are *sunya* (empty), and hence dependent. For example, the thing we denominate as a flower is an existence made up of constituent elements such as seed, sunlight, air, water, and so on. The existence of the flower is a ‘pseudo being,’ dependent upon the cooperation of those conditions, and each condition *per se* is still a ‘pseudo being’ composed of other constituent elements. For instance, water can be disintegrated into H₂ and O” (197). In this manner the Buddhist maxim “form is emptiness; emptiness is form” begins to make sense. And it is in this manner that *dharmas* express the *Dharma*. To frame this thought non-dualistically, Shunryu Suzuki says in *Zen Mind: Beginner's Mind*, “Each existence depends on something else. Strictly speaking, there are no separate individual existences. There are just many names for one existence” (119).

Mind is all *dharmas* and that all *dharmas* are the Mind. [...] Knowledge cannot know it, nor can words speak it” (Hurvitz, et al. 166). In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder offers yet another expression of this sentiment: “When humans know themselves, the rest of nature is right there. This is what the Buddhists call the Dharma” (68).

As Snyder’s Romantic quote about a “great poet” indicates, he feels that the job of his poetry is to paradoxically communicate a non-linguistic, non-intellectual, non-dualistic sense of existence through language. When asked in an 1990 interview to say something about what seems to be the paradox of composing a Zen poem—how to give expression to an experience that the interviewer perceives to be pre-symbolic and pre-verbal [Martin 165]—Snyder responded:

[...] in Zen we find that that which *cannot* be said is not complete. If you have an understanding and cannot express it, then your understanding is not yet complete. The act of expressing clarifies your understanding of it. However, the nature of that expression may not be clear and transparent to everybody, which is why Zen literature is not easy to follow. But that’s what it is. So the person who has a Zen eye can understand it. (Martin 166)

This question and answer deals specifically with Zen poetry, and it would seem not all of Snyder’s poetry is Zen poetry, as many of his poems are overtly political and often deal with subjects that do not seem to reflect Zen beliefs, yet his vision of the world is often expressed through Zen terminology. In a rather revealing statement, Snyder uses distinctively Zen terminology to describe his poetic task:

The work of poetry is really not the work of prophecy. Nor is it, ultimately, the work of social change. That’s just part of it. The other part of it is in the eternity of the present, and doesn’t have to do with evolutionary processes at all, but has to do with bringing us back to our *original, true natures* from whatever habit-molds that our perceptions, that our thinking and feeling get formed into. And bringing us back to *original true mind*, seeing the universe freshly in eternity, yet at any moment. (RW72; italics added)

Snyder’s attention to the present moment is typically Zen, and the mixing together of the terms “original, true nature” and “original mind” is a way to refer to the same “original

nature” of Zen Buddhism, which involves the seeing “freshly” or mindfully free of “habit-molds” (preconceived or fixed ideas) and the getting forever-lost-in-eternity-always-present. In the above quote, our “original mind” is an emptied awareness; it is the experience of seeing free of subjective intentions, or preconceived and fixed ideas. If the work of Snyder’s poetry is to “[bring] us back to original true mind,” then Snyder’s poetry points, however indirectly, to the experience of emptiness as revealing our original nature.

Because our original nature is non-dualistic, the awareness of it is not nameable in the sense that it can be made a noun—since to name it as such would be to constitute it as a thing, which it both is and is not. The naming of original nature cannot mean in the typical sense, as the meaning it intends lies outside the enclosure of a noun; hence, Snyder and other Buddhists often refer to this non-dualistic Absolute as “emptiness” or “the Void”: the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” which Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man” seems to behold.²⁰ The experience of emptiness refers to a non-dualistic state of Being that both is (in the sense of acting as a thing) and isn’t (in the sense of not acting as a thing), because the categories “is” and “isn’t” are dualistic assertions that are extrinsic to the experience of original mind. As a result of this linguistic constraint, much of Snyder’s poetry typically points to a reality many Westerners have difficulty grasping at a conceptual level, and because of this pointing, the poetry often appears to be quite didactic, as it actively points to and espouses a worldview.

With this type of poetics in mind, one might playfully label Snyder a “Zen shaman,” as the shaman’s traditional role in his or her society was to act as intermediary for the exchanges between the human and the natural, or what Snyder calls the “extra-human

²⁰ For an intriguing inquiry into the influence Eastern states of mind had on many of Wallace Stevens’ poems, including the “The Snow Man,” see William W. Bevis’ *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature*.

realms” (*Towards* 110).²¹ The eco-philosopher David Abrams, working along similar lines, calls these realms the “more-than-human world” in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, his book chronicling the role written language has played in abstracting humans from their sensual environment. Yet it is through written language—what Abrams finds to be a central source of our estrangement from nature—that Snyder’s poetry and prose attempts to bridge the gap between the human and natural world via an eco-Buddhist rejection of this gap.

In a statement indicating the biocentric view on human affairs he takes, Snyder, in a 1972 interview with Ekbart Faas, claimed that his ideas primarily stem from his readings on biology. This assertion, however, along with other biocentric statements Snyder has made, in no way deny the radically interrelated, interconnected vision of the world his work seems to present. Snyder’s readings on ecological biology, in particular, suggest fundamental congruencies between Buddhism and the biological sciences. As he said in the same interview, “I’m committed to a biological Buddhist mystic defense of the diversity of life which I think is the work of the poets as ancient shaman-poets and ancient servants of the Muse and the lady of wild things and non-human or extra-human realms” (*Towards* 110).

²¹ This rather new-age label of “Zen shaman” is not meant to mock Snyder, as he is often considered to be the original shaman-song poet whose syncretistic style other poets have imitated, often garnering negative critical reception. Impassioned arguments against this type of poetics contend that by acting as shaman or as intermediary, a person or text constructs itself as the vessel of truth or objective reality. Snyder, by constructing his poetry in this shaman-song style, therefore seems to construct himself—behind the veil of the text—as the source of truth. Largely because of this, Snyder has been attacked over the years by those of the “theories of identity” camp, who have repeatedly asserted that his poetry misappropriates typically marginalized voices (nature, Native American, other indigenous peoples) for his own Westernized, Romanticized, or other ideological purposes. Although the arguments for and against a poetics of this sort are varied and complex, a basic defense of Snyder claims that these charges reduce all writing to an autobiographical function, and would further assert that Snyder’s poetry isn’t interested in identity, that it isn’t even interested in selfhood at all. In a statement touching upon this idea, Snyder, when directed to the lack of personal presence in his poetry by Julia Martin in a 1990 interview, said, “I’m not interested in being a consistent poet speaking, speaking for my own sentiments and sensibilities (166). And when further asked about what subject he thought was interesting to talk about in his poetry, Snyder responded, “Talking about your non-self! [laughs.]” (167). In this last statement, we can see that from a non-dualistic perspective, to speak about oneself is to speak about the world, and to speak about anything in the world is to speak about oneself and non-self. For a more detailed defense of Snyder’s shaman-song poetics, see Tim Dean’s essay, “The Other’s Voice: Cultural Imperialism and Poetic Impersonality in Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.”

Although Snyder's language, like Abrams', constructs a surface dualism of "human" and "non-human," the distinction is made in order to transcend this dualism. Snyder recognizes that the human/nature or culture/nature binary, which posits that certain human attributes like the soul and language are distinct from and above the natural world, constructs the natural world as other, and so he often substitute terms like "extra-human realm" or "non-human realm" for "nature." For the sake of public understanding, however, Snyder typically uses the term "nature" to refer to the non-human realm which is thought to be separate and outside the "self." What we often think of as "nature" Snyder thinks of within a Buddhist awareness of original nature, and his various expressions for this original nature are "the nature of the nature of nature," "the wild," and "thusness."

IV.

A ZEN EFFACEMENT OF THE “SELF” / “NATURE” DIVISION

Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

In the West, we are accustomed to defining both physical objects and ideas in terms of binary oppositions. One such binary, which I have already mentioned, is the mind/body opposition—a distinction that arose in connection with the earlier subject/object dichotomy, and which has traditionally valorized the rational perceptions associated with the mind over sensuous perceptions. Working against this Cartesian binary and the resulting preference ascribed to the mind, Snyder, as a practicing Zen Buddhist, understands that the body is to be trusted. In an video interview he gave in 1984, Snyder asserted the importance of listening to one's body as he recounted the real-life events that surround the poem “Piute Creek,” from his book *Riprap (Gary)*. As Snyder said in the interview, “Piute Creek” recalls his experiences around a campfire with either a cougar or coyote close behind him in the dark:

One granite ridge
A tree, would be enough
Or even a rock, a small creek,
A bark shred in a pool.
Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted
Tough trees crammed
In thin stone fractures
A huge moon on it all is too much.
The mind wanders. A million
Summers, night air still and the rocks
Warm. Sky over endless mountains.
All that junk that goes with being human
Drops away, hard rock wavers
Even the heavy present seems to fail
This bubble of a heart.

Words and books
Like a small creek of a high ledge
Gone in the dry air.

A clear attentive mind
Has no meaning but that
Which sees is truly seen.
No one loves rock, yet we are here.
Night chills. A flick
In the moonlight
Slips into Juniper shadow.
Back there unseen
Cold proud eyes
Of Cougar or Coyote
Watch me rise and go. (GSR 400)

At the beginning of this poem, a narrowed field of vision is pictured: “One granite ridge / A tree, would be enough / Or even a rock, a small creek, / A bark shred in a pool” and then the poem’s frame of vision expands to depict a wider panorama: “Hill beyond hill” and “A huge moon.” The expansion of the speaker’s field of vision causes him to wander out of his narrowed state of mind into a perception of the hills and mountains set within geologic scales of time: “A million / Summers.” At this point in the poem, those things that make the speaker distinctly human (“words and books”) drop away. The image of the hard rock wavering breaks down the normal perception of rock as solid and stable and indicates that the speaker is now seeing with an attentive mind of emptiness, since the seeing is free of categories and conceptions about things: “All that junk that goes with being human” (GSR 400). The wavering of the rock also reveals the rock to be a fluid process, an activity that underscores both geologic history and the Buddhist belief that every phenomenon (*dharma*) is constantly changing in a reflection of what Buddhists describe as transience or impermanence (Murphy 50).²² At this meditative point in the poem, the speaker’s voice has described how “All that junk that goes with being human / Drops away” before the

²² In this essay, as in most Buddhist literature, “transience” and “impermanence” are synonymous terms.

detection of the animal's presence, and "that / Which sees" has now become the big mind or mind of emptiness, stripped of meanings constructed by the dualistic mind, which is idea-constructing and filled with "Words and books" (*GSR* 400). It is only when those things we think of as distinctly human are removed—"Words and books / Like a small creek off a high ledge / Gone in the dry air"—that the narrator is able to see with a clear and attentive mind. Such a translucent state of mind is known as *wu-hsin*, literally "no-mind," by Zen Buddhists. It is a state of absolute attentiveness, free of self-consciousness and fixed ideas, wherein the mind functions freely and easily.²³ Referring to "Piute Creek" in an interview, Snyder says that he was tipped off to the presence of a coyote or cougar by the hairs on the back of his neck, which he says "are always correct" (*Gary*). Such an awareness is possible in the poem because, "A clear attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen." Because of this clear mind, operating without words that construct meanings, Snyder is alerted to the presence of the animal; he is allowed to see in a way that would be impossible had his mind been distracted and filled with words or books.

²³ Mind, for the Zen Buddhist, cannot be regarded as an object of thought or action, as if it were a thing to be grasped and controlled. To attempt to do so creates a dualism. Mind, accordingly, is inseparable from itself. There is no separation from mind in the true mind. As Shunryu Suzuki says, "[I]n the sutra it says, 'There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body or mind...'" This 'no-mind' is Zen mind, which includes everything (115). To illustrate this point, in a poem from "The Heart Sutra," clear dewdrops stand for an empty mind that is free of dualistic conceptions and ideas:

When just as they are,
White dewdrops gather
On scarlet maple leaves,
Regard the scarlet beads! (Stryck 12)

The dewdrops of this poem allow the color of the maple leaves to shine through, just as one who sees with a mind of emptiness allows sensuous experience to shine through as reality. Within this awareness, mind-is-body-is-emptied-awareness. There is no mind other than experiencing-seeing-and-being-seen. According to Zen, participation in this seeing-and-being-seen brings the Mind into awareness of reality. Referring to this Buddhist understanding of mind, which is the entire field in which the mind-body complex participates, Snyder says in *Turtle Island*, "Now, we are both in, and outside, the world at once. The only place this can be is the *Mind*. Ah, what a poem. It is what is, completely, in the past, present, and future simultaneously, seeing being, and being seen" (114).

In the essay “Poetry, Community and Climax,” Snyder explicitly claims that language, ego, and custom (synchronous with fixed ideas) act as barriers to this sort of originary relationship with the natural world:

Human beings buffer themselves against seeing the natural world directly. Language, custom, ego and personal advantage strategies all work against seeing. So the first wholeness is wholeness with nature. (33)

Snyder feels that the desire to distinguish ourselves in any way from the natural world has been most harmful. As he says:

People from the high civilizations in particular have elaborate notions of separateness and difference and dozens of ways to declare themselves “out of nature.” As a kind of game this might be harmless. [...] But at the very minimum this call to a special destiny on the part of human beings can be seen as a case of needlessly multiplying theories (Occam’s razor). And the results—in the human treatment of the rest of nature—have been pernicious. (*PW* 107)

The most basic expression of this separateness is located in the words “self” and “nature,” each term asserting an existence separate from the other. Such separateness is dismantled in much of Snyder’s work by a Buddhist denial of this separateness.

In a brief poem, in which the subject matter appears to be similar to his experience with either a cougar or coyote in “Piute Creek,” Snyder re-vision the “self”/“nature” dualism as the speaker describes how his poetry is informed by a no-mind meeting of himself with the natural world:

How Poetry Comes to Me

It comes blundering over the
Boulders at night, it stays
Frightened outside the
Range of my campfire
I go to meet it at the
Edge of the light. (*GSR* 557)

In this instance, poetry comes from the meeting of the animal world—as represented through actions normally associated with cougars and coyotes—with the speaker at the edge

of the light. Interestingly, it is the light from the fire that both draws the animal near and keeps it at bay, and it is only at the edge of the light, at the liminal space where the human and the animal blurs, that poetry “comes” to the speaker. The speaker’s poetry seems to thus emerge out of a clearing of the divisions between himself and the natural world. That the poem does not specifically name a creature implies that the creation of the speaker’s poetry is not contingent upon the emergence of a specific or unique animal, but opens the poem to include an expanding range of creatures. In the space where poetry comes to the speaker, the human world, absolutely attuned to the natural world, is the natural world. Highlighting the dissolution of this “self”/“nature” division, the final lines to Snyder’s poem “Straight-Creek—Great Burn” emphasize again a congruity between the poetic process and nature:

A whoosh of birds
swoops up and round
tilts back
almost always flying all apart
and yet hangs on!
together;

never a leader,
all of one swift

empty
dancing mind.

They arc and loop & then
their flight is done.
they settle down.
end of poem. (*NN* 241)

The final line of this poem seems to call attention to the difference between the experience and the poetic representation of that experience, yet another way to view this ending, as Robert Kern has pointed out, is to view the experience—the flight and settling down of the birds—as itself a poem (“Silence” 116). I would go further than Kern, however, and argue

that because the speaker witnesses the flight of the birds as the poem he is also seeing with a mind of emptiness and therefore perceives no true distinction between the phenomenal events and the poetic representation of those events: they are one. The lines “all of one swift / empty / dancing mind” lack a clear antecedent and so draw the birds, as well as the perceiving speaker, into this description of an emptied awareness. Although this description may at first look like an anthropomorphism, Snyder, as we know, does not envision a gap between the human and natural realms, so for him to describe these realms in a Buddhist vocabulary is to assert the interpenetration and mutual dependency of the natural and human realms. From a Buddhist perspective, the poem’s use of “mind” is also of interest in that “mind”—what we tend to think of as a disembodied consciousness (“self”)—is characterized by the adjectives “swift” and “dancing,” each of which normally functions to describe physical objects. According to Snyder’s Buddhist sense of Mind, Mind is “seeing being, and being seen” (TI 114)—it is a totalizing sense of Being that subsumes the natural and human realms into a totalizing sense of awareness. In the instance of this poem, as is the case in so many of Snyder’s poems, the natural world is therefore describable in human terms and vice versa; the two constructed realms cannot be separated or distinguished.

Referring to Dōgen Kigen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra* in the essay contained within *The Practice of the Wild* called “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” Snyder uses the 13th-century Zen master’s description of the way mountains, rivers and humans function to demonstrate the wholeness that wraps humans into the processes of nature. “His mountains and streams,” Snyder says of Dōgen, “are the processes of the earth, all of existence, process, essence, action, absence; they roll being and non-being together. They are what we are, we are what they are” (103). Mind, according to Dōgen and other Buddhists, is an extension of the natural world. It is not separate from the sensual world, as

certain Western philosophical traditions have tried to assert. The human mind and body are one; mind is body is nature. Humans are thus in no way outside of fellow animate or inanimate beings. As one of the “Little Songs for Gaia” says in Snyder’s book *No-Nature*: “As the crickets’ soft autumn hum / is to us, / so are we to the trees / as are they / to the rocks and hills” (287).

According to Robert Kern, in “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” Snyder adopts strategies—oddly enough for a writer who often seems hostile to poststructuralist theories and their jargon—that are nothing if not deconstructive in their efforts to break down binary oppositions between art and nature, culture and nature, and humans and nature (“Mountains” 7).²⁴ As Snyder sees it, “Mountains and rivers” form a dyad that make wholeness possible, and Dōgen Kigen’s notion of mountains and waters, in his “Mountains and Waters Sutra,” Snyder explains,

[...] is a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature. As such it goes well beyond dichotomies of purity and pollution, natural and artificial. The whole with its rivers and valleys obviously includes farms, fields, villages, cities, and the (once comparatively small) dusty world of human affairs. (*PW* 102)

From this perspective, humans cannot be thought of outside the realm of nature. In a thoroughly de-centered manner, Snyder continues a page later:

For those who would see directly into essential nature, the idea of the sacred is a delusion and an obstruction: it diverts us from seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness. Roots, stems, and branches are all equally scratchy. No hierarchies, no equality. No occult and exoteric, no gifted kids and slow achievers [...] no natural or artificial. (*PW* 103)

To emphasize the indivisibility of the human and natural realms, Snyder describes a group of mountains as if they were human:

²⁴ The reader should be aware that the play of *différance*, which Derrida sees as deconstructing binaries such as “culture” and “nature,” is quite different from the unity of opposites that results from a Buddhist deconstruction of the same binary.

So the blue mountains walk to the kitchen and back to the shop, to the desk and to the stove. *We* sit on a park bench and let the wind and rain drench us. The blue mountains walk out to put another coin in the parking meter, and go on down to the 7-Eleven. The blue mountains march out to the sea, shoulder the sky for a while, and slip into the water. (*PW* 103; italics added)

In this passage, Snyder swaps, and thereby melts together, the natural and the human. The insertion of “We” into the passage pulls the reader into the actions. Because the subject of the passage is the blue mountains, the use of “we” brings the reader (the human realm) into relation with the mountains (nature). Also, the anthropomorphized actions of the blue mountains attempt the same from the reverse angle; they show how the natural, geological processes of the earth are not significantly different from those processes of everyday ordinary life. The processes of daily human life are therefore no different than the processes of mountains and rivers forming each other (*PW* 101). According to Dōgen, “If you doubt mountains walking you do not know your own walking” (*PW* 103). Humans and mountains are part of this “thusness”—what Snyder thinks of as the essential nature of the universe, which is in the continual process of impermanence, as represented in Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters Sutra” by “the obvious fact of the water-cycle and the fact that mountains and rivers indeed form each other” (*RW* 101).

In “Endless Streams and Mountains,” the opening poem to Snyder’s epic long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, the process of mountains and rivers forming each other is described as,

Step back and gaze again at the land:
it rises and subsides—

ravines and cliffs like waves of blowing leaves—
stamp the foot, walk with it, clap! Turn,
the creeks come in, ah!
strained through boulders,
mountains walking on water,
water ripples every hill. (8)

Nature is constantly moving in the above stanzas; mountains are given shape by water (“water ripples every hill”), while waters are “strained through boulders.” Snyder also expresses this sentiment earlier in the same poem: “...The water holds up the mountains, / The mountains go down in the water...” (7). He later adds the final line to the poem: “Streams and mountains never stay the same” (9). In another process-oriented poem in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, this impermanence is articulated as, “Rocks of water, / Water out of rocks” (68), and in the poem “The Mountain Spirit,” also within *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, this same motif is repeated:

Peaks like Buddhas at the heights
send waters streaming down
to the deep center of the turning world.

And the Mountain Spirit always wandering
hillsides fade like walls of cloud
pebbles smoothed off sloshing in the sea (145)

If the phrase “mountains and rivers” is a way to refer to the totality of the processes of nature, then that process is one of constant change: “nature” is impermanence itself.

V.

“THE WILD”: SNYDER’S ECO-BUDDHIST STILL POINT

To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent, open, imperfect—and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us. For in a fixed universe there would be no freedom. With that freedom we improve campsites, teach children, oust tyrants. The world is nature, and in the long run inevitably wild, because the wild, as the process and essence of nature, is also an ordering of impermanence.

Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*

Although Snyder, as we have seen, makes no distinction between the human and natural realms, he does distinguish between what is “wild” and what is “natural.” This distinction is essential to a basic understanding of Snyder’s particular intellectual synthesis of Buddhism with ecological biology and postmodernism. “Everything” Snyder says, “in the universe is natural, otherwise it couldn’t exist, but that which has not been altered by human intention or manipulation is what we call wild” (*Gary*).²⁵ What, then, does he mean by “wild?”

For Snyder, “the wild” is closely related to the Chinese definition of “Dao”—the *way* of nature—and things within the *way* are,

beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. (*PW* 10)

²⁵ Snyder’s statement would, at first glance, appear to collapse under his own logic of interrelatedness, since if everything is interrelated then nothing is not human and no human is not natural. This statement also appears to indicate that humans are somehow distinct from the natural world. However, this is exactly the sort of thinking Snyder’s work attempts to dispel. Although Snyder does not clarify it in the video interview from which this quote is taken, “human intention or manipulation” does not refer to all human thought and action. “[H]uman intention or manipulation” refers specifically to those thoughts and actions that are not filtered through emptiness awareness (remember that emptiness awareness is free of fixed ideas or intentions). As I will soon show, what Snyder defines as “the wild” will include the natural world as well as the human world of experience and action filtered through emptiness awareness and a collective sensuous unconscious.

Not surprisingly, the terms “beyond categories,” “unmediated,” “freely manifesting,” “insubstantial,” “playful,” “surprising,” and “quite simple” are apt descriptions of emptiness awareness. This list of descriptives, Snyder thinks, is also not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma*, with *Dharma*’s original sense of “firming and forming” (*PW* 10). In the essay, “A Place in Space,” Snyder continues to connect his definition of “the wild” to Buddhist precepts. This time it is impermanence; “Wild” he says, “is a name for the way that phenomena continually actualize themselves” (*GSR* 260). In this same essay, Snyder points out that nature is an unknowably organized chaos and that this is its fundamental nature—what he calls the “the nature of the nature of nature” in *The Practice of the Wild*. “The wild” is a process for Snyder; it is mountains and rivers without end; it is also humans as nature.

“The wild” is also a synonym for “thusness”—“thusness, is the nature of the nature of nature. The wild in the wild” (*PW* 103)—and both words refer to an organized chaos, firmed and formed by intrinsic organizing principles. Snyder’s correlation of “the wild” with “thusness” is of particular interest since “thusness” is Snyder’s take on the Buddhist term “suchness.” As it is generally understood by Buddhists, “suchness” denotes an experience of the world filtered through emptiness awareness. That Snyder uses this Buddhist description of a sensuously embodied awareness to add to his definition of nature as “thusness” / “the wild” is characteristic, since he does not envision a true gap between the “self” and “nature.” “The wild” and “thusness” are thus terms that simultaneously describe the human and the natural.

Asserting this interpenetration of the human and the natural in “the wild,” the poem “Ripples on the Surface” represents the human realm as “the house” and the natural realm as “the wild”:

[...]—Nature not a book, but a *performance*, a
high old culture

Ever fresh events
scraped out, rubbed out, and used, used, again—
the braided channels of the rivers
hidden under fields of grass—

The vast wild
 The house, alone.
The little house in the wild,
 The wild in the house.
Both forgotten.

No nature

Both together, one big empty house. (*GSR* 568)

The poem's conventional use of the term "the wild" as representative of "nature" is distinct from Snyder's use of the term "the wild," since Snyder's use of the "the wild" in *The Practice of the Wild* denotes a non-dualistic awareness of nature intermeshed with the "self," while this poem's use of "the wild" refers to what we tend to think of as the natural world. This second half of the poem intermingles the human realm of "the home" with that other home, "the wild." "The wild" interpenetrates the home ("The wild in the house") just as the house interpenetrates "the wild" ("The little house in the wild"). The two are indistinguishable: "one big empty house." When this interpenetration happens, the split between the two is forgotten ("Both forgotten") in a clearing out of the division between the human and the natural ("one big empty house"). The use of the term "empty" is here an overt reference to an emptiness awareness, and the pure "thusness" of nature becomes our home, becomes us, "one big empty house" in which we dwell. In this movement, nature-is-our home-is-us-perceiving-through-emptiness.

"The wild," like emptiness, is to Snyder a non-concept in the sense that it denies any fixed conception of nature-humans. As Snyder says of nature's wildness in *No Nature's* preface page:

Whatever it is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or expectations [...] There is no set “nature” either as “the natural world” or “the nature of things.” The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional.

Hakuin Zenji puts it “self-nature that is no nature/ ...far beyond mere doctrine.” An open space to move in, with the whole body, the whole mind. My gesture has been with language.

When “the wild” is not trapped by human conception, when it is stripped of fixed ideas, it is allowed to be fluid and open, to go beyond the category of “it.” Seeing with a mind of emptiness allows nature to be seen thusly (“—Nature not a book, but a *performance*, a / high old culture”).

Snyder’s use of the Buddhist term “thusness” to refer to “the wild” is also of interest in that it indicates that he imagines “the wild”—or “the nature of nature of nature” (*PW* 103), as Snyder also calls it—to be open. From a Buddhist standpoint, to define or conceive of “the wild” as a finite system is to make the mistake of denying the ever-changing world of phenomena, while from a postmodern perspective, which Snyder is quite aware of, to define or conceive of it as a finite system is to assert a static reality or center.

As a term that knots the human and the natural realm together in an open expression, “the wild” is like Derrida’s statement that “There is nothing outside of the text” (*Dissemination* 158), because, for Derrida, nature has never been anything but writing, which is the process of *différance*. As he says in *Dissemination*,

There have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute presence, Nature, that which words like “real mother” name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (158-59; emphasis added in original)

Not even nature can be thought of as separate from textuality. Nature is here perceived as a fluid and differential text, just like “the wild.” What this seems to “mean” (if I can even use

that term when speaking about Derrida) is that, for Snyder, phenomenal nature functions like language; as Barbara Johnson's "Translator's Introduction" says, in a comment on this passage, "Nothing, indeed, can be said to be *not* text" (xiv). Nature is not literally language for Snyder; rather, it is of a similar structure as language. It is like a text: a deferring web of meaning.²⁶

As Snyder sees it, nature (read "the wild") is also not a completely indeterminate text, as he envisions nature to have a recognizable order and knowable surface structures. In this manner, nature is both determinant and indeterminate. Snyder suggests that one of the manifestations of this determinant indeterminacy appears in ecological biology. Subsuming ecological biology into his non-dualistic awareness of nature, Snyder blends together "the wild" with what the Spanish ecologist Ramón Mágalef calls "climax systems." "Climax systems" are natural systems that have reached optimal levels of diversity or biological complexity, wherein evolutionary and ecological stability is the rule (*RW* 115-116).²⁷ Although scientists have claimed to locate optimal levels of diversity or biological complexity within an ecosystem (surface structures), they have so far been unable to identify the deep structures responsible for this ordering.²⁸ For Snyder, nature's "climax systems" are analogous to the mind when it is fed by its thought "detritus":

²⁶ Derrida has claimed that meanings are multiple, but not to the extent that they are indefinite or infinite. Although words are always open to gaining future meaning, meaning is a function of present context. Words gain new meaning by insertion into new contexts, yet our inability to predict these new contexts does not seem to prevent us from having a reasonably secure grasp of the finite range of meanings our words have in their present contexts (Moran 472). Language's inability to convey a traditional sense of meaning, however, stems from words' irreducibility. Because each *presence* ("cat," for instance) requires its *absence* (not-"cat": "hat," "bat," "mat," etc.), each word has an irreducible double meaning, and so meaning, as framed within a traditional Western metaphysics that privileges *presence*, eludes us.

²⁷ In a warning note, Mágalef and various other scientists have suggested that the evolution of species flows in line with the tendency of systems to reach climax.

²⁸ There is still much debate among scientists as to whether or not biological complexity equals a healthy ecosystem. Mágalef and Snyder would obviously claim that it is essential to a healthy ecosystem, but this question is far from resolved. Also, my use of the term "deep" indicates that when scientists or philosophers search for underlying structures, they are participating in the search for larger blocks of understanding or unifying fields within which to group their existing theories.

I would then suggest: as climax forest is to biome, and fungus is to the recycling of energy, so “enlightened mind” is to daily ego-mind [...] When we deepen and enrich ourselves, looking within, understanding ourselves, we come closer to being like a climax system. Turning away from grazing on the “immediate biomass” of perception, sensation, and thrill; and reviewing memory, internalized perception, blocks of inner energies, dreams, the leaf fall of day to day consciousness, liberates the energy of our own sense detritus. (*RW* 173-174)

In this interpenetrating passage, the “enlightened mind” is spoken of in terms of the Earth floor, as a bubbling mass of self-organizing detritus that fuels the daily “ego-mind” in its pursuits. Here again, nature is our nature; there is no separation between natural and human realms. “Our bodies are wild,” Snyder says:

The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. There are more things in the mind, in the imagination than “you” can keep track of—thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of the mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas. (*PW* 16)

In a quasi-Jungian manner, our minds are part of “the wild” (*PW* 16). And because our conscious minds operate on top of the matrix of “the wild,” language, Snyder thinks, is fundamentally connected to the unconscious layers of interaction with the sensuous world.

Ironically, however, it is through our traditionally anthropocentric perceptions of language, that Snyder feels we have abstracted ourselves from our inter-connection with the sensuous world. We have diverged from what is “the wild,” that non-dualistic and self-organizing *Dharma* Snyder sees as the rule of the universe (*PW* 103). About the true nature of language, he writes:

Like the imagination and the body, language rises unbidden. It is of a complexity that eludes our rational intellectual capabilities. All attempts at scientific description of natural languages have fallen short of completeness, as the descriptive linguists readily confess. (*PW* 16)

Language, like the natural systems from which it springs, is in fact wild—it cannot be tamed or defined. “I think language is, to a great extent, biological,” Snyder says, freely admitting that “language takes an enormous amount of cultural shaping,” while also maintaining that

“the structures of it have the quality of a wild system,” which are “self-managing, self-organizing, and self-propagating” (*GSR* 329). This inability to accurately describe natural language is as it should be for Snyder. There is no way to understand “the vast word-hoards in the depths of the wild unconscious” (*PW* 16) that come from someplace else and that he thinks, in a rather lyrical moment, may be “the way clouds divide and mingle” or “the way the many flowerlets of a composite blossom divide and re-divide” (*PW* 17). As a result of this logic, humans can neither claim to understand the origins of language, nor can they claim that natural languages are the result of an organized thought construction, for to do so would be species-egoism:

It would be a mistake to think that human beings got “smarter” at some point and invented first language and then society. Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence, animals that we were/are. Language is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves. (*PW* 16)

According to Snyder, language is part of the animal and sensuous world: “Language is learned in the house and in the fields, not at school” (*PW* 16). It is born first out of direct sensuous experiences with the world.

VI.

WILD LANGUAGE

Have mountains, and waves, and skies, no significance but what we consciously give them, when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts? The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

[Zazen] taught me something about the nature of thought and it led me to the conclusion—in spite of some linguists and literary theorists of the French ilk—that language is not where we start thinking. We think before language, and thought images come into language at a certain point. We have fundamental thought processes that are prelinguistic. Some of my poetry reaches back to that.

Gary Snyder, Paris Review Interview 1992

In this century we have come to largely believe—thanks to Saussure, Heidegger, Lacan, and other theorists—that language largely constructs the self, and post-structuralist theories following Derrida’s lead have often emphasized the self-reflexive nature of language in order to deconstruct traditional Western binaries and the oppressive power structures they maintain. Derrida et al. would maintain that language is constantly fluid, and that every sign always involves every other sign, whereby meaning is always deferred. For the ecocritic and eco-poet—and Snyder can be considered both—the problem with the dominant post-structuralist position is the assertion that all experience is mediated by language or *différance*. Eco-poetry, Leonard Scigaj claims, argues the reverse of these post-structuralist positions; language, he claims, is mediated by experience (29).²⁹ According to Scigaj, language is an instrument the eco-poet continually refurbishes to articulate his or her originary experiences

²⁹ When Snyder’s linguist friend asks him in *The Practice of the Wild*, “Is there *any* experience whatsoever that is not mediated by language?” Snyder responds by banging his beer mug sharply on the table, thereby startling half a dozen people at the bar (71).

in nature (29). In Snyder's case, we might slightly alter Scigaj's claim to state that language is an instrument that the poet continually refurbishes to articulate his or her sensuous experiences in the world. Or, to put it another way, the ecopoet relates a sensuous experience through language, and thereby constructs texts that influence current and future historical, social, and ideological contexts, particularly as they affect our interactions with the environment. For the ecopoet, originary experiences with the sensuous world become the center of meaning that informs language.³⁰ Yet, as we know, language is filled with ambiguities and hierarchies. Many postmodernist critics—especially those of the Marxist

³⁰ Although Derrida and other postmodernists de-center the Western metaphysics of *presence* and *absence*, they end up constructing the play of language as a center of Being (albeit a fluid center, but nonetheless a center) by emphasizing its primary role in the construction of the "self." In opposition to this view, Snyder, other ecopoets, and eco-philosophers have argued that languages evolve from a sensuous interaction with "nature"; contra Derrida, Snyder and others argue that it is not *différance* but rather humans-experiencing-nature that stand behind the text. (For a recent articulation of this thought see the third and fourth chapters of David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, of which Snyder, incidentally, gave a glowing review.) Although such an effort to re-center Being around experiences with nature would seem anti-postmodern and anti-Derridean in the apparent attempt to construct a static and present source of Being, Snyder's Buddhist-influenced definition of nature as "the wild" (an open and fluid field) de-centers nature as a static source of Being. Snyder's effort to re-center Being, however, around sensuous experiences with nature mediated by emptiness awareness, what he calls "unconditioned mind-in-the-moment[s]" (*PW70*), and around those languages that evolve out of these experiences, seems to construct these specific non-verbal, meditative experiences as a reclaimed *presence*. Those sensuous experiences that lack this meditative clarity, as well as the languages that evolve out of such fallen states, would then seem to construct an *absence*. In this way, Snyder's work appears very much opposed to Derrida's rejection of the Western metaphysics of Being as *presence*. As Barbara Johnson's "Translator's Introduction" to Derrida's *Dissemination* says of this reclamatory desire for presence,

[...] This project of reappropriation is inherently self-subverting because its very starting point is not presence itself but the *desire* for presence, that is, the *lack* of presence. It is not possible to desire that with which one coincides. The starting point is thus not a *point* but a difference. (*xi*)

To expand upon this statement Johnson quotes from *Dissemination*:

Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of non-satisfaction. Différance produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that makes it impossible. (p. 143)

Both of these quotes assert that each *presence* requires *absence* for its being, and this logic would seem to suggest that Snyder's centering "unconditioned mind-in-the-moment[s]" with nature as a *presence* represents the construction of a hierarchical dualism that privileges the *presence* of these specific experiences over their *absence*. In an egalitarian manner, however, Snyder describes these "unconditioned mind-in-the-moment[s]" with nature as universal human experiences that happen on both a conscious and unconscious level; whether we like it or not, each of us, as participants in "the wild," continually adds to wild language structures and wild textuality. Language poets, for instance, do not work in a sensuous vacuum; rather, they work out of a tradition of languages formed from "unconditioned mind-in-the-moment[s]," and no matter how disconnected language

and post-colonial vein—have shown us that the world affects texts in ways that construct these hierarchies.³¹ The charge, then, against which ecopoetry must defend itself is that the ecopoet is a constructor of ideologies centered around an individual's experience of the sensuous world. How does the ecopoet or Snyder deny that he or she is simply constructing new and possibly oppressive ideologies based on their interactions with the sensuous world? The answer to this question, for many ecopoets and thinkers, and particularly for Snyder, lies in the way language is understood.

In Snyder's view, the origin of all natural languages lies in a tribal culture's desire to connect its inner world of hopes and fears with the outer physical world (*PCC* 33), and the poet's job, according to Snyder, is to articulate this blending of the natural with culture through the imaginative process (*RW* 70). The poet, in a rather Romantic sense, is to be considered the central mythmaker of his or her society:

[...] poetry is intimately linked to any culture's fundamental worldview, body of lore, which is its myth base, its symbol base, and the source of much of its values—that myth-lore foundation that underlies any society. (*RW* 70)

The poet's job becomes much like the traditional shaman's position as intermediary between the human and the more-than-human other, and for Snyder, this more-than-human other is nature:

[T]he poet is a voice for the non-human, for the natural world, actually a vehicle for another voice, to send it into the human world, saying there is a larger sphere out there; that the humans are indeed children of, sons and daughters of, and eternally in relationship with the earth. (*PCC* 33)

In another shamanistic moment, Snyder states that poets are,

poets are from the natural world, their work reflects a certain wild collective unconscious of sensuous experiences with the natural world.

³¹ One half of my argument is similar to Edward Said's argument in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that all art is discourse-specific (i.e., that it cannot escape its historical, social, and ideological context). However, my association with Said's assertion does not at all deny the reverse—that art can and does influence historical, social, and ideological contexts: a view succinctly expressed by Henry James' claim that "It is art that makes life."

by virtue of the nature of their sensibilities, tuned into other voices than simply the social or human voice. So they are like an early warning system that hears the trees and the air and the clouds and the watersheds beginning to groan and complain. (*RW* 71)

For Snyder, the poet's songs are like linguistic indicator species that reflect a culture's relationship with its sensuous environment.³²

Yet these myths, which take the form of ritual and song in primitive cultures and which are presently understood to form ideologies, are ultimately of the same substance as language. And language, Snyder thinks, is a structure whose ultimate nature is wild, beyond human control:

The poor literati, I was thinking. Have philosophers and writers and such always been ineffectual bystanders while the energetic power-players of church, state, and market run the show? In the shorter time scale, this is true. Measured in centuries and millennia, it can be seen that philosophy is always entwined with myth as both explicator and critic and that the fundamental myth to which a people subscribe moves at glacial speed but is almost implacable. Deep myths change on something like the order of linguistic drift: the social forces of any given time can attempt to manipulate and shape language usages for a while, as the French Academy does for French, trying to stave off English loanwords. Eventually languages return to their own inexplicable directions. (*PW* 61)

In this important passage, Snyder recognizes that deep myths, constructed by and intertwined with languages, which are ultimately born out of the relation between humans and their sensuous experience, are not easily changed by the short-term manipulation of language. As Snyder says,

Some historians would say that "thinkers" are behind the ideas and mythologies that people live by. I think that also goes back to maize, reindeer, squash, sweet potatoes, and rice. (*PW* 61)

Behind this assertion is the implicit understanding that both myths and language are keys to the construction of the individual and his or her culture. In Snyder's view, to comprehend

³² According to Snyder, the myth base of a culture "is most commonly expressed and transmitted in the culture by poems, which is to say *by songs*" (*RW* 70). "Much of the world's lore," Snyder says, "has been transmitted, in one form or another, via poetic forms, measured language or sung language" (*RW* 70).

the anthropology of languages is to see that all natural languages emerge from a culture in direct connection with a natural world that is beyond categorization or explanation: “[e]ventually languages return to their own inexplicable directions” (*PW* 61).

In a statement that deals with the individual’s approach to his or her self, but, because of Snyder’s Buddhist framework, necessarily includes the larger contexts of language and nature, Snyder argues that knowing a physical place helps one to know oneself as an interdependent whole:

How does knowledge of place help us know the self? The answer, simply put, is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose sole identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is no “self” to be found in that, and yet oddly enough there is. Part of you is out there waiting to come into you, and another part of you is behind you, and the “just this” of the ever present moment holds all the transitory little selves in its mirror. The Avatamsaka (“Flower Wreath”) jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us, no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the whole self is the whole thing. (*OW* 63-64)

In this last word grouping, the Jewel Net of Indra, ecological systems, and emptiness awareness are all interrelated: each cannot exist without the other; they are interpenetrating. Language, as a fundamental human function, is implicitly included in this interpenetrating perspective, as it is intertwined with humans who are nature. As Snyder sees it, because nature is us, and both are “the wild,” language is also a part of “the wild.” It is a consequence of the indivisibility of the human and the natural realms.

Snyder thinks that language systems evolve out of experiences he calls “unconditioned mind-in-the-moment[s],” which are those sensuous experiences with nature structured by the emptied awareness of “suchness”:

I’d say it was the unconditioned mind-in-the-moment that eats, transforms, goes beyond, language. Art, or creative play, sometimes does this by going directly to the freshness and uniqueness of the moment, and to direct and unmediated experience. (*PW* 70)

Much of Snyder's poetry is an attempt to communicate these "unconditioned mind-in-the-moments," these non-linguistic, wild experiences from which language originally evolved: the "crystal clouds of utterly incommunicable nonverbal states" that Snyder previously referred to in "Poetry and the Primitive" (*GSR* 53).

A passage from Snyder's poem "We Wash Our Bowls in This Water" captures just such an attempt:

Su Tung-p'o sat out one whole night by a creek on the slopes of Mt. Lu.
Next morning he showed this poem to his teacher.

The stream with its sounds is a long broad tongue
The looming mountain is a wide-awake body
Throughout the night song after song
How can I speak at dawn. (138)

Here again, this borrowed poem juxtaposes the natural world and the human world.³³ The mountains surrounding the stream become "a wide-awake body," while the stream becomes "a long broad tongue" making sounds, which are the songs sung "throughout the night." In this instance, the natural world and the human world are inextricable. For Su Tung-p'o, to speak is to feebly try and represent what he cannot—the Earth-body-mind connection is spoken so well by the "suchness" of things that there is no need for his abstracted human language. Through written language, the only way that Su Tung-p'o can accurately represent his experience of being-the-world is to admit that he cannot accurately re-present this experience. Buson, the 18th century Japanese poet, articulates this same paradox in one of his haikus: "Sweet springtime showers / And no words can express / How sad it all is." Silence, however, is not the only response to this "suchness." For Snyder and Buson, the language of poetry points to an unutterable sentiment, yet this pointing is always secondary to the experience itself.

According to Snyder, language, in the form of the written text, derives from sensuous interactions with the world that are then related orally:

it is quite clear that the primary existence of language (“tongue”) is in the event, the utterance. Language is not a carving, it is a curl of breath, a breeze in the pines. (*PW* 69)

In opposition to Derrida’s disapproval of the primacy Western culture has assigned to the *presence* of oral transmissions over the *absence* of the written text, Snyder feels that “sound is essentially your path in [to an unconditioned mind-in-the-moment]” and that “literature and poetry are fundamentally oral, because language is oral, and writing is secondary” (Cantor 165).³⁴ Human orality originally arose from sensuous experiences with the world: the “curl of breath” arising from “a breeze in the pines.” Ultimately, Snyder thinks, all systems of language derive from these “unconditioned mind-in-the-moments.” It is the blend of these “unconditioned mind-in-the-moments” with culture that makes language. Although languages are largely shaped by culture, cultures are largely shaped by “the wild”; “Wild nature,” Snyder says, “is inextricably in the weave of self and culture” (*PW* 68).

In his essay “A Place in Space” Snyder rhetorically wonders about language’s role in this weave, and in doing so he puts forth an aesthetics of language arts:

Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read “language”) a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world? Observation, reflection, and practice show artistic process to be the latter. (*GSR* 260)

Here again, “the wild” (“the measured chaos that structures the natural world”) is interwoven with the artistic process. In this same essay, Snyder argues that consciousness, mind, imagination, and language are all fundamentally wild (*GSR* 260).

³³ Although Snyder’s use of juxtaposition as a poetic device varies in effect, the frequent juxtaposition of the “human” with the “natural” is typically done in a way that negates any difference between the two.

³⁴ In contradiction to the non-dualistic character of his project, Snyder appears to construct a hierarchical dualism by privileging the speech act over the written text.

In the hands of a culture disconnected from this fundamental reality, language begins to remove us from an originary relationship with being-the-world. Snyder feels that the majority of “humanists” (those rationalists descending from the Greek thinkers who largely shaped cultural opinions) have spent a vast amount of time fiddling with language, focusing on the way it works, while never essentially understanding its contents (*PW*76). He thinks that “when occidental logos-oriented philosophers uncritically advance language as a unique human gift which serves as the organizer of the chaotic universe” it is a delusion, considering the way wild layers of nature have “found their own way into symbolic structure and have given us thousands of tawny human-language grammars” (*PW*76-77). Essentially, the age-old obsession with the way language works and contemporary beliefs as to its hermetic nature have abstracted us away from its original purpose as a tool used to harmonize a society with itself, other societies, and—most importantly—with the natural world that surrounds the society. Fittingly, Snyder’s poetry endeavors to re-align his readers with their original nature, which is “the wild,” through language which points to a non-dualistic experience of “the wild”: an emptiness awareness of an existence beyond categories, without stability or permanence.

VII.

THE STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES OF SNYDER'S ECO-BUDDHIST
POETICS

Delight is the innocent joy arising
with the perception and realization of
the wonderful, empty, intricate,
inter-penetrating,
mutually-embracing, shining
single world beyond all discrimination
or opposites.

Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*

In many of his poems, Snyder attempts to bring his reader into a relationship with what the text refers to “in itself” through the absence of any explicit references to the speaker. On a structural level, the elision of the speaker allows him to take the focus away from “I” and place it on those objects which largely comprise the poem—a move that tacitly asserts Snyder’s Buddhist belief in the illusory nature of the “self” as autonomous entity and which also draws the reader’s attention away from inner depths towards outer “suchness.” A classic example of this lies in the first stanza of the poem “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout”:

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies. (*GSR* 399)

In this part of the poem we are given concrete images and observations, and the poem all but lacks the presence of a subject.³⁵ The subject here is the perceiving self, acting much like

³⁵ Although the very act of seeing implies a seer, the intrusive presence of the seer in the poem is removed as far as is possible. What sees in this poem, instead of an objective narrator who is to be thought of as outside or separate from the world it sees, is a reflected representation of the suchness of things, which, as you may recall, denotes an experience of the world filtered through emptiness awareness.

Emerson's transparent eye-ball. This technique emphasizes a world of attention beyond the self and exemplifies what Robert Kern sees as the literal or metonymic character of much of Snyder's poetry ("Clearing" 162).

A poem like "Six-Month Song in the Foothills" also stresses the primary nature of objects as opposed to the subjective interpretation of these objects:

In the cold shed sharpening saws.
 a swallow's nest hangs by the door
setting rakers in sunlight
falling from meadow through doorframe
 swallows flit under eaves.

Grinding the falling axe
sharp for the summer
 a swallow shooting out over.
over the river, snow on low hills
sharpening wedges for splitting.

Beyond the low hills, white mountains
and now snow is melting. sharpening tools;
 pack horses grazing new grass
bright axes—and swallows
 fly in to my shed. (NN 90)

Charles Altieri claims that the syntax of this poem's last stanza creates complex spatial relationships where, grammatically, each of the last three nouns might fly into the shed—a flooding effect that is aided by the lack of punctuation near the end (61). Echoing Whitman's quasi-Buddhist vision "I am vast...I contain multitudes," the shed, Altieri asserts, becomes a metaphor for the newly-awakened mind which is receptive to and contains the world of perception (60). Snyder's extensive use of participles also creates unusual relationships between the natural world and the speaking subject. That the poet does not supply explicit referents to the participles has two effects: the elision of antecedents to the participles first draws attention to the lack of a subject, and then deliberately frees the objects from the limits of the speaker's subjectivity (Altieri 61). Only in the last line of the

poem does the subject appear, and there it serves primarily to stress the convergence of subject and object in the clear-perceiving space of the mind's shed (Altieri 61). Snyder's use of participles in the poem also suggests impermanence by highlighting nature as an active process.

The critic Jody Norton has said of this poem that the absence of logical and syntactical connectives between lines results in an open series of juxtaposed images/actions that tend to function freely with both those images/actions preceding and those following—a technique that interconnects the images/actions so that their meaning is dependent upon relation (57). Many critics have noted that this juxtaposed and elliptical style of poetry, which has its roots in Eastern poetic forms such as the haiku and in Western modernist poetic traditions of the Imagistic ilk, has typically been used in the 20th century to represent the highly fragmented quality of modern life. As a structural mechanism, Norton claims, “Juxtaposition creates a de facto connection between two elements of a poem: at the least, they are related through contiguity” (51). Yet, in the 20th century, this contiguity has often been employed to express a loss of unified meaning, which has arisen as a result of the sheer diversity of perspectives as to “truth” and “reality.” In opposition to the convention of placing unrelated elements next to each other in an expression of this diversity and loss of unified meaning, Snyder typically employs juxtaposition to both reveal relation between contiguous elements and also to convey a unified field of meaning.

This relation through contiguity, however, operates less on a *this-is-like-that* metaphoric level than at a *this-is-that* equivalency in Snyder's poetry. Throughout *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, for instance, when the human realm is juxtaposed with the “natural” realm, it is done in an effort to stress the equivalency of the two worlds. Metaphor, which operates on a *this-is-like-that* level, is typically characterizes a departure from the element

described, and so the use of metaphor can be seen to highlight the subjective experience of that element. As an example, when the speaker of Wallace Stevens' poem "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" ends with the line "It was like / A new knowledge of reality" (Stevens 388), the speaker's use of "like" to compare the element to "a new knowledge of reality" indicates a certain falling away or dislocation from the element itself. The verb "to be"—"It *was* a new knowledge of reality"—would express an equivalency between the element described and the poetic representation of the element, but the use of "like" inserts the speaker's subjective presence into the picture in an intrusion that draws the focus away from the element itself.

Although Altieri has claimed to see the use of metaphor in "Six-Month Song in the Foothills" and other poems by Snyder, much of his poetry does attempt to free itself from the use of metaphor. Instead, as Kern has pointed out, Snyder's poems typically work on a literal or metonymic level. This style has the effect of emphasizing the referent, which allows the objects/images to speak for themselves through an emptiness awareness. For Snyder, it is only when objects/images speak for themselves that humans can be brought into an originary relationship with their environment.

In the poem, "Thin Ice," from *Riprap*, Snyder tries to show this relationship between experience and language as he recounts falling through a sheet of ice:

[...]It creaked
The white air under
Sprang away, long cracks
Shot out in black,
My cleated mountain boots
Slipped on the hard slick
—like thin ice—the sudden
Feel of an old phrase made real—
Instant of frozen leaf,
Icewater, and staff in hand.
"Like walking on thin ice—"
I yelled back to a friend,

process of stripping away the abstractions of words from nature allows Snyder a non-linguistic awareness.

Snyder's poetry, however, does not call for the wholesale rejection of language, but merely asks the reader to recognize that language is the direct extension of experiences with one's wild environment. In the poem, "Three Deer One Coyote Running in the Snow," he observes how animals write to one another by studying their tracks:

[...]Later:
I walk through where they ran
to study how that news all got put down. (*NN* 293)

The end of this poem indicates that in order to study animals' communications one must walk in their tracks, just as humans must study anthropology to understand their own communications: "Language belongs to our biological nature," Snyder says, "and writing is just moose-tracks in the snow" (*PW* 69). Here again, language, "nature," and the "self" are all interconnected in a net of existence.

VIII.

THE ECO-BUDDHIST PROJECT OF
MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WITHOUT END

Earth Verse

Wide enough to keep you looking
Open enough to keep you moving
Dry enough to keep you honest
Prickly enough to make you tough
Green enough to go on living
Old enough to give you dreams

From *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

When Huang-bo bid goodbye to Nan-ch'üan, who saw him off at the door, Nan-ch'üan held out Huang-bo's straw hat and said: "Your body is unusually big. Isn't your straw hat too small?" Huang-bo said "Although my hat is small the entire universe is in it."

From Notes on "The Mountain Spirit," *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

Mountains and Rivers Without End is a work that tries to swallow the world by variously trying to fit the world into raindrops, a hat, a painting of a rice cake, and other elements we tend to think of as distinct from ourselves. In "The Hump-backed Flute Player," for instance, the anonymous speaker in the poem sees buddhas in the elements of nature:

And falling shining rain
Each drop—
Tiny people gliding slanting down:
 A little buddha seated in each pearl—
And join the million waving grass-seed-buddhas
On the ground. (*MRWE* 81)

The image of the multiple buddhas here represents the viewer's enlightenment-realization (*satori*) that the raindrops and the blades of grass have the same buddha-nature as the viewer does; there is no distinction between the viewer and the viewed, since those who participate in their buddha-nature participate in original nature. The anonymous speaker in this poem

understands that he is the raindrops and the leaves of grass, and, likewise, the blades of grass and the raindrops are him. In the opening of this poem the reader is told that the Buddhist scholar-pilgrim Hsuan Tsang is carrying “emptiness” and “mind only”—a description that correlates Hsuan Tsang not only with Kokop’ele, the mythical Hump-backed Flute Player of Hopi legend, but also with the anonymous speaker of the poem and the prophet Wovoka, since each carries emptiness in either a pack, a hump, a hat, or his mind. Kokop’ele is specifically said to be carrying a pack [“his hump is a pack” (79)], just as is the speaker in the earlier poem “Night Highway 99” [“well man I just don’t feel right / without something on my back” (14)] and the anonymous speaker of the “The Hump-backed Flute Player” [“Ah, what am I carrying? What is this load?” (81)]. Because the prophet Wovoka’s hat is described as “empty,” Black Coyote is able to see “the whole world / in Wovoka’s empty hat” (81). This image of emptiness-reveals-the-whole repeats itself in the poem “The Mountain Spirit” when Wovoka’s prophetic vision of the pre-white-man world is melted into the baby Krishna’s mouth (146): a cavity which, according to Snyder’s note on the poem, contains the whole universe (163). Each of the characters in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” is thus associated with one another through some form of hump, which is an expression of “emptiness” or “mind only.” Furthermore, it is only after the anonymous speaker becomes aware that the entire universe is in fact contained in rain drops and blades of grass that he finds himself carrying the non-load of emptiness: “Ah, what am I carrying? What is this load?” (81).

This use of seemingly isolated images to represent the whole of things is a poetic and prose technique that Snyder has employed on many occasions. In “The Hump-backed Flute Player,” for instance, the main speaking voice ends the section that describes what the travelers carry by expanding an isolated sound image into the larger visual image of a cricket

in space: “The ringing in your ears / is the cricket in the stars” (*MRWE* 82). More than likely, this technique comes from a Buddhist tradition of inverting one’s preconceived notions or ideas in the effort to bring about an awareness of the *Dharma*:

The Buddha once said, Bhikshus (monks), if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha. (*RW* 35)

To understand the Buddha is to have knowledge of the *Dharma*; it is to see that “the wild” or the plain “suchness” of a blade of rice is to see “the wild” or the plain “suchness” of one’s own nature, which is all of nature. A mind of emptiness does not contain a conception of nature because everything is part of this wholeness. As Snyder claims in *The Practice of the Wild*, those who would see directly into essential nature understand that there is no true delineation between “natural” and “artificial” (103). This holistic vision is underscored in “The Hump-backed Flute Player” by the anonymous speaker’s perception of the blades of grass, an image which overtly refers to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and which also associates the speaker’s emptiness awareness with Whitman’s vision of interdependence and Oneness.

It is also notable that Kokop’ele, the mythical Hump-backed Flute Player of the Hopi people, is associated with emptiness in this poem, since he is a healing figure who guided the ancient Hopi people in their effort to find the center of their physical and spiritual universe. According to Leslie Marmon Silko’s essay, “Landscape, History, and Pueblo Imagination,” there is no distinction between the exterior (physical) and interior (spiritual) landscapes made by the Pueblo elders’ view of their world, which she claims is very similar to the Hopi elder’s view (275): “Viewers,” Silko says, “are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on [...] The land, the sky, and all that is within them—the landscape—includes human beings” (266-67). Silko also suggests that both Hopi and Pueblo worldviews are based in a tradition of stories that reflect a viable relationship to their

terrain, wherein the peoples are different from nature's other creatures but spring from the same sources—an awareness that, she says, “never deteriorated into Cartesian duality, cutting off the human from the natural world” (273). Silko also claims that in these stories only when the requisite balance was struck between “human and *other*” (i.e. “nature”) could the Pueblo people become a culture (273). Accordingly, culture seems to emerge, for the Hopi and Pueblo peoples, from a correspondence between the interior and exterior landscapes. “[T]he Hopi elders,” Silko says, are thus “grateful to the landscape for aiding them in their quest as spiritual people” (275). Because the figure of Kokop'ele is credited with helping the Hopi people find the center of their physical universe, which Silko asserts is equivalent to finding the center of their spirituality, Snyder may also associated him with an emptiness awareness, since such an awareness denies the division between the interior (“self”: the human) and the exterior (“nature”: the *other*).³⁶

Throughout *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, a project that had been in the works for forty years, Snyder continues to express this wholeness through the dismantling of the division between the human and natural realms. In these interlinked long poems, the human and the natural realms continually melt into one another. In “Covers the Ground,” trucks on the freeways of California's Central Valley are described as boulders interacting with a glacial river:

trucks on the freeways,
Kenworth, Peterbilt, Mack,
rumble diesel depths,
like boulders bumping in an outwash glacial river (*MRWE* 66)

³⁶ Although the epistemologies of various Native American senses of the unity of the subject and object seem distinct from the epistemologies of Buddhist awarenesses of this unity, Snyder's syncretistic efforts seems to suggest that each of these particular modes of experiencing this unity shares in a cross-cultural set of epistemological characteristics.

Previous to this description, the ground of the Central Valley is described as “covered with / cement culverts standing on end, / house-high & six feet wide / culvert after culvert far as you can see” (65), all of which is said to be covered with a lengthy list of highways, houses, farms and their accoutrements. This human collection of “stuff” covering the ground is then, according to a quote by John Muir that Snyder appropriates, compared to the rich diversity of flowers that used to cover the valley:

“The Great Central Plain of California
was one smooth bed of honey-bloom
400 miles, your foot would press
a hundred flowers at every step
it seemed one sheet of plant gold;

all the ground was covered
with radiant corollas ankle-deep:
bahia, madia, madaria, burielia,
chrysopsis, grindelia,
wherever a bee might fly—”

us and our stuff just covering the ground. (66-67)

Human objects are here portrayed as nature (flowers, in this instance), to be seen as placed within time, within the process of change and decay: “yards of tractors, combines” are lined up and viewed, “new bright-painted units down at one end, / old broke and smashed down at the other” (65).

The experience of change or impermanence, often expressed in the form of narrative travel in Snyder’s poetry, conveys an equivalency between physical and mental environments that further negates the dualistic distinction between the interior (“self”) and the exterior (“nature”). While cruising through the high-desert country of southeastern Oregon and northeastern California, the speaker in “Finding the Space in the Heart” finds that the vast physical emptiness of the region cannot be spoken of in dualistic terms. As the speaker turns his truck into a desert landscape described as “know-not, / bone-gray dust boiling and

billowing, / mile after mile, trackless and featureless” (150), he offers a soliloquy on the physical emptiness surrounding him:

Off nowhere, to be or not be,
all equal, far reaches, no bounds.
sound swallowed away,
no waters, no mountains, no
bush no grass and
 because no grass
no shade but your shadow.
No flatness because no not-flatness.
No loss, no gain. So—
nothing in the way!
—the ground is the sky
the sky is the ground,
no place between, just
wind-whip breeze,
tent-mouth leeward,
time being here. (151)

The opening reference to Hamlet’s famous soliloquy indicates that the speaker finds himself confronted with the challenge of whether he is “to be” or “not be.” In response to this choice, the speaker begins to describe features that the desert landscape lacks—sound, water, mountains, bush grass, shade—and then comes to a moment where he understands that there is “No flatness because no not-flatness.” As the speaker begins to see that without this “flatness” (absence, bareness) there could be no concept of “not-flatness” (presence, lushness, mountains, water), he comes to an awareness that “No loss” equals “no gain”: one must include the other. “To be” is therefore to “not be,” and to “not be” is “to be.” The choice “to be” or “not be” is an illusion. There is only both, which is one.³⁷ When he

³⁷ For the *absence* of “not be” to exist there must be a “be,” or *presence*. This sort of logic is informed by the following threefold Buddhist discourse: First, mountains are mountains and waters are waters; second, mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters; third, mountains are *really* mountains and waters are *really* waters. In this third stage the negation of the negation is the absolute affirmation of wholeness, because to deny “mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers” for the affirmation of the emptiness of “mountains are not mountains and waters are not waters” is to affirm a nonconstruction without the support of the construction. Once again, “form is emptiness; emptiness is form”—each phrase penetrates the other.

grasps this concept, the speaker realizes that now there is “nothing in the way” of a non-dualistic experience: “the ground is the sky / the sky is the ground, no place between.” There is just “time being here,” which is another way of saying “forever-lost-in-eternity-always-present” (an experience of wholeness, seen through emptiness awareness). Within this poem, the mind of emptiness is evoked as a manifestation of the desert landscape:

*O, ah! The
awareness of emptiness
brings forth a heart of compassion! (MRWE 149)*

In this phrase, which follows the speaker’s introductory description of himself driving through high desert flats, the physical earth both expresses and is a state of mind. The speaker likens the geological landscape to the Zen experience of emptiness. For the speaker, the “emptiness” in the poem is both the physical *emptiness* of the landscape and the Zen understanding of *emptiness*, in which an individual thinking with this “big” mind (free from fixed ideas and subjective intentions) is free of the isolated concept of “self” and thus able to “bring forth a heart of compassion.”³⁸ Echoing the quoted phrase above, the first of two epigraphs to *Mountains and Rivers Without End* states, “The notion of Emptiness engenders Compassion.” This Snyder-translated quote by Milarepa, an 11th-century Tibetan Buddhist, indicates that the awareness of emptiness gives rise to the act of compassion, which is a form of transcending the “self.”

A story in Robert Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen* nicely illustrates the type of awareness that gives rise to the transcending of “self.” According to the story, a group of

³⁸ Implicitly, compassion requires a renunciation of the isolated self. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “compassion” as “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings of others.” Interestingly, the word “sympathy” was originally a Greek astrological term used to describe the congruent relationship between the physical alignment of the heavens (as manifest in the stars) and the workings of the human realm—a relationship similar in character to the ancient fertility relationship believed to exist between humans and the natural landscape.

American university students, troubled by the apparent lack of ethical directives they found in the Alan-Watts-influenced-and-defined-Zen, once asked Yasutani-roshi,

If [as] beat Zen has led us to believe satori [enlightenment realization of one's original nature] reveals the unreality of the past and future, is one not free to live as one likes here and now, without reference to the past and without thought of the future? (Kapleau 15)

In response to this question, Yasutani-roshi made a dot on the blackboard and explained that this isolated dot represented their conception of "here and now." To show the incompleteness of this view, he placed another dot on the board, through which he drew a horizontal line and a vertical one. He then explained that the horizontal line stood for time from the beginningless past to the endless future and the vertical for limitless space. The "present moment" of the enlightened man, who stands at this intersection, embraces all these dimensions of time and space, he emphasized. Accordingly, the satori-realization that one is the focus of past and future time and space unavoidably carries with it a sense of fellowship and responsibility to one's family and society as a whole, alike to those who will follow one (Kapleau 15). This responsibility to society would of course include all humans plus the society of all sentient beings, which includes all of nature. As such, the totalizing sense of the universe that Zen espouses also requires a totalizing sense of selflessness.

Along this same line of thought, if one sees through emptiness, then it becomes plausible that certain Buddhists would say a tree is in possession of Buddha-nature (the potential to achieve enlightenment). For when humans attain an inner harmony, which is the natural state of the universe, they become like the Buddha: perfectly in harmony with his nature, which is our nature, which is nature.

In "Walking in the New York Bedrock / Alive in a Sea of Information" Snyder continues to depict the human world of experience as if it is the world of nature. Here, the city of New York is compared to various ecosystems of natural commerce, both underwater

and above water, present and past. Helicopters in this poem make their “long humming trips / Trading pollen and nectar / In the air / of the / Sea of Economy” (*MRWE* 99), while subway graffiti is described as “Pictographs, / petroglyphs” (100), and buildings are pictured as masters and gods of the city inhabitants (100, 101). In the final stanzas of the poem, an incisive depiction of economic inequality is also likened to a food chain:

Street people rolling their carts
Of whole households
Or asleep wrapped in light blue blanket
Spring evening, at dusk, in a doorway,
Eyeballing arêtes and buttresses rising above them,
Con domus, dominion,
Domus,
Condominate, condominium
Towers, up there the
Clean crisp white dress white skin
Women and men
Who occupy sunnier niches,
Higher up on the layered stratigraphy cliffs, get
More photosynthesis, flow by more ostracods,
Get more sushi,
Gather more flesh, have delightful
Cascading laughs,

—Peregrine sails past the window
off the edge of the word-chain
harvesting concepts, theologies,
snapping up bites of the bits bred by
banking
ideas and wild speculations
on new information—
and stoops in a blur on a pigeon,

As the street bottom-feeders with shopping carts
Slowly check out the air for the fall of excess,
Of too much, flecks of extra,
From the higher-up folks in the sky

As the fine dusk gleam
Lights a whole glass side of
Forty some stories

Soft liquid silver,

Beautiful buildings we float in, we feed in,
Foam, steel, gray
Alive in the Sea of information. (101-102)

In this passage, the wealthy apartment-dwellers occupy the top of the food-chain and consume the largest amounts of energy (“get / More photosynthesis”), while the lower classes “[s]lowly check out the air for the fall of excess, / of too much, flecks of extra.” The comparison of the world of human actions to the natural world implies that the speaker of the poem is looking at the world of humans from a biocentric and sociobiological position.³⁹ The ambiguous use of “as” to begin the third stanza also suggests that the bottom-feeding lower classes are akin to the pigeon of the second stanza who is preyed upon by a peregrine falcon that—to complete the flattening of the division between the human and the natural worlds—is fed by human concepts, theologies, and banking ideas.

Here again, the human realm belongs to the natural realm. According to “Old Woodrat’s Stinky House,” another poem in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, what a coyote feeds on the coyote is. In this poem, a list of all the various animals and objects found in 5,086 coyote scats is defined as “Greater Yellowstone” (120). The coyote is thus a certain reflection of his environment. It is therefore acceptable to say that, in this New York poem, what the peregrine feeds on, the peregrine is, and to take it a step further, what a human

³⁹ Within this poem, the melting of the human world into the natural world, and the past historical and anthropological into the present, is similar in technique to the “mythical method” T.S. Eliot observed in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and employed in *The Waste Land* when he combined various world literatures, and historical facts into a present text. Just as Eliot explicitly announces in one of *The Waste Land*’s footnotes that the figure of Tiresias is “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. [...] What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (Eliot 1837), so too may the reader of Snyder’s poem infer that the trope of food chains, or more accurately, ecological transfers of energy through interconnected chains, is the central figure that Snyder uses to integrate the various figures and aspects of the poem. Although Snyder’s technique in this poem is similar in technique to Eliot’s “mythical method,” the lack of authorial footnotes and heavy ironizing—as is prevalent in *The Waste Land*—act to fortify this poem’s “intended meaning” against more fractured or indeterminate readings of the text.

feeds on that human is. So when this poem compares the humans “Who occupy sunnier niches, / Higher up on the layered stratigraphy cliffs” to the peregrine falcon, the assertion is that the natural (the peregrine, at the top of the food chain) is in fact the human (the wealthy, at the top of the economic food-chain). In this poem, however, the use of the terms “excess” and “too much” indicate that the wealthy, unlike the peregrine, are consuming at a biologically inappropriate or unsustainable rate. But it is not only the wealthy who are to blame for this inequality, since a human collectivity supports the destructive economic system that is symbolized in the poem by the buildings already built and those being constructed; notice also that the bottom-feeders—who are “whole households” of the lower classes—are “asleep” at the base of the towers and are lethargically “slow” to check the air for leftovers. Also, since the buildings that humans and the falcon are able to “feed” on pigeons, theologies, and banking ideas is deemed “the word-chain,” the implication is that human language (“the word-chain”) acts as a set of structures that perpetuates the economic food-chain or hierarchy. As one of the final lines of this poem elaborates, it is the buildings that ultimately contain us and our activity: “Beautiful buildings we float in, we feed in” (102). Like “The Hump-backed Flute Player,” and like the entire project of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, “Walking in the New York Bedrock / Alive in a Sea of Information” points to the exterior world of nature in order that we see nature as a process, which is our human process.

In the epigraph to *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Dōgen’s comments on the “Painting of a Rice Cake” express this non-dualistic awareness by denying the division between the human representation of the thing (the world of humans) and the thing-itself (the natural world):

An ancient Buddha said “A painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger.” Dōgen comments:

“There are few who have even seen this ‘painting of a rice cake’ and none have of them has thoroughly understood it.

“The paints for painting rice-cakes are the same as those used for painting mountains and waters.

“If you say the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dharma is not real.

“Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting.

“Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person.” (*viv*)

Like a raindrop or a blade of grass or rice, the painting of a rice cake is you, is me, is “the nature of the nature of nature,” “the wild,” and/or “thusness.” To say that a painting of a rice cake does not satisfy hunger is to say that the painting of the rice cake is less real than the rice cake itself, thereby constructing a dualism of “real” and “non-real.” The paints used in the painting of a rice cake are made of the same elemental materials as the rice cake itself, just as the mountains and waters and paintings of mountains and waters are made up of the same elemental materials as humans, and all these materials (phenomena), in whatever combinations they manifest themselves, are expressions of impermanence. Enlightenment reveals that the painting of a rice cake is the entire phenomenal universe, of which humans are both part and all. Until an awareness that the painting of a rice cake is the entire phenomenal universe, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger, which is desire: the source of all suffering, according to Buddhism. Non-dualistically, there is no such thing as real or non-real, “natural” or “artificial.” Without painted rice cakes how could one ever satisfy hunger, satisfy non-hunger, not satisfy hunger, and not satisfy non-hunger? The entire phenomenal universe is thus a painted rice cake, just as the entire phenomenal universe is the rice cake

itself. Any object or non-object could be substituted for the painting of the rice cake—it does not make any difference—as any element stands for the *Dharma*.

In this same manner, the entire phenomenal universe is Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*: a “representation” of the identically-titled Chinese landscape scroll, which is itself a representation of “real” mountains and rivers, which are themselves traditionally “a way to refer to the totality of the process of nature” (PW 102). Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is therefore like a grain of rice, a drop of rain, or blade of rice.

Speaking about such a moment of unity, Snyder remembers giving up an intellectual life that was separate from his physical work:

By just working, I found myself being completely there, having the whole mountain inside of me, and finally having a whole language inside of me that became one with the rocks and with the trees. And that was where I first learned the possibility of being one with what you were doing, and not losing anything in the mind thereby. (RW 8)

As a practicing Zen Buddhist, Snyder understands that the-construction-of-his-poem-is-his-work-is-his-whole-life-is-all. To think of artistic or intellectual practice as separate from the rest of his life, or to think of a representation of the thing as separate from the thing itself, is to construct an illusory dualism of *this* and *that*.

Snyder's poetry often denies such dualisms by acting, in the ecocritic Leonard Scigaj's playful words, as a poetry of *référance*, since it makes the reader aware of the limits of language's self-reflexivity, while simultaneously referring his or her perceptions beyond the printed page to nature, the referential origin of language (38). The poetry of *référance*, Scigaj continues, is always seeking to make the reader aware of his or her relation to what is outside language, and it often attempts to bring the reader into moments of atonement or at-one-ment with nature (38). It is a poetics of nature, says Scigaj, that seems to find its keenest expression in Snyder's active interplay between the lived body and the sentient environment

(232). Even beyond Scigaj's dualistic notions, language and nature and humans are not divisible in any fundamental sense as far as Snyder is concerned; they are all expressions of wildness or "thusness."

Snyder's own term for his artistic project is not the poetry of *référance* but the "art of the wild," which he describes as,

[...] art in the context of the process of nature—nature *as* process rather than as product or commodity—because "wild" is a name for the way phenomena continually actualize themselves. (GSR 260)

The above is clearly a statement of artistic purpose, fundamentally shaped by the non-dualistic teachings of *dharma* (phenomena) and impermanence. Snyder's "art of the wild" consists not merely of his books of poetry, but also includes the act of creating poems and the reading of and commentary on those poems; they are all one. According to Scigaj's take on Dōgen's comments on the "Painting of a Rice Cake," "The labor of artistic creation through words is just another of the many ways that one can realize enlightenment. It is inseparable from everyday practice" (263). Within Snyder's radically integrated Zen vision, the act of reading *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, like the act of his writing it, is to be experienced as another of the many ways that one can realize enlightenment. With this in mind, Snyder can, without seeming egoistic, claim to think of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*—as he does in the poem's epilogue—"as a sort of sutra" (158).

This totalizing Buddhist perspective can be seen in the way that temporal and spatial realities are separated from their everyday conceptions in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. In the poem "Journeys," for instance, various sections are dreams, while other sections represent the speaker's historical memory. The distinction between dream and historical memory becomes increasingly difficult to discern, since the poem represents both dream and memory as journeys, and the switching to and from dream stanza and historical stanza

indicates that dream is analogous to historical memory and vice versa. In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker is interlinked to another figure named “Ko”—a term which, Patrick Murphy points out, happens to be the Indo-European root for “together,” and which might also represent the Hopi figure of Kokop’ele (*Understanding* 73). The end of “Journeys” also describes the speaker and Ko melting into one another through a metaphoric death:

Ko-san and I stood on a point by a cliff, over a
Rock-walled canyon. Ko said, “Now we have come to
Where we die.” I asked him—what’s that up there,
Then—meaning the further mountains.
“That’s the world of after death.” I thought it looked
just like the land we’d been traveling, and couldn’t
see why we should have to die.
Ko grabbed me and pulled me over the cliff—
Both of us falling. I hit and I was dead. I saw
My body for a while, then it was gone.
Ko was there too. We were at the bottom of the gorge.
We started drifting up the canyon. “This is the
Way to the back country.” (*MRWE* 55)

In the final lines of this poem, the mountains ahead are associated with death and the future. They also appear to the speaker just like the mountains he had already passed through. This gesture indicates that the difference between past and future no longer makes sense to the speaker. He wonders why he should have to die, which is also a manner of wondering how death is distinct from life and how the future is distinct from the present. The speaker must metaphorically die, however, in order to grasp that as time is indivisible so too is space indivisible. As the speaker’s body departs him, the narration switches from the ego-driven “I” to egoless “We,” which now includes Ko. This shedding of the ego is depicted as “the / Way to the back country.” This statement indicates that the denial of linear conceptions of time and isolated categories of “self” (space) is a *Way* (Tao) to a wild backcountry of both the mind and the physical landscape, since, within “the wild,” the mind *is* the physical landscape.

As a further example of Snyder's disassembling structural techniques, the phrase "Clearing the mind and sliding in / to that created space" in the poem "Endless Streams and Mountains" is allusion to emptiness awareness (*MRWE* 5). Because this phrase seems to have no clear referent, the reader, as well as the speaker of the poem, is pulled into the action, or non-action as it were. In this poem, emptiness is also associated with the "broad white space" of the calligraphy paper that the author is about to fill in with his brush (9). Both the "created space" of the mind and the "broad white space" of the calligraphy paper are free of habits, subjective intentions, conceptions, and fixed ideas, yet the speaker tells us at the end of the poem that he is about to fill the "broad white space" with his brush and ink—a move that would seem to symbolize the creation of categories, names, and concepts through the use of language. But as Dōgen's commentary on the "Painting of a Rice Cake" reminds us, to think of the language or the artistic process as separate from who we are is to construct a divisive dualism; therefore, what at first appears to be the construction of categories, names, and concepts by the use of language in fact represents the stripping away of these same fixed ideas by way of language that points to a holistic and non-dualistic vision.

In a culmination of Snyder's radically integrated approach to language, artistic expression, and the processes of nature, the final lines of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* depict the author's moist calligraphy brush lifting away from the paper as the work ends, while the open space of the page continues:

*Walking on walking,
under foot earth turns*

Streams and mountains never stay the same.

The space goes on.
But the wet black brush
tip drawn to a point,

lifts away. (152)

The mantra-lines “*Walking on walking, / underfoot earth turns / Streams and mountains never stay the same*” appear at the end of this final poem just as they did at the end of the first poem in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. This repetition highlights beginnings and endings as part of the process of impermanence, and the repeated use of “walking” in this passage stresses that the human and the natural are describable in the same terms of process, impermanence (notice the verbal construction). The juxtaposition of the line “*underfoot earth turns*” with the previous line suggests that the second use of “walking” is a reference to the geological and celestial movement of the earth. The lines “The space goes on. / But the wet black brush / tip drawn to a point, / lifts away,” juxtaposed to the line that precedes them, indicate that the geological processes of the earth are congruent to the way in which language functions. The human actions of the speaker are therefore no different than the actions of the earth. In these final lines, the human action represented is the construction of language. The author’s calligraphy brush will no longer re-shape and re-mold language, yet this space, which represents Zen emptiness, “goes on”; our original nature, which is seen through emptiness awareness, “goes on” even though the language Snyder uses to represent it may not. That “The space goes on,” even though Snyder’s brush and ink may not, stresses the reality of impermanence as well as the notion that at a deep level language, as part of wild nature, represents “unconditioned mind-in-the-moments” rather than abstracted constructions of the world we often perceive language to re-present; language is tied to experience and cannot be separated from it. According to Leonard Scigaj’s commentary on this passage,

Text and practice are inseparable, and Snyder’s “moist black line” dispels the late capitalist illusion that signifiers are unattached commodities, Baudrillardian simulacras of surfaces mechanically reproduced [...] in ways that insulate us within language games of aesthetic appreciation. Snyder implies that the aesthetic

appreciation of the “moist black line” is inseparable from the labor of experience in the everyday that evolved the perceptions that motivated, guided, and enacted the process of artistic composition.” (*Sustainable* 263)

If we were to go a bit further than Scigaj and add to Snyder’s experience of constructing this long poem the larger experience of existence, it would seem that *Mountains and Rivers Without End* uses the semaphore of language to point away from the self-contained approach to language—one that posits it as a pure mental construction, devoid of natural origin—toward the larger process of nature, in which humans and language are inextricably interwoven. Like each word within its web, the system of language is similar to a blade of rice or a painting of a rice cake—it is an emblem for all of existence.

IX.

THE POLITICS OF SNYDER'S ECO-BUDDHISM

World views, like the genes of their carriers, are tested in the crucible of natural selection. They may help or hinder their subscribers in the business of life, and, thus, may themselves spread or shrink in influence. World views grow and change in response to success and failure in praxis, or calcify and die.

J Baird Callicott and Roget T. Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*

[I]ndustrial/technological civilization is really on the wrong track, because its drive and energy are purely mechanical and self-serving—*real* values are someplace else. The real values are within nature, family, mind, and into liberation [...] And how do we make the choices in our national economic policy that take into account *that* kind of cost accounting—that ask, “What is the natural-spiritual price we pay for this particular piece of affluence, comfort, pleasure, or labor saving?” [...] There’s an accounting that no one has figured out how to do.

Gary Snyder, 1977 *East West interview with Peter Barry Chowka*

Although Gary Snyder may be best known for his poetry and prose, his public performances and lectures have also established him as an influential environmental and political thinker. In his later years, Snyder has become increasingly political in his efforts to affect change, and he holds that his political worldview is the pragmatic aspect of his art, in the sense that he feels that there is really no separation between politics and art; his art is his politics and his politics of art is an ecological vision, wherein his “political position is to be a spokesman for wild nature” (RW 49). Snyder also feels that his work is in line with the *big flow* of things, which is to say he understands that over huge scales of time “all human activity is as trivial as anything else [on this planet]” (Martin 161). Humans, within this vision, aren’t separate from or superior to animate and inanimate nature, but are rather governed by a Buddhist conception of essential nature, which is another name for original nature. To re-quote Snyder,

For those who would see directly into essential nature, the idea of the sacred is a delusion and an obstruction: it diverts us from seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness. Roots, stems, and branches are all equally scratchy. No hierarchies, no equality. No occult and exoteric, no gifted kids and slow achievers [...] no natural or artificial. (*PW* 103)

In effect, Snyder's politics of art is based on extinguishing illusory constructions of "self" as distinct from "nature" and other human "selves." This politics of art is also based on the continual dismantling of these philosophically-influenced constructions that get institutionalized in the form of dominant ideologies, and which keep humans away from original nature, which is nature. This radically-integrated politics of art is founded on a view that human political systems require "self-government" (*GSR* 338), which would then require the active participation of all sentient beings, because the "self" is understood to be all of existence. And as I have previously mentioned, Snyder has claimed that the poet's role, like the shaman's, is to act as "an early warning system that hears the trees and the air and the clouds and the watersheds beginning to groan and complain" (*RW* 71). Such a sentiment indicates that rocks and trees do in fact have a voice that can be heard and added to the political discussion; however, this outlook requires the active participation of all sentient beings (rocks and trees included), and seems to espouse a move toward decentralized or at least more locally-representative forms of government that make decisions with the local environment in mind as a primary concern.⁴⁰ In contrast to this move, the world appears to be moving toward increasingly centralized forms of human organization.

Primarily as a result of the sheer violence of this last century, along with the construction of weapons of mass destruction, and the spread of a global capitalistic

Kommiss

⁴⁰ Snyder has been a leading advocate for bioregionalism, a term that suggests human activities should be constrained by ecological and geographical boundaries rather than political ones.

marketplace, the establishment of international coalitions and other bureaucratic governing bodies (i.e. the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, and the United Nations) has come to dominate current conversations regarding social organization. Each of these centralized coalitions and governing bodies appeals to universalistic values such as justice, equality, and fairness, in their efforts to foster and promote political and economic stability among nation-states. Unfortunately, the democratic ideology behind these universals has tended to act as thin camouflage for the various oligarchies and pressure groups that internally manipulate these organizations for political and economic advantage, and, as a result, widespread dissent has been voiced by those groups and nation-states that have been variously disempowered. Also, the very act of relying upon universals to establish the rule of law cuts against the grain of post-structuralists who feel that the values of universalism have always led to forms of oppression, both to humans and to our natural environment.

Snyder, in contrast to the move toward highly bureaucratic and centralized systems of rule based on universals, describes himself as an anarchist, in the sense that he defines anarchism as the “creation of nonstatist, natural societies as contrasted with legalistically organized societies, as alternative models for human organization” (*GSR* 337). The only universal Snyder seems to espouse is his integrated worldview, which is structured by a Zen Buddhist framework that does not require *moral* universals.⁴¹

For all his political activism, however, Snyder has strangely never advocated a totalizing political platform or a universal program of social change. As he says, he has

⁴¹ The word “moral” implies notions of *right* and *wrong* and therein invokes a dualism that Buddhism does not recognize. From an interrelated perspective, participation in original nature informs one that he or she is all of existence, and conversely, all of existence is him or her, so there is no need to apply any other universal than the truth of original nature to all things, since one who participates in his or her original nature, which is “nature,” realizes that each giving act is a selfish act and each selfish act is in fact a giving act: the act of generosity. To act in one’s original nature is, therefore, to act for the benefit of oneself and all others (including “nature”).

always been “cautious about proposing [political] programs” because he is not sure that “deliberately applied drastic changes will necessarily get you to where you want to go” (Martin 160). Instead, Snyder’s prose and poetry seem to suggest that a change in fundamental modes of Being, or what he calls “myth-block ideas” (*RW* 72), is a better method with which to approach unsound social structures than is the promotion of an active political program. Yet, from a practical perspective, Snyder’s long-range vision seems to offer no present program for structuring a world of increasingly interdependent economies, where weapons of mass destruction are a tangible threat.

Although the world might eventually be better off if everyone shared Snyder’s worldview and acted according to his vision, this seems an unlikely and impractical end, given the radical nature of his project. As a pragmatist, which Snyder claims he is, the effort to convert the hundredth monkey to his perspective seems a task with no clear end in sight—and this may very well be the way Snyder envisions his effort (as framed within glacial scales of time)—since his worldview is set against a rapidly spreading Western capitalistic and industrial/technological system (read “globalization”) whose destructive core values of enlightened self-interest and anthropocentrism largely structure contemporary political discourses.⁴² The difference between Snyder’s worldview and globalization’s present worldview appears to be one of emphasis. In Snyder’s eco-Buddhist vision, working for the good of the planet works for one because he is the planet, while from the general globalized perspective, working for one’s own good is good for one’s country, all countries, and the planet. Clearly, placing initial emphasis on the long-range good of the planet versus placing

⁴² Just as Callicott and Ames have claimed that the adoption of ‘modern’ technologies by the East has been nothing less than an adoption of the dominant Western paradigm, so too does the adoption of a Westernized capitalistic and industrial-technological system include the adoption of its intrinsic values of enlightened self-interest, anthropocentrism, and commodity fetishism.

initial emphasis on the short-term good of the individual has dramatic practical consequences, yet a global shift of this sort would require—at the bare minimum—a fundamental overhaul or overthrow of the current economic and political models and their intrinsic core values.

Although the postmodern era, in which Snyder and his eco-Buddhist approach are primarily ensconced, has ushered in a greater respect for diversity of opinion and lifestyle, at the same time, globalization has sped in the reverse—it has increasingly homogenized both the developed and underdeveloped worlds into its paradigms, which many consider to be unstable and damaging. And for the past few decades, a growing critical movement has organized against the tide of this global movement. Snyder, as a critic of Western capitalistic, industrial/technological civilization, has been an important voice in this movement, yet, his role as cultural dissenter—like that of many other postmodern, anti-globalization critics and theorists—has remained rather peripheral, largely due to his unwillingness to translate his eco-Buddhist vision into a feasible model for human organization. Should Snyder continue to desire to translate his eco-Buddhist beliefs into the political world, it is likely that he will need to frame them into a practical model of organization—maybe in something along the lines of E.F. Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful*—or it is probable that his project will speak to an audience abstracted from the concrete threats of the prevailing global model.

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