

The Real Work: Negotiating the Anthro-Ecocentric Divide

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Gary Snyder is recognized as a pre-eminent voice in American literature and, within that context, of the finer distinction that is nature or environmental writing. Snyder's poem "I Went into the Maverick Bar" is *American* in that it represents the contradictions that the nation embodies and the attempt that individuals must make once the contradictions become apparent.

I WENT INTO THE MAVERICK BAR

I went into the Maverick Bar
In Farmington, New Mexico.
And drank double shots of bourbon
 backed with beer.
My long hair was tucked up under a cap
I'd left the earring in the car.

Two cowboys did horseplay
 by the pool tables,
A waitress asked us
 where are you from?
a country-and-western band began to play
"We don't smoke Marijuana in Muskokie"
And with the next song,
 a couple began to dance.

They held each other like in High School dances
 in the fifties;
 I recalled when I worked in the woods
 and the bars of Madras, Oregon.
 That short-haired joy and roughness—
 America—your stupidity.
 I could almost love you again.

We left-onto the freeway shoulders—
 under the tough old stars—
 In the shadow of bluffs
 I came back to myself,
 To the real work, to
 “What is to be done.” (Snyder, *Reader* 466)

Snyder's obvious suggestion is that, in order to do *what is to be done*, what needs to be done, we must first reassess our position within a specific setting and return to an awareness of ourselves and our lives within said setting. Taking that as a starting point, our readings of environmentally based literature (or what we call in some cases *nature writing*) must struggle with those very same contradictions. Certainly “the real work” requires a return to a consideration of one's place in the ecosystem, but how does that jibe with a return to one's self, positioning, as it might appear to do, the anthropocentric against the ecocentric? Snyder's work, along with writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Leslie Marmon Silko, and N. Scott Momaday, to name but a few, suggests that contemporary “nature writing” is not merely a shift away from an anthropocentric perspective guided by a human will to change. Rather, their representations of a bio- or ecocentric world is a resurfacing of the streams that seem to have long been neglected in North American writing. Possibly, the anthropocentric tendencies could in part be said to have been determined by that so-called American “pioneering spirit,” its ideology of individual self-determination in a self-made world where *independence* denies the terms of *inter-dependence* that define ecocentrism. This, in the end, is what pits in violent historical contrast, American and Aboriginal (Native American) lives.

Our contemporary concerns about the environment, and our interest in more communal, interdependent and collaborative traditions, in other words what Native American cultures tend to be, have led to an increased interest also in how those values are represented. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *Gardens in the Dunes*, N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and Terry Tempest Williams' *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*, are representative of voices in the landscape of American literature that speak to a counter-perspective that, as Williams suggests, “reveals the backside of the heart” (Williams 195). That is the direction we are required to take in approaching any representation of wildness. It is a direction inclusive of deep physical, physiological, and existential connections rather than nostalgic ones, connections that we might contemplate in asking if such a possibility even exists. Placing Gary Snyder's own use and interpre-

tations of Eastern Philosophies and Native American cultures alongside a small selection of Native American writing, this paper will address some aspects of a North American (United States) sense of self-determination and independence that continues to hold sway today.

Although earlier times and cultures might have had a better, more intimate understanding of the workings of wild landscapes, that knowledge was progressively squandered with the privatization of the commons as migrations toward settled, urban environments increased. Henry David Thoreau's oft-misquoted dictum "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" (Thoreau), which for Jack Turner defines the mis-understanding of the distinctions and the tensions between "wilderness as property and wildness as quality" (J. Turner 81), finally re-emerges in a contemporary American context with Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild*. In that collection of essays, and specifically in "The Etiquette of Freedom," the finer distinctions between wild, wildness, and wilderness are teased out and brought to bear on our present state of being in the world (Snyder, *Practice* 4).

The title of Snyder's essay suggests an approach, a conduct, a relationship *with* and *for* freedom that requires thoughtfulness and consideration. As such, given our assumptions regarding freedom and the sense of entitlement that we feel, inclusive of a tradition inclusive of warfare supposedly representative of the struggle for it, the terms by which we define the term require review and processing. That is exactly what Snyder's *Etiquette* undertakes.

The set-up for this exploration is an episode witnessed by Snyder during a visit he and a friend paid to Louie, an elderly Native American man. The friend, an expert on native California languages, tells Louie that he has found another *Nisenan* speaker, a language reduced to a very small number of speakers. Contrary to the expected excitement at the news, Louie's response is less than interested: "I know her from way back. . . . She wouldn't want to come over here. I don't think I should see her. Besides, her family and mine never did get along" (4). This exchange suggests that a construct such as language is less important than the unspoken understanding or "compact" established within an ecosystem, a system in which the Native American kinship tradition is fully identified.

The recounted episode becomes the essay's first instance of a round-about definition of freedom not usually recognized: its emancipatory potential from anthropocentric constructs. The very ambiguity of the terms by which we constitute a relationship, not to say a belief in freedom, leads Snyder to contemplate its depth of meaning. While his etymological exploration is comparative in nature, he most definitely situates it on *American* ground:

Wild and free. An American dream phrase loosing images: a long-maned stallion racing across the grasslands, a V of Canada Geese high and honking, a squirrel chattering and leaping limb to limb overhead in an oak. It also sounds like an ad for a Harley Davidson. Both words, profoundly political and sensitive as they are, have become consumer baubles. (5)

Constructing his argument by braiding Native American anecdotes, stories, history and practices, his own understanding and practice of Asian Taoist and Buddhist Dharma, with his North American cultural approaches to the natural environment, Snyder's essay illustrates how we have constructed language to suggest humans' distance from the *natural* world.

An apt symbolic figure to illustrate the possibility of retracing our paths back along the forgotten byways of local knowledges and environmental interdependence, the "lost" conquistador Alvar Núñez, also cited by other writers such as Rebecca Solnit and Barry Lopez, is an indication that it might somehow still be possible to "gain a compassionate heart, a taste for self-sufficiency and simplicity, and a knack for healing" (13). The Spaniard's wanderings on the continent resulted in his regaining of a sense of ecocentric self by letting down his defenses, by holding himself open to what he did not know. Others, hardened by their cultural certainties, could only establish an in-sane or a less-than-sane (meaning unhealthy) relationship with what they encountered.

Jack Turner again, along these same lines, reconstitutes Thoreau's phrase "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" to emphasize that it is about the creation of free self-willed, and self determinate things with the harmonious order of the cosmos" (J. Turner 82). What, then, might we have when faced with the contrasting concepts of property vs. quality? If we look at writing that has emerged out of what might be considered "the American experience," writing that describes being in a diverse and astounding landscape, we notice that it is in full contradiction with the values that have made formed that other America, the America of manifest destiny, of slavery, of expansionism and imperialism. Whether we read Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, Mary Oliver, Leslie Marmon Silko, or Scott Momaday, we find that the issue of property is moot, non-existent, while quality of life, experience, community and freedom are pervasive and all important.

WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD"

1

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road. (Whitman 1)

ROBINSON JEFFERS, "SHINE, REPUBLIC"

The quality of these trees, green height; of the sky, shining; of water, a clear flow; of the rock, hardness.

And reticence: each is noble in its quality. The love of freedom has been the quality of western man.

...

And you, America, that passion made you. You were not born to prosperity, you were born to love freedom. You did not say “en masse,” you said “independence.” But we cannot have all the luxuries and freedom also.

Freedom is poor and laborious; that torch is not safe but hungry, and often requires blood for its fuel. (Jeffers 503)

The freedom that for Jeffers “often requires blood” has quite another meaning for Native American writers. Not only was their freedom lost so that others could claim it as part of their national ideology, but today the gap between the American notion of freedom and what others within the nation are allowed remains more than evident. Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, likely two of the best known Native American writers, express their experience of freedom in similar but disparate terms. The American Dream is Native America’s American nightmare, the legacy of the nation’s struggle for freedom, the *pursuit of happiness* defined by private property, ownership, and individualism free of responsibility to others, is a pursuit foreign to Native America. Silko:

As a person of mixed ancestry growing up in the United States in the late 1950s, I knew all of the cruel epithets that might be hurled at others; the knowledge was a sort of solace that I was not alone in my feelings of unease, of not quite belonging to the group that clearly mattered most in the United States (Silko, *Fences* 102).

And Momaday, in remembering his grandmother and the stories of his Kiowa nation and its traditions, writes *The Way to Rainy Mountain* as a sort of comparative memory to revive that which might be too easily forgotten by others:

Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been. I wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind’s eye, and traveled fifteen hundred miles to begin my pilgrimage. (Momaday 7)

The work of these two writers expresses the belief of the interconnectedness of all things, of the “reciprocal relationship humans have with their environment,” and what some North American aboriginal cultures refer to as “Earth’s Blanket” (N. Turner 19). In accordance with this, freedom is understood as the possibility to express the overall, whole potential of the ecosystem, in other words *local knowledge* as a manifestation and expression of the whole interactive ecosystem.

The shift from anthro- to ecocentric could be said to represent a shift in perspective toward a more inclusive sense of freedom. That it might also signify a freedom relieved of the inheritance of *manifest destiny* has yet to be determined. Accepting the fact that the undercurrent of American culture as expressed by its Aboriginal population has always been ecocentric might also reshape the effect of hegemonic alterations of it and a reinterpretation of writers like Whitman.

The bard's "good fortune" is contained not in property but in the quality of his own self, not in property but the "open road." In the end, it is his *story* that seems to form freedom's overriding trait, the manner in which *quality* is transmitted. Story and history (lower case h, that is to say unofficial history) emerge as equals and not as property of any one person or author. And, while Native American stories might be told by individuals they are inclusive of community history and are not solely the teller's.

In *The Earth's Blanket*, Nancy Turner reports that anthropologists have identified an "ethic of reciprocity" in First Nations cultures:

The linkage between humans, animals and the spirit world which so characterized the First Nations societies created a complex ethical framework which reinforced the notion of mutual dependency. Humans were not seen as dominant but played a complementary and often subordinate role in the larger ecological system. A key feature here was the concept of reciprocity and the belief that respectful human attitudes towards the resources helped to ensure the availability of future supply. Such an ethic encourages responsible use and supports an imperative of restraint. (235)

Such an ethic constitutes the threads of the *Earth's Blanket*, corresponding to what many Native/First Nations writers report. It is *story* that forms part of Native ceremony, where "the linkage is told and retold in stories" and emphasizes "people's relationships with each other, across families, clans, communities and generations, as well as with other relatives—the animals, fish, trees and all the other elements of creation" (231). It is what leads Leslie Marmon Silko to declare that "within one story there are many other stories coming together" and that it through storytelling that "you know you belong" (Silko, *Yellow 3*). And it is the sort of relation that leads Momaday to represent this extended kinship as freedom:

The skyline in all directions is close at hand, the high wall of the woods and deep cleavages of shade. There is a perfect freedom in the mountains, but it belongs to the eagle and the elk, the badger and the bear. The Kiowa reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bend and blind in the wilderness. (Momaday 7)

What is required of us today is "the real work" of story telling as an expression of history and its continuation and conditioning of the present toward the preservation of culture. The conditions we have created through the exploitation of resources and cultures demand this more human remedy of us. In the North American context, what was once called the disappearing race did not disappear despite repeated attempts to cause it to do so. Although secreted and distanced, its cultures and values have survived and offer us a valuable and viable example for everyone's survival. What other need would there be for Native American writers to write and publish their work, if not as an offering of a different, saner view of what the "real work" might be for the greater culture. Their critical gift is a great opportunity to participate in storytelling as an integrative and healing practice.

It is hard to say whether the quincentenary celebrations of 1992 marked a turning point in acknowledging what back during that year came to be recalled as “five hundred years of occupation.” The continued veneration of Columbus and the “discovery” would seem to contradict such an assumption. And there are many other events and incidents that could be said to have marked potential turning points in our attitudes toward Native America, from Pine Ridge in 1973, to the Peace and Reconciliation process currently active in Canada (Reconciliation Canada). It was however the 500th remembrance of 1492, and its yearly repetition on October 12th, that brought and continues to bring the contradictions rooted in North American society to the fore.

Among the conferences, publications, declarations, and confrontations of 1992 a little book, the transcript of a lecture by Barry Lopez, entitled *The Rediscovery of North America* (1992), outlines a perspective of opportunity. Lopez does not pull any punches in recounting how our relationship to the continent that some aboriginal groups called Turtle Island was initiated. Through a review of what constitutes North American geography, cultures, place names, flora and fauna, Lopez points to the processes of *imposition* that we have overlayed on the continent and its inhabitants, all of its inhabitants, as a result of the “discovery.” He re-imagines how we might start afresh, by stepping back to a condition of initial approach during which we might marvel at what the continent offered (and continues to offer) and how we might step upon it with a new attitude, new eyes, a softer step: “We must turn to each other, and sense that this is possible” (58).

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