

# **Gary Snyder and the Invention of Bioregional Spirituality and Politics**

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Gary Snyder is one of the most influential green poets and prose writers of the second half of the twentieth century. He became one of the leading intellectual architects of several green religious movements, including bioregionalism and green anarchism, deep ecology, ecopsychology, radical environmentalism, and what could be called neoanimism. Yet for some he will always be most known as one of the “beat poets” during the second wave of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s. What distinguished him and fellow poets Michael McClure and Kenneth Rexroth from the rest of the beat movement was a deep sensitivity to nature, a perception of its sacredness and “intrinsic value.” In those and the following years, Snyder’s influence grew throughout environmentalist sub-cultures and the counterculture more widely.

Born in San Francisco and raised on a farm in Washington near Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Rainier, three long streams of his life may be traced to his early years. First, his childhood experiences encouraged both a profound reverence for wild nature and a concern about its destruction:

From a very early age I found myself standing in an indefinable awe before the natural world. An attitude of gratitude, wonder, and a sense of protection especially as I began to see the hills being bulldozed down for roads, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest magically float away on logging trucks (1977: 15).

And this wonder involved what for Snyder has been an enduring perception.

I was born a natural animist. It wasn’t a moral or intellectual thing, from early childhood, I felt the presence of other beings, and I enjoyed being out in the woods right back of our farm ... I think most kids are natural animists (unless otherwise cited, all quotations are from author’s interview with Snyder in Davis, California, June 1993).

Second, Snyder had friends with the left-anarchist Industrial Workers of the World and a grandfather who “soapboxed for the Wobblies” when he was a young adult (1990: 124), and such ideology left an imprint that would emerge in his political writings. Third, he graduated from Reed College with a degree in literature and anthropology, which undergirded much of his future poetry, prose, and activism. Snyder worked a variety of outdoor jobs as a young man, including one as a logger and another briefly with the United States Forest Service after college, a position from which he was dismissed due to his association with leftists during the anti-communist purges of the time.

## **A New (Old?) Religion and Politics**

Snyder’s anthropological studies helped draw him to both Native American and East Asian religions, leading him to once contend that they constitute “one teaching” (1980:

67). But finding American Indian cultures inaccessible to non-Indians, “its content, perhaps, is universal, but you must be Hopi to follow the Hopi way” (1980: 94), he chose to study Buddhism intensively, which he did for twelve years beginning in 1955, especially focusing on Zen Buddhism in Japan. In Buddhism he found metaphysics of interdependence and kinship ethics with the nonhuman world that resonated with his own animistic perceptions. But while he also found teachers of “Buddhist anarchism” and formed a commune with fellow anarchist Nanao Sakaki while in Japan, he was disappointed with the more prevalent martial and bureaucratic Buddhism that he encountered there, concluding that world religions primarily function to “reinforce the societies they are in” (1980: 2).

Upon his return to the United States his lifework really began, as he sought to integrate religion and politics into a new, bioregional spirituality that he hoped would, over time, reconnect humans to nature and nudge them to develop ecologically sustainable spiritualities and political arrangements. Snyder first came to public attention as a beat poet, and to those in the know, as the model for the character Jaffe Ryder in Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958). He was deeply influenced by these enclaves, which he described later as rich “with anarchist and Wobblie connections and full of anti-authoritarian leftists.” Yet Snyder’s influence soon began to extend beyond those enclaves and into environmentalist sub-cultures and the counterculture at large. This was in part because he was offering something innovative, both spiritually (an earthen spirituality to a culture feeling alienated from nature and anxiety about this) and politically (an alternative to an impersonal, technocratic, centralized nationstate).

## **Buddhist-Animist Spirituality and Deep Ecology**

Once back in the United States, fed by and feeding the countercultural ferment of the time, Snyder began to develop and promote a distinct religious perspective and became a major contributor to the “deep ecology” movement, which also expresses a reverence for the Earth’s living systems and asserts that nature has inherent value. He concluded that in Western cultures it is probably more politically astute to promote “deep ecology” rather than Paganism (or perhaps even Zen Buddhism). Yet he nevertheless contended in discussions with deep ecology proponents that Zen expressed deep ecological ethics with unsurpassed philosophical sophistication. This is certainly one reason that Buddhism has remained central to his identity. In 1973, he called himself “a practicing Buddhist, or Buddhist-shamanist” (1980: 33), and twenty years later, after first indicating that he considered himself a “fairly orthodox Buddhist,” he also labeled himself a “BuddhistAnimist.”

Clearly, his enduring animist identity is as central to his nature spirituality as is his Buddhism. When asked in 1993 about interspecies communication, which he had periodically alluded to, he told a story about a woman named Ella, an Irish Mystic he knew in the 1950s, who once accompanied him on a walk in Muir Redwoods, north

of San Francisco. Hearing the song of a yellow crown warbler, Ella turned to him and reported that this song was a special gift to her from that bird. Reflecting on this and my follow-up questions about what animism meant to him and what an animistic perception was like, Snyder answered

Its not that animals come up and say something in English in your ear. You know, it's that things come into your mind ... Most people think that everything that comes into their mind is their own, their own mind, that it comes from within. It may come from someplace deep within or less deep, but everybody thinks it comes from within. That's modern psychology. Well, some of those things that you think are from within are given to you from outside, and part of the trick is knowing which was which – being alert to the one that you know was a gift, and not think, "I thought that." Say [instead], "Ah, that was a gift!" ... I have a poem about a magpie giving me a song (Magpie's song). That's just one [example]...

And like many environmentalist proponents of animism and Buddhism, Snyder criticizes monotheistic religions. Reflecting on the metaphysics of interrelatedness, which permeates his writing, Snyder said

Interrelatedness is a commonsense observation. We should remind ourselves that ordinary working people, traditional people ... notice that things are connected. What's not common is the mind-body dualism that begins to come in with monotheism. And the alliance of monotheism with the formation of centralized governance and the national state, that's what's unnatural, and statistically in a minority on Earth. The [most common] human experience has been an experience of animism. Only a small proportion of people on Earth have been monotheists.

Snyder's spirituality and politics are thus linked in his dual critique of monotheism and nationalism. Arguing that these "do seem to go together" he concluded,

Jews and Muslims are the only pure monotheists, Christians hold to it in a very qualified and tricky way ... Everybody else in the world is a multifaceted polytheist, animist or Buddhist, who sees things in the world [as alive].

It easy to understand why Snyder liked the influential article and book by Christopher Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing?" (1972, 1974), which argued that trees should be represented in the courts and other democratic processes. Reflecting on Stone's argument, Snyder noted that he had long resonated with the "animistic idea that you can hear voices from trees" and commented that this makes it easy to move from the idea that trees should have standing to "nonhuman nature has rights." Snyder

came to understand that his own role as a poet was to promote such rights and to speak for the nonhuman world, “to speak for these things, to carry their voice into the human realm” (1980: 74).

For Snyder, these are sacred voices, although he periodically has cautioned against overuse of the word “sacred,” noting that this term can devalue what it signifies. Yet his work unambiguously conveys his reverence for life. Indeed, a central theme in Snyder’s writings is the sacramental nature of life itself, even the process of eating, and eventually, being eaten.

Eating is a sacrament. The grace we say clears our hearts and guides the children and welcomes the guest, all at the same time ... (1990:184). To acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being “realistic.” It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being ... (1990: 19). And if we do eat meat it is the life, the bounce, the swish, of a great alert being with keen ears and lovely eyes, with foursquare feet and a huge beating heart that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves ... (1990: 184).

Such a reverence he brought forcefully into poetic movements and the counterculture in general, first in the western United States, then much more broadly.

## **Anarchism, Bioregionalism, and Radical Environmentalism**

While Snyder’s spirituality resonated with many in the environmental movement and Western countercultures, he has been equally influential in promoting radical environmental ideas and decentralism in green social philosophy. Specifically, he helped pioneer the green social philosophy now known as “bioregionalism,” which promotes decentralized participatory democracy within the contours of different (reconfigured) ecosystem types. Bioregionalism, for Snyder, represents an “exercise of ignoring the presence of the national state” if not an effort to overturn it outright, although he views this not as a violent, short-term revolutionary ideal, but as an evolutionary hope dependent on a transformation of consciousness.

As with his spirituality, Snyder’s bioregional perspective was deeply influenced by his understanding of Native American cultures. His reading in the 1950s of the studies of Anthropologist A.L. Kroeber, who concluded that Native American cultural zones paralleled regional ones, was especially influential on his thinking. Equally so was the anarchist writer Peter Kropotkin, whose thinking Snyder was introduced to in the early 1950s “as part of the poetry and political circles of San Francisco culture.”

Reflecting on such tributaries, bioregionalism drew, according to Snyder,

on the history of anarchist thought ... [on the conviction] that we do not need a state, and that the state or government is *not* necessarily synonymous with the social order and organization inherent in society. By *anarchism* I mean a nonviolent political philosophy that finds order in the possibilities of a free society, and not in the imposed order of a state structure operating with a monopoly on violence ... not ... wild-eyed bomb throwers ... So North American bioregionalism is an extension of anarchist thought, combined with much appreciation of American Indian culture areas, the recognition of the virtues of decentralization, and the insights of “field ecology” (Woods and Schoonmaker 1985: 115–16).

From such sources and many discussions occurring within the cultural underground of the United States, Snyder and other bioregionalists surmised that small-scale societies, which live for a long time close to the land in specific ecoregions, can best figure out how to live there properly, both culturally and ecologically, listening to the land itself, and learning good environmental manners. Fairly rapidly, such ideas grew into the bioregional ideal, especially once a now-obscure figure, Allen Van Newkirk, invented the term in 1975. Snyder and the actor Peter Coyote, as well as Freeman House and Peter Berg (both of whom founded bioregional organizations and wrote widely in support of such ideals), for example, brainstormed together many of the ideas and tropes of the emerging movement – such as “reinhabitation,” the idea of reinhabiting land after being away and estranged by it in order to learn to live there sustainably. Snyder and McClure may also have coined the slogan “Back to the Pleistocene,” believed to have first appeared in print in an interview republished in *The Real Work* (1980: 57), which would later be adopted by Paul Shepard, one of the premier theorists of both ecopsychology and radical environmentalism. In the early 1980s, the slogan was used by Dave Foreman, one of Earth First!’s co-founders, and in a new kind of primitive marketing, it soon adorned T-Shirts and bumper-stickers. That Snyder also put the Australian Buddhist and rainforest activist John Seed in contact with Foreman in the early 1980s further illustrates Snyder’s influence on the evolution of radical environmentalism. Seed became one of the world’s leading proponents of deep ecology spirituality and radical environmental action. Indeed, close reading of Snyder’s *Turtle Island* (1969), which was awarded a Pulitzer prize in 1975, reveals nearly every idea and theme that would later erupt and find expression in the 1980s in the radical environmental movement, including the idea that industrial civilization is like “a cancer ... eating away at the breast of mother Earth” (1969: 104–5). The radical environmental novelist Edward Abbey, who was familiar with Snyder’s writings, would further promote this metaphor, proclaiming through one of his characters in *The Monkeywrench Gang* that modern society’s obsession with growth represented “the ideology of the cancer cell” (1975: 186).

## Criticisms and Rejoinders

Despite Snyder's respect for Native Americans and what he believes are their nature-sympathetic cultures, some Indians have criticized him. In *The Remembered Earth* (1979) the Cherokee critic, Geary Hobson, criticized Snyder for "inadvertently" starting a "white shaman fad" with some poems "in which the poet speaks through the persona of an Indian shaman" (Hobson 1979: 105). Hobson was easier on Snyder than many others in his article, acknowledging Snyder's appreciation for Indian culture and that he was "one of the finest poets in America ... when he is not pontificating about Indian things" (Hobson 1979: 107). But he clearly felt that Snyder and others should leave Indian things alone, so that "contemporary Indian writers" could speak for themselves, and certainly not assume the persona of a shaman. One of his contributors, the American Indian novelist Leslie Marmon Silko, was harsher, arguing that Snyder was a willing participant in a "two-part" attack on Indians, first by assuming in a racist way, along with many other white poets, that he could understand the mind of an Indian and express it in poetry; and secondly, by borrowing widely from Indians in his book *Turtle Island*, even its title, while failing properly to acknowledge "this land he is occupying ... is *not* his land" (Silko 1979: 215). Silko takes offense that ethnographers and artists, including Snyder, then collect royalties on what she considers "plagiarized materials" (1979: 212).

While Snyder received some of the earliest criticisms of cultural theft from indigenous voices, by the mid-1980s, most of such criticism shifted to those in the New Age movement who fabricated an Indian identity to sell books or profited financially by selling "Native American" ceremonies or other experiences.

But Snyder had understood his spirituality in shamanic terms, so the criticisms cannot be considered off-target, even for those who do not find them compelling. Snyder himself did not duck the issue or distance himself from his worldview, which he saw as cohering with shamanism. In a 1979 interview that brought up the criticisms in Hobson's book, Snyder responded directly. Shamanism comes from powerful experiences and wisdom that flow from making contact "with a totally nonhuman other" (1980: 154), he contended, "that is what I'm talking about when I talk about shamanism, which is a worldwide phenomenon and not limited in a proprietary sense to any one culture" (1980: 155). No one bothers Native American writers who speak in genres derived from European culture, Snyder continued, concluding,

As artists we are all free to write about anything we like. And if it is inauthentic it will show up sooner or later. If it really works, then people will trust it (1980: 155) ... The practice of shamanism ... at its very center is a teaching from the nonhuman, not a teaching from an Indian medicine man, or a Buddhist master. The question of culture does not enter into it. It's a naked experience that some people have out in the woods (1980: 156).



For Snyder, then, authenticity resides in the experience; and the value of ritual rests in its power and efficacy. The emergence of new truths and practices are possible because they can be learned from the dynamic, changing, multivocal Earth, and time will judge their authenticity.

Gary Snyder's work has also been criticized for its anarchistic, bioregional social philosophy. Some consider such ideology naive and utopian or devoid of a concrete strategy for bridling either corporate power or nationstates themselves. Others assert such social philosophy cannot adequately address global issues, such as the destruction of marine fisheries or atmospheric pollution. The political theorist Robyn Eckersley, in *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (1992), criticized anarchistic and bioregional thinking for assuming humans should take their cues from nature, arguing this would actually produce a world where the strong dominate the weak. Eckersley also argued that local communities often oppose ecological flourishing, so promoting regional autonomy often makes little ecological sense. Another political theorist, Dan Deudney, agrees that vesting political autonomy in a bioregion will often not serve either equity nor environmental well-being, arguing that bioregionalism has not explained how it could keep resource-rich bioregions from dominating those less well endowed.

Snyder views such criticisms as based on a misunderstanding of what anarchism means and on a *caricature* of bioregionalism:

Nobody ever said that anything was going to be autonomous, or that we were going to live [exclusively according to] bioregions. We're talking about theatre. Everybody has to get this into their heads. This is theatre, mythology, visionary praxis. This is forming a new society on the shell of the old. It doesn't mean the old society goes away, but it means you have some alternatives with which to act on the old. And nobody is thinking literally – aha! bioregions! autonomous nations! – or anything like that. There is a whole fluid way of looking at community relationships and jurisdictions. None of that is a useful discussion in terms of twenty-firstcentury politics.

Here and elsewhere Snyder's rejoinders indicate that he is not a naive utopian who is expecting to see the nationstate fall in the near future, ushering in an ecological new age. Yet he remains hopeful that bioregional spirituality and politics might, "nullify some things or lead to joint management committees between government managers and local people," and that such developments could provide valuable models for an environmentally sustainable and socially just future.

Snyder complains that critics intend "to demolish something that was never created, a theory or proposal that doesn't exist" and fail to apprehend that "bioregionalism is an educational proposal to see where we are." But if people could begin to see bioregional spirituality and politics in this way, Snyder thinks, "we might begin to see some cultural effects [and] then, we might see political effects."

## Conclusion

For decades Snyder has been traveling widely from his home in the Sierra Nevada foothills to deliver lectures and poetry readings around the world, sometimes upon the occasion of receiving one of the numerous literary awards he has won. Since 1985, he has also influenced many college students as a professor in the English Department and Nature and Culture program at the University of California, Davis. Meanwhile, in no small measure because of his influence, watershed protection groups have swept across America and local green coalitions in a number of instances have taken over regional governments, including in Snyder's home county.

If Snyder is correct that the proof is in the pudding, then it appears there is something ecologically and socially salutary to be found in the emergence of bioregional politics in America. And if he is correct metaphysically, then there will always be hope because the land and its creatures will always be speaking their truths, and all humans have to do is learn to listen.

I'm not really worried about what white people are going to do on this continent. If anybody lives here long enough, the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land ... That's what taught us, and it would teach everybody, if they'd just stay here. The old spirits and the old powers aren't lost; people just need to be around long enough to begin to [let them] influence them.

Snyder recalled this "elegant ... if overly optimistic" view from a Crow Indian Elder during a 1985 interview (Woods and Schoonmaker 1985:116). In doing so he showed his ability to temper hope with cautionary realism and a sense that living long and attentively in place will be needed if humans are to reharmonize their lives with the wider natural world.

*Bron Taylor*

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