Ecosystems, Mandalas and Watersheds: 
The Dharma Citizenship of Gary Snyder

Trevor Carolan

Abstract
In the face of a natural world that is crumbling environmentally, the contributions of Pacific Northwest-raised poet, essayist, and generational sage Gary Snyder continue to inform the emotional, philosophical and activist heart of our Western ecological discourse. Informed by trans-Pacific poetics, land and wilderness sustainability issues, cross-cultural anthropology, Mahayana Buddhism, his long years of familiarity with “the bush” and high mountain places, as well as a lifetime of scholarship that has earned him membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Snyder’s language and poetic commitment can be understood intimately — from a Pacific Coast perspective especially — as a rethinking of what citizenship might mean in the global age.

I pledge allegiance to the soil / of Turtle Island. . .
Gary Snyder, “For All”

Articulated in a series of modern literary classics that include the Pulitzer Prize-winning Turtle Island (1974), Earth House Hold (1969), Axe Handles (1983), his path-breaking translations of Han Shan’s Cold Mountain Poems (1965), The Practice of the Wild (1990), and Mountains and Rivers Without End (1996), for more than fifty years Snyder’s principles have engaged themes of transformation and responsible planetary ecological stewardship. At the root of his vision is a non-denominational renewal of reverence for the authentic, interconnected sacredness of creation, and from the declarations of his first published works Riprap (1959) and Cold Mountain Poems, his works have consistently spoken to the essential, life-sustaining relationship that he argues must exist between individual, “place,” and community psyche.

In discussing “Four Changes,” an essay written in 1969, Snyder describes — with an echo of Emerson resonating in the background — his idea of the ecstatic, the mystical nature of this relationship:

At the heart of things is some kind of serene and ecstatic process which is beyond qualities and beyond birth-and-death.¹

Of this psychic awareness, or “interrelatedness,” he has written that, “if humans are to remain on earth, they must transform the five-millennia-long urbanizing civilization

tradition into a new ecologically-sensitive, harmony-oriented, wild-minded, scientific-spiritual culture.”

And as root prescriptions for the overarching global crisis of the age, he offers as remedies the quintessential “EcoCrit” ideas of an “eti

and a “practice of the wild.”

Developing these protocols out of what he terms a “Turtle Island view” of the intrinsic value of nature — a phrase referring to traditional widely-held North American aboriginal depictions of the continent, in which “[humanity] and all of nature are represented by a single continuum of life, strong and virile, emerging from unrecorded ages to the present” — any paradigm for a truly healthy culture, Snyder argues, must begin with surmounting narrow conceits of personal identity and finding a commitment to place, as in, for example, to Turtle Island, or Arizona’s Painted Desert, British Columbia’s West Coast temperate rainforest, or North Beach in San Francisco. For this reason, critics from the period of his 1975 Pulitzer Prize laureate onward have regarded Snyder as holding himself accountable, “not to laws, but to a higher authority, the earth.”

From the humanistic position, the Turtle Island view binds man, not to man, but to his environment, to the strong, rhythmic wholeness of individual being. It follows that responsibility to self is also concern for the earth which is humanity’s physical and spiritual home. Yet, as a former logger in the U S Pacific Northwest’s conifer rainforest, Snyder also manifests a sensible concern for the need to harvest, as well as conserve, the environment’s natural fruits. Snyder’s poem “Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier Than Zen Students,” an homage to the dignity of labour in the resource extraction industries, is a perfect illustration of this philosophy: while it is necessary for the logger, for a community, to cut and chop, Snyder implies, it is vital that it be done mindfully and with integrity. As Betty Pickett contends, what Snyder cannot accept is the unfeeling despoliation of all that is Turtle Island. In the poem’s concluding line, “there is no other life,” she sees the poet’s affirmation that even in reducing the extent of the natural state there is a rightness, for the men who do the harvesting — rising earlier than students of Zen Buddhism who might typically presume for themselves the high moral ground in ecological discourse — do so as “whole, contented, unified beings,” and as such are themselves bona fide citizens of Turtle Island, and planetary citizens of Mother Earth.

The Native American mythological origins of Snyder’s Turtle Island view expand further, however. He comments:

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4 Betty Pickett, “A Natural Life,” Prairie Schooner (Fall 1975), 274.
5 Ibid., 275.
6 Ibid.
The twentieth-century syncretism of the ‘Turtle Island view’ gathers ideas from Buddhism and Taoism and from the lively details of world-wide animism and paganism. There is no imposition of ideas of progress or order on the natural world — Buddhism teaches impermanence, suffering, compassion, and wisdom. Buddhist teachings go on to say that the true source of compassion and ethical behaviour is paradoxically none other than one’s own realization of the insubstantial and ephemeral nature of everything. Much of animism and paganism celebrates the actual, with its inevitable pain and death, and affirms the beauty of the process. Add contemporary ecosystem theory and environmental history to this, and you get a sense of what’s at work.7

Extending his analysis further, and borrowing from deep ecology to remake the shop-worn literary concept of “sense of place” into something fresh and vital, Snyder refers to the sensibility of fully “inhabiting” a place spiritually, economically, and compassionately as a “bioregional consciousness” — one that is equally powerful in embracing urban, suburban or rural living environments. Bioregionalism, he explains in “The Rediscovery of Turtle Island”:

calls for commitment to this continent place by place, in terms of biogeographical regions and watersheds. It calls us to see our country in terms of its landforms, plant life, weather patterns, and seasonal changes — its whole natural history before the net of political jurisdictions was cast over it. People are challenged to become ‘reinhabitory’ — that is, to become people who are learning to live and think ‘as if’ they were totally engaged with their place for the long future. This doesn’t mean some return to a primitive lifestyle or utopian provincialism; it simply implies an engagement with community and a search for the sustainable sophisticated mix of economic practices that would enable people to live regionally, and yet learn from and contribute to a planetary society.8

7 A Place in Space, 246.
8 Ibid., 246–47. Note: Poet-essayist Andrew Schelling notes that the term ‘bioregion’ first appeared formally in the American Heritage Dictionary in 1991. In an interview, American author, publisher and original San Francisco ‘Digger’, Jim Koller, recounted for me the actual origins of the idea of Bioregionalism. During the early 1970s, former Digger luminaries Peter Berg and Peter Coyote met in Pennsylvania and examined the growing U S ecological movement to see how it could be taken deeper. On returning to San Francisco, Berg founded the Planet Drum Foundation. When the idea entered public discourse in the U S, Koller as publisher of Coyote’s Journal tied poetics to the bioregional idea, and with fellow poet-publisher Gary Lawless and Berg began introducing the bioregional ethos to Europe. Through the work of Guiseppe Moretti, bioregionalism became well-established in Italy where the annual Bioregional Festival now takes place there in Gobbio each September.
Here, Snyder returns to watershed imagery by explaining that while a watershed flows “through” each of these places, it also includes them. “That’s why I talk about watersheds,” he explains in an interview, bringing in an iconographic image to cement the association:

Symbolically and literally they’re the mandalas of our lives. They provide the very idea of the watershed’s social enlargement, and quietly present an entry into the spiritual realm that nobody has to think of, or recognize as being spiritual. But there it is. The watershed is our only local Buddha mandala: one that gives us all, human and non-human, a territory to interact in. That is the beginning of dharmic citizenship: not membership in a social or national sphere, but in a larger community citizenship. In other words, a sangha; a local dharma community. All of that potentially is in there, like Dogen when he says, “When you find your place, practice begins.”

Thirteenth century master Dogen Zenji is a classical Asian voice that Snyder has discussed frequently through the years. Snyder himself trained as a lay Zen monk for ten years at Daitokuji temple in Kyoto, Japan. He observes of Dogen:

There are several levels of meaning in what Dogen says. There’s the literal meaning, as in when you settle down somewhere. This means finding the right teaching, the right temple, the right village. Then you can get serious about your practice. Underneath, there’s another level of implication: you have to understand that there are such things as places. That’s where Americans have yet to get to. They don’t understand that there are ‘places’. So I quote Dogen and people say “What do you mean, you have to find your place? Anywhere is okay for dharma practice because it’s spiritual.” Well, yes, but not just any place. It has to be a place that you’ve found yourself. It’s never abstract, always concrete.

Snyder has explained how one of the models he uses to present his ideas is that of an ecosystem. “An ecosystem is a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relations that are all-powerful and instructive,” he notes in “A Village Council of All Beings.” In an address presented to the Ladakh Ecological Development Group’s conference called “Rethinking Progress” in Leh, northern India in 1992, he relates:

Each figure in the mandala — a little mouse or bird (or little god or demon figure) — has an important position and a role to play. Although ecosystems can

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10 Ibid., 24.
11 *A Place in Space.*
be described as hierarchical in terms of energy flow, from the standpoint of the whole, all of its members are equal.\footnote{Ibid., 76.}

This is the core teaching of equanimity and interdependence. In the mandala visualization, the small as well as central figures are all essential. As Snyder states elsewhere, “the whole thing [the Hindu-Buddhist mandala or thangka image] is an educational tool for understanding — that’s where the ecosystem analogy comes in. Every creature, even the little worms and insects, has value. Everything is valuable — that’s the measure of the system.”\footnote{Ibid., 23–24.}

For Snyder, value also translates as responsibility. Within his approach to committing to a place is the acceptance of responsible stewardship. It is through this engaged sense of effort and practice — participating in what he salutes as “the tiresome but tangible work of school boards, county supervisors, local foresters, local politics” — all the manifestations of contemporary community and regional activism — that individuals find their real community, their real culture. “Ultimately, values go back to our real interactions with others,” he emphasizes. “That’s where we live, in our communities.”\footnote{Ibid., 23–24.}

“Living in place” then, is a process that redefines one’s personal stake in the community, for in the larger Buddhist sense, community includes all the beings — the “ten thousand things”\footnote{Lao-tzu in the first epistle of the Tao Te Ching — “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao” — intimates that “the Tao that is named is the mother of the ten thousand things,” or the totality of everyday existence.} of everyday existence. Joan Halifax, a former research assistant to Joseph Campbell and teaching Director of the Upaya Zen Buddhist Centre in Santa Fe, notes additionally how “in contemporary Buddhism the term Sangha refers to the community that practices the Way together.”\footnote{“The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism, and Deep Ecology,” Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology, ed. Allan H Badiner (Berkeley: Parallax) 20–37.} Individually, one’s job as citizen member is to develop community networks that extend beyond the obvious political divisions of age, class, race, gender and employment — boundaries that keep us apart, and which Snyder believes are reinforced through the media. With the growing importance of community coalition-building, however, Snyder explains that he has found it expedient to narrow his ideas concerning bioregionalism, or his notion of a practice of the wild, down to a shared neighbourhood level, arguing that urban dwellers too, can and must learn as U S agricultural conservationist Wes Jackson says, to “become native to this place.”\footnote{Becoming Native to This Place (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1996), 87–103.}

It is within this stressing of local involvement at the tangible community level that he sees convergences arising between political activism, social justice issues, and East
Asia’s traditional Buddhist and Taoist wisdom paths that find increasingly wide acceptance in Western culture. As a poet who from 1958 onward has also been accorded a leading international lay spiritual teacher’s role, for Snyder the convergences occur within an encounter that embraces the Zen Buddhist idea of “waking up” to one’s individual place. Having experienced this satori, or Zen-style awakening, commitment to the key principle of upholding creative stewardship for its protection and continuance becomes an inherent spiritual obligation within the consciousness of “wild mind.” By way of clarification, Snyder confirms that “wild” in this context does not mean “chaotic, excessive or crazy”:

It means self-organizing. It means elegantly self-disciplined, self-regulating, self-maintained. That’s what wilderness is. Nobody has to do the management plan for it. So I say to people, let’s trust in the self-disciplined elegance of wild mind. Practically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humour, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking, brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness.  

Unsurprisingly, for a poet, the practices of waking up, stewardship, and cultivating the path of the spirit find a nexus in language. Snyder’s poetics have long been rooted in the new world tradition of Whitman, Walter Carlos Williams, labour ballads and the vernacular. With its clear language, sharp imagery and spare line, his work has long enjoyed a sizeable BC audience, in part for the astringency and plain taste at its core — another legacy of his engagement with Zen Buddhism. In Mountains and Rivers Without End, certain to be known as his poetic masterwork, and that begins “Clearing the mind and sliding in / to that created space,” the collection’s third poem, “Night Highway 99,” offers the reader an illustration of his style. Following an epigraph on poverty and mindfulness by friend and fellow poet Lew Welch, it reads:

We’re on our way

man
out of town
go hitching down
that highway 99. . .

Travelling down the old West Coast highway that once ran from Alaska to Chile, references to Puget Sound, Bellingham, Ferndale, Marblemount, Mt Vernon, and other Canadian border-hugging locations punctuate the long poem sequence, situating it in immediate geographic context, leading toward an Everett citation where even “BC Riders gave hitchhikers rides.” Anyone who ever thumbed long distances in the west or down the Pacific coast to San Francisco has these places and images engraved on their heart. What is edifying in these poems is how their metaphors and images pay homage to the commonplace, the typically overlooked — this precious territory we call home. A few examples suffice: “Gray wharves and hacksaw gothic homes / Shingle mills and stump

18 Carolan, 24.
farms / weary Indians. . . strawberry pickers speaking Kwagiutl / snag papermill / tugbooms in the river.”

It goes on: the Tatshenshini River, Naikoon Beach at northeast-end Haida Gwai, travelling down a dry-side east-side trench of the Rockies with a “lovely but dangerous girl with a dusky voice.” This is Gary Snyder’s “wild medicine,” where a glass of buttermilk in Portland becomes an epiphany reminiscent of Gautama’s enlightenment, where snow on the evergreens around Lake Shasta evokes a Chinese landscape, and a tag of coastal slang recalls anecdotes from life in the timber camps and on trail crews. It was precisely this Pacific Northwest referencing of the local, the naming of the particular that offered a generation of BC writers with interests beyond Earle Birney authorization to write this way. From the beginning, Snyder’s way of carving out a place of individual freedom in the wall of American culture has been founded in a bedrock of insightful seeing practice — a vision honest enough to recognize how both back country and urban metropolis are sacramental, each in their fashion.

In his omitting of the personal in favour of the path, Snyder also exemplifies the basics of the Zen tradition in which he trained. As illustration, he reports

the practice of meditation must have a little to do with getting beyond “wild mind” in language. Spending quality time with your own mind is humbling and, like travel, broadening. You find that there’s no one in charge, and are reminded that no thought lasts for long.19

In this, Snyder’s East-West ethical orientation is complemented by an older, deeper appreciation of the anthropomorphic richness of the local Native American cultural lore — the rainforest mythological totems of eagle, bear, raven, and killer whale that continue to survive as important elements of regional consciousness in school and community insignias throughout the Pacific Northwest region of Washington State where Snyder grew up, and in adjacent British Columbia and southern Alaska coastal regions. An anthropologist in his early training, before transferring into Asian language and literature studies at Berkeley University in the mid-1950s, Snyder wrote a senior BA thesis discussing Haida aboriginal mythology.20 Since that time, his etiquette of freedom and responsibility has evolved and crosses ancient cultural, tribal, and even inter-species boundaries. The result, as Joan Halifax explains, has been a recognition that

the encounter between shamanism and Buddhism has something to offer us. Both traditions are based in the experience of direct practice realization, of

19 Ibid., 24–25
direct knowing, of communion, of understanding through experience, of seeing through the eyes of compassion.\(^{21}\)

In *Danger On Peaks*, his first collection of poetry in more than twenty years that also rests on Japanese *haibun*, or prose/poem journal-style entry technique, Snyder recounts his own moment of direct awakening to the experience of seeing compassionately. Beginning with a section recalling boyhood mountaineering adventures around Mount St Helens, the site of one of the 20\(^{th}\) century’s great explosions in southern Washington State, Snyder combines natural images of the outdoors familiar to anyone raised on family camping journeys. Then, in a poem entitled “Atomic Dawn,” he recollects how, on descending from his first major climb up the peak, he learned at age 15 of the first atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Horrified by news photos of the destruction, the youthful Snyder appealed to the mountain’s huge spirit for help, and he recalls vowing “By the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt St Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life.”\(^{22}\)

This is what he has done. But there is always the unpredictable. In another poem, “Pearly Everlasting,” he recounts, “If you ask for help it comes / But not in any way you’d ever know.”\(^{23}\) In sharing his acquired knowledge of “wild mind,” throughout his career Snyder has not hesitated in introducing non-Native American readers to traditional Native myths. Virtually single-handedly he brought the antic, irrational Native tales involving the trickster figure of “Coyote” to popular consciousness.\(^{24}\) *Danger On Peaks* offers a typical example:

Doctor Coyote when he had a problem  
Took a dump. On the grass, asked his turds where they lay  
What to do? They gave him good advice.

He’d say “that’s just what I thought too”  
And do it. And go his way.\(^{25}\)

Snyder clarifies the importance of this cross-pollinating influence in “Reinhabitation”, an essential essay from his 1995 collection *A Place In Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds*:

\(^{21}\) Halifax, 34.  
\(^{22}\) *Danger On Peaks*, 9.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 19.  
\(^{25}\) “Doctor Coyote When He Had a Problem,” 59.
Here in the twentieth century we find Occidentals and Orientals studying each other’s wisdom, and a few people on both sides studying what came before both—before they forked off...Sometime in the last twenty years the best brains in the Occident discovered to their amazement that we live in an environment. This discovery has been forced upon us by the realization that we are approaching the limits of something...We are again, now, in the position of our Mesolithic forbears...learning how to live by the sun and the green at that spot. We once more know that we live in a system that is enclosed in a certain way, that has its own kinds of limits, and that we are interdependent with it.\textsuperscript{26}

This demystifying cross-cultural lens into the interdependency that is important for Snyder points yet further beyond the human toward the \textit{mana}, or living holiness of humanity’s precious home-place, Mother Earth. A Mela-Polynesian term brought to English in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century by R H Codrington,\textsuperscript{27} \textit{mana} shares an intimacy of natural awareness with an equivalent Lakota Sioux cosmological term from the Great Plains that in recent decades has gained widespread currency among Native North Americans:

All life is \textit{wakan}. So also is everything which exhibits power, whether in action, as in the winds and drifting clouds or in passive endurance, as the boulder by the wayside. For even the commonest sticks and stones have a spiritual essence which must be reverenced as a manifestation of the all-pervading mysterious power that fills the universe.\textsuperscript{28}

Buddhism’s transcendent appreciation of this supernatural phenomenon, Snyder relates, reaches its clearest expression in the \textit{Avatamsaka Sutra}, where its

\textit{jewelled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness} tells us no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the whole self is the whole thing...Thus, knowing who we are and knowing where we are, are intimately linked.\textsuperscript{29}

Knowing who we are and where we are implies having, as Snyder says, “a direct sense of relation to the land.”\textsuperscript{30} With its overtones to the archaic human past, this literacy of place embodies in the fullest psychic sense, “a spirit of what it [is] to be \textit{there}.”\textsuperscript{31} In the Taoist perceptual view with which Snyder is familiar, this is consonant with the elemental visualization of that from which all things, temporal and eternal, emanate: with \textit{Tao}, the essential nature of \textit{what is}. Within this accord of self, place, and spirit, the individual self

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 187–88.
\textsuperscript{27} See Halifax, 23–24; also Ronald Wright, \textit{On Fiji Islands} (Toronto: Viking 1986), 44.
\textsuperscript{28} Leflesche, cited in Halifax.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{A Space in Place}, 189.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
is subsumed by place; and place and self are themselves sublime embodiments of the Tao, which itself serves as both noun and verb.

Similarly, in the archetypal Confucian understanding of this process, when heaven and the individual heart are unified (through ling, or meditative purity), then earth and humanity are also in accord (Chinese: tianrenheyi). Mencius, heir to the wisdom of Confucius, styles this unity of purpose with elegant economy in the foundational work that bears his name saying:

For an individual to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature, he is serving Heaven.32

Implicit in this appraisal of the attunement of both “self and sphere” is the cosmic binding of what he terms the “flood-like chi.” This ambiguous concept is an imagistic representation of what in current interfaith discourse can be understand as compassionate mind. Mencius acknowledges it may be:

Difficult to explain. [It] is a chi which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding. Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a chi which unites rightness and the Way.33

In the context of Snyder’s appeal, unless such values are grounded within Right Action in the community itself, they will not last. In this Buddhist-inflected mode of thinking, perhaps to have a lay spirituality is a precondition of a more compassionate, dharmic spirituality. Otherwise, one is left with a cultural void and nobody to share information with.

Like the character of Japhy Ryder in The Dharma Bums, Snyder left to study Buddhist culture in Japan in 1956 — a time when Allen Ginsberg recalled the young poet was already advising audiences about the hazards of clear-cut logging and the unnecessary slaughter of whales.34 During a ten-year residence in Japan, Snyder cultivated an intensive Zen Buddhist practice in Kyoto monasteries. Returning to North America, he began incorporating into his writing the knowledge gained from his experiences abroad, and in 1969 published Earth House Hold. This now-classic document from the American culture wars of the Sixties with its provocative-for-the-time sub-title, “Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries,” is memorable for its inclusion of what has become one of the most enduring epigraphs of the entire field of Trans-Pacific Studies. Specifically, in an essay entitled “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution,” he declares:

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32 Bk 7, A: 182.
33 Ibid., 77.
The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both.\textsuperscript{35}

Since returning to homestead in the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada range, Snyder has steadfastly championed social changes that bring greater freedom, choice and mobility into individual life — a resistance against what he calls the “Hungry Ghost” culture of modern North American life with its “enormous bellies, insatiable appetites, and tiny mouths.”\textsuperscript{36} What he has fashioned from his experience has been the Turtle Island view. As Gretel Erlich maintains in a back-cover statement that appears on the original North Point edition of \textit{The Practice of the Wild}, its influence upon Western environmental and ecosystems thought has provided “an exquisite, far-sighted articulation of what freedom, wildness, goodness, and grace mean, using the lessons of the planet to teach us how to live.” Ironically, Snyder’s work was initially dismissed by the US East Coast academic establishment and he was tagged as an exponent of the “bear-shit on the trail” school of poetry — a name he recollects that was originally coined humorously by poet Kenneth Rexroth.\textsuperscript{37}

Gary Snyder’s conceptualization of dharma citizenship rooted in ecosystems, mandalas, and watersheds, brings many streams together and his influence has percolated up and down the Pacific Coast as a critical influence on, among many others, Rex Weyler, Robert Bringhurst, Gerry Gilbert, Al Neil, Terry Glavin, Bob Hunter, John Schreiber, Robert Sund, Bill Porter, Mike O’Connor, Tim McNulty, and Jim Dodge — a sufficiency that might itself constitute a school. Anchoring this citizenship itself is a notion of dharma that is big enough to breathe comfortably through a variety of sustaining wisdom practices. As he relates:

The emphasis on human rights that is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the concern for all beings expressed in Buddhism, and the compassionate political savvy of Confucianism. . .[all] contribute to it.\textsuperscript{38}

In a joyous, ultimately democratic reminder that “we are all indigenous…all members present at the assembly,”\textsuperscript{39} Snyder stakes his legitimacy as an heir to the American revolutionary trend manifested in turn by such literary and wilderness sages as Henry David Thoreau (\textit{Walden}) and the New England Transcendentalists, Walt Whitman (\textit{Leaves of Grass}), Ezra Pound (\textit{Cathay}), John Muir, William Carlos Williams, and Kenneth Rexroth. One might think here, too, of the older, multilingual Longfellow who could infuse his poem “Hiawatha” with a sharp appreciation of aboriginal tradition, native languages, and local geography. “Ultimately,” Snyder affirms, “values go back to

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Earth House Hold} (New York: New Directions, 1969), 92.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{A Space in Place}, 208.
\textsuperscript{37} Interview with the author, Davis, CA, May, 2007.
\textsuperscript{38} “Exhortations for Baby Tigers,” \textit{A Space in Place}, 208.
\textsuperscript{39} Carolan, 26.
our real community, to our real culture, our real interactions with others. That’s where we live, in our families and in our communities.”

These are the cognate forms of what an arch-modernist like T S Eliot could envision as a tradition of “much wider significance,” a tradition that by its unity one is obliged to recognize as “the really new,” and that contributes fundamentally to the proposition of a new world dharma. How, though, does one reconcile the contending forces of tradition and “the new” in a practical fashion when, as Eliot insists, “the difference between the present [new] and the [traditional] past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show?”

For Eliot, likely the chief arbiter of poetry and literary aesthetics in English during the 20th century, as well as of a new modernism in literary criticism:

> What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. . .the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

For Snyder, depersonalization has been the meat and bread of his career for more than forty-five years. Having adopted a fine Sino-Japanese poetic aesthetic reaching from the Tang dynasty with its erasure of “the defined subject position of the poem in favour of a malleable one,” and having embraced the anti-anthropocentric philosophical stance in which the reader frequently is unlikely to “meet a subject pronoun” until deep into the unfolding texture of his work, the integrity of his style is a logical extension of the consciousness which informs it.

The judicious word is “style.” In early announcement of the postmodernist explication of text, Wylie Sypher assumes a genuine style is one containing:

> an expression of a prevailing, dominant, or authentically contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of human experience peculiar to their day and who are able to phrase this

40 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 39.
43 Ibid., 40.
experience in forms deeply congenial to the thought, science, and technology which are a part of that experience.\textsuperscript{46}

This serves as the ethical-aesthetic grounding that is characteristic of Snyder’s poetry and essays. Their “mojo”, or creative magic, is that which Eliot regards as involving:

in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable. .

. the historical sense involves perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.\textsuperscript{47}

The Beat poetics that swept Snyder, Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and their colleagues to public attention was informed by Buddhism, and in popularizing this traditional Asian wisdom path for the West, Snyder and his confreres nurtured a hybridized “East-West” expression honouring the sacredness of daily existence — what Buddhism understands as “everyday” sacraments.\textsuperscript{48} In his recent work, Snyder travels further, extending this compassionate vision to include the victims of early-twenty-first century terrorist brutality.

Observing that the Mount St Helens eruption in 1980 would be followed later by other dreadful explosions in Afghanistan and New York in 2001, in the concluding section of Danger On Peaks entitled “After Bamiyan,” Snyder honours the human victims in New York and the Bamiyan Valley’s ancient Gandharan Buddhist statuary destroyed by the Taliban, writing: “The men and women who / died at the World Trade Center/together with the / Buddhas of Bamiyan / Take Refuge in the dust.”

It is here that one recalls how like the medieval Benedictines with their mantra Laborare est orare — “our work and prayer are one” — Snyder’s work has always been a kind of sutra, or prayer. This can also include a hard fraternal boot where appropriate, in this case to utopian journalist and talk-show personality Christopher Hitchens whom Snyder rebuked for his public remarks following the Bamiyan world heritage site destruction:

\textsuperscript{46} From Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York: Random House, 1960), 50.

\textsuperscript{47} “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 38.

\textsuperscript{48} Shuan McNiff, a distinguished elder in the field of creative art therapy discusses this idea in “Everyday Sacraments,” Shambhala Sun (March, 1996), 51–55.
A person who should know better wrote, “Many credulous and sentimental Westerners, I suspect, were upset by the destruction of the Afghan Buddha figures because they believe that so-called Eastern religion is more tender-hearted and less dogmatic. . . Is nothing sacred? Only respect for human life and cultures, which requires no divine sanction and no priesthood to inculcate it. The foolish veneration of holy places and holy texts remains a principal obstacle to that simple realization. . .”

Snyder’s response to such unctuous provocation is blunt:

“This is another case of ‘blame the victim,’” I answered. “Buddhism is not on trial here. The Bamiyan statues are part of human life and culture, they are works of art, being destroyed by idolators of the book. Is there anything ‘credulous’ in respecting the art and religious culture of the past? Counting on the tender-heartedness of (most) Buddhists, you can feel safe in trashing the Bamiyan figures as though the Taliban wasn’t doing a good enough job. I doubt you would have the nerve to call for launching a missile at the Ka’aba. There are people who would put a hit on you and you know it.”

Amid the samsara of confusing and amoral times, Snyder’s straight-talk from the heart has come to be recognized as an oracular path. Detailing the responsibilities of a true planetary citizen — socially pluralistic, ecologically holistic in vision and action — through its synthesis of Western and Asian ideas, a third generation of seekers is now being inspired to communal action based on respect for the sanctity of nature it inspires. Honouring community and commitment to place, from this path has also arisen, as Snyder articulates, a reconceptualized sense of citizenship, true dharma citizenship. As Snyder explains,

Such a non-nationalistic idea of community [and citizenship], in which commitment to pure place is paramount, cannot be ethnic or racist. Here is perhaps the most delicious turn that comes out of thinking about politics from the standpoint of place: anyone of any race, language, religion, or origin is welcome, as long as they live well on the land. . . this sort of future is available to whoever makes the choice, regardless of background. It need not require that a person drop his or her Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, animist, atheist, or Muslim beliefs but simply add to that faith or philosophy a sincere nod in the direction of the deep value of the natural world and the subjecthood of nonhuman beings.

Tim Costello argues from Australia that it is precisely this form of “politics with a soul” that speaks to the deep impulse of Green spirituality among many in the West who are

50 Ibid.
51 A Place in Space, 234.
currently searching for new expressions of the sacred.\textsuperscript{52} Recognizing that our ideas of
place and community are implicit forms of social commentary, Costello intimates that in
an era of post-institutional religion such ideas may also serve as tangible forms of
sanctuary — as new expressions of the perennial human need for an inner serenity based,
inevitably, on intangibles.

“Many young people are searching for a fusion of their deepest and truest private
aspirations with public meaning,” he explains:

They know that the public secular institutions of government, media, unions and
educational institutions like our universities are running on empty because they
have little language of interconnectedness or priority for spiritual values.\textsuperscript{53}

This where Gary Snyder’s language and commitment offer redress. Returning praise and
reverence for the simple joys of teaching children, gardening, or for the rewards of
individual and communal labour, whether it be through the interconnectedness of poetry,
meditation, chanting, labour, or activism, Snyder has shown a way forward. As the late
Ish River poet Robert Sund contended, his fellow poet has “[known] where to look for
what he needed.”\textsuperscript{54} In a paraphrase of Allen Ginsberg’s well-travelled concept of
“Aesthetic Mindfulness,” he has known how to identify what it is he has seen when he
has seen it, and what he has heard when he hears it.\textsuperscript{55}

Clarifying what “organic interconnections” between the “natural and human worlds”
might mean, Costello points out that spirituality can be reinterpreted as new, simpler
meta-narrative for our age:

The daily disciplines of meditation, recycling, using public transport, and
greening one’s neighbourhood are parallels to the rhythms of prayer, Bible
reading, witness and love of neighbour in Christian teaching.\textsuperscript{56}

Snyder does not disagree. In an essay entitled “Poetry and the Primitive,” he relates, “We
all know what primitive cultures don’t have. What they do have is this knowledge of

\textsuperscript{52}“Politics with a soul. Yes, it is possible,” \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} (Dec. 23, 2002), 9.
\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54}“Yes, It’s Really Work!” \textit{Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life}, ed. Jon Halper
\textsuperscript{55}Allen Ginsberg encouraged his colleagues and students to practice “Aesthetic
Mindfulness” explaining it as “paying keen attention to what you see when you see it,
and what you hear when you hear it.” See Trevor Carolan, \textit{Giving Up Poetry: With Allen
Ginsberg at Hollyhock} (Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 2001), 15–25.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 9.
connection and responsibility.” This responsibility is seen in the lives of the Australian aborigines, of whom Snyder, who has spent time among them, observes how they live in a world of ongoing recurrence — comradeship with the landscape and continual exchanges of being and form and position; every person, animals, forces, all are related via a web of reincarnation — or rather, they are “interborn.” It may well be that rebirth (or interbirth, for we are actually mutually creating each other and all things while living) is the objective fact of existence which we have not yet brought into conscious knowledge and practice.

Bringing a wider awareness of how benefits may be reaped from the wisdom of “interbeing” lies at the heart of the citizenship Gary Snyder offers the global age. Forged from his roots in the Pacific Northwest, the California Sierras, and the Buddhist-Indic worlds of East and South Asia, it is an ethic easily endorsed by a broadening horizon of seekers that extends from the West Coast’s post-Sixties, ecologically-minded community to enlightened Christians like Tim Costello, who can regard it as the manifestation “of a God who is indeed green.”

Among the jobs of poets and shamans is the work of extending new, and renewing good traditional ideas (“What You Should Know to be a Poet”). Bringing these into conscious knowledge and practice, the approach Snyder has traditionally employed is rigorous but uncomplicated. In an interview discussing Back On the Fire (2007), a collection of essays, he summarizes his approach by observing simply,

One of the things I’ve been trying to do for a long time is to find a vocabulary, a way to talk and bring images out that will communicate from my rural, backcountry, out-in-the-woods upbringing and family culture to the intellectual and literary worlds that I’ve also lived in on the West Coast, with the intention of bringing the whole West Coast culture closer together. That’s what I hope . . . that it makes it possible for academics, businesspeople, loggers, and Sierra miners to realize they’re together in the same place.

Advancing the work of building community along more ecologically, socially and economically sound principles can sound remarkably like what Buddhism understands as transmitting the dharma. To conclude, arising from the trans-Pacific “new world” culture that Snyder once identified as the West Coast of North America and the Asia-Pacific, a new world dharma compatible with the twenty-first century’s evolving interfaith and

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57 “Poetry and the Primitive,” Earth House Hold, 121.
58 Ibid., 129.
secular humanist learning projects is an idea worth thinking through — a renewed concept of citizenship for a new millennium.\textsuperscript{61}

*Trevor Carolan* teaches English and Creative Writing at University of the Fraser Valley. He began writing at age 17 for *The Columbian* newspaper near Vancouver and travelled Europe and India for three years before earning his MA in English at Humboldt State in California. He has been Coordinator of Writing programs at the Banff Centre, and has published 14 books of poetry, translation, non-fiction, fiction, and anthologies. His work has appeared in five languages. During his career he has also worked as media advocate on behalf of international human rights, Canadian First Nation land claims, famine relief, and Pacific Coast watershed conservation issues. He served three years as an elected municipal councillor for North Vancouver, and wrote as a political columnist. He has been the international editor of *Pacific Rim Review of Books* since 2004, and holds a PhD from Bond University, Australia.