

Sense of Community in the Work of Gary Snyder

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Abstract

This essay examines the concept of community in six selected works by Gary Snyder. Living rooted in a place in symbiosis with the non-human has been a model found in most indigenous cultures and Eastern religious traditions. Snyder's anthropological scholarship and a life-long involvement with Zen Buddhism have shaped his vision of a sustainable model of living. In his work Snyder convincingly shows that living in a place-based community has not diminished in importance in the globalized world. The sense of community in Snyder's work will be scrutinized from multiple perspectives. Those include Snyder's understanding of the concept of community and his own role within it, his relation to nature and the non-human, his understanding of the food chain as the key process of energy sharing within a community, and the importance of the sense of place for establishing a lasting community.

Keywords: Gary Snyder, community, sense of place, shamanism, Buddhism, ecology, food web, nature, ecocentrism

1. Introduction

Besides being a renowned nature poet and activist, Gary Snyder was also elected the head of the California Arts Council. Even in this prominent position, Snyder never gave up on his values and ideals and supported small-scale projects that aimed at fostering a sense of community and a sense of place. His active engagement in community life at the San Juan Ridge has become his lifelong commitment, and a practical example of the famous motto “think globally, act locally.”

Community is usually conceived of as a group of people who live in a particular area. However, Snyder's conception of community is much wider, as it includes the non-human element. He synthesizes his anthropological knowledge of indigenous cultures and his

long-lasting Zen apprenticeship. These traditions have influenced him mostly because in both spiritual traditions the non-human element plays a vital role.

This essay will address the author's definitions of community and his relationship to nature and the non-human; it will probe into the sense of place as a necessary precondition for establishing a lasting community; it will examine Snyder's own place and the role of a poet within a community; and it will also deal with the issue of the food chain, which is a necessary process within a community that includes the non-human.

This analysis will limit itself to six selected works by Gary Snyder: *Myths & Texts* (M&T), *Earth House Hold* (EHH), *Turtle Island* (TI), *The Real Work* (TRW), *A Place in Space* (PIS), and *The Practice of the Wild* (POW). The selected works represent all the author's genres and at the same time cover the five decades of his writing from the 1950s to the 1990s. *Myths & Texts* is Snyder's second collection, originally published in 1960. Although published after *Riprap*, *Myths & Texts* is regarded as Snyder's first completed work.¹ It gathers poems that originated between 1952 and 1956. *Earth House Hold* (1969) represents the writer's journal excerpts, notes, book reviews and essays covering a 16-year period from 1952 to 1968. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island* (1974) is a collection of poems written between 1969 and 1974. *The Real Work* (1980) gathers talks and interviews from 1964 to 1979. *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) is a highly acclaimed book of essays. And *A Place in Space* (1995) is another, more recent, collection of essays that, as the writer says in the opening Note, "draws on some forty years of thinking and writing" (unpagged).

2. The nature of nature: Other, Another, or our Mother?

Gary Snyder is often referred to as a nature poet, or a poet of the wilderness. Since his early years, nature and wilderness have been instrumental for Snyder because that is where he has searched for spiritual values and his own identity. Yet Snyder does not limit his view on nature as a mere vehicle for man's spiritual growth. He goes beyond anthropocentrism, with man standing at the center and determining the value of nature depending on whether it serves man's needs, be they material or spiritual.

The anthropocentric view implies the existence of man and nature as separate entities. Snyder rejects such a duality in accordance with the Buddhist doctrine, which does not discriminate between "self" and "other" simply because it denies the very existence of the individual self. To illustrate that isolating one's self from the whole is a mere illusion, Snyder quotes the metaphor of a web of polished jewels where each individual self is like a jewel that is defined by the reflections of all the other jewels:

... the universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see nothing but the reflections of other jewels, which themselves are reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net. (qtd. in Snyder, *PIS* 67)

This metaphor is the basic image and definition of existence in the Hua-yen tradition within Buddhism (or Avatamsaka in Sanskrit). It presents the mutual interconnectedness and interpenetration of all things and beings. Snyder also encapsulated it in saying that

“[a]ll are one and [at the same time] all are many” (PIS 51). The image of a mutually linked web may be also considered the essential image of Snyder’s concept of community.

Snyder’s “no self” resonates with his call for “no nature,”² however paradoxical it may sound. In other words, “he rejects the idea of nature as something outside humans which might be either used for their needs (to be cultivated, exploited or destroyed), or even kept under their protection, isolated from them and preserved for future generations” (Erban, “Konec přírody” 31, translation mine). Thus Snyder does not speak of going back to nature because that would imply that people could possibly ever have turned themselves away from it. Acknowledging that nothing exists in isolation and seeing ourselves as a part of an interrelated web stands in juxtaposition to the self-centered consciousness, which, as Snyder believes, is what “moved them [humans] further and further from a spontaneous feeling of being part of the natural world” (PIS 47).

For a better understanding of Snyder’s approach to nature, it will be helpful to compare his perspective with one from which it differs. Therefore, the analysis will draw on two diametrically opposed ways of relating to something outside ourselves: either by referring to it as “Other” or “Another.” These concepts of Otherness and Anotherness were developed by the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who applied them in the philosophy of language and culture.³ The notion of Otherness has been central to recent gender and cultural studies. That which is Other (e.g. foreign cultures, women, etc.) is supposedly separate, inferior, and lacks a subject position as well as voice and value. Barnhill argues that “[s]uch a view of culture and women has allowed for imperialism and sexism to work so destructively” (“An Interwoven World” 125). It has worked in a similar way for nature. The study of Otherness acquired another dimension when Patrick D. Murphy and David L. Barnhill applied it in the field of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, examining the reasons for and the consequences of placing nature and women into the category of alienated Other.⁴ The following lines will show how seemingly similar terms may imply extremely different approaches toward nature.

Firstly, if nature is treated as Other, it means that there is a profound split between nature and humans. However, if nature is Another, it “is not hostile to the *I* but a necessary component of it, a friendly other, a living factor in the attempts of the *I* toward self-definition” (Barnhill, “Great Earth Sangha” 202). This Anotherness rejects the strict dichotomy of self and Other, and so does the Buddhist doctrine. Murphy confirms that Bakhtin’s concept of Anotherness implies that self and Another are “interdependent, mutually determinable, constructs” (Literature, Nature and Other 5), which faithfully represents Snyder’s concept of nature as a community. Snyder encourages people to avoid thinking in terms of Other since it is alienating: “One moves continually with the consciousness / Of that other, totally alien, non-human: / Humming inside like a taut drum, / Carefully avoiding any direct thought of it, / Attentive to the real-world flesh and stone” (*M&T*, “Burning 1: *second shaman song*” 38).

Secondly, regarding nature as Other goes hand in hand with devaluing it. Nature as Other is viewed as a mere commodity, a passive, silent *object*. By contrast, being Another means being a voiced *subject* with its own integrity and value. This is why Snyder warns against an objectifying consciousness: “At the root of the problem where our civilization goes wrong is the mistaken belief that nature is something less than authentic, that nature is not as alive as man is, or as intelligent, that in a sense it is dead, and that animals are of

so low an order of intelligence and feeling, we need not take their feelings into account” (*TI*, “The Wilderness” 107). Snyder sees intrinsic value in nature regardless of whether it serves people or not.

Last but not least, if nature is Other and as such separate and distinct from man, as a consequence there is little if any sense of obligation to it. However, as soon as nature is Another—a part of us and our community—then we have a natural obligation to preserve it. “But even more: if nature is truly a community we belong to, then there is a responsibility to participate in it as community” (Barnhill, “Great Earth Sangha” 187–188). The feeling of obligation toward nature will naturally arise from man’s commitment to place, the concept that has been so much promoted by Snyder, and which will be discussed later.

Snyder’s view of nature as an interconnected web, as a community in other words, opposes the traditional view of nature as Other, which is how Western culture has tended to see nature. Otherness, on the other hand, enables a dialogical interchange and reinforces the interdependence and the natural necessity of diversity.

Moreover, Snyder goes beyond suggesting that nature is Another, our community: it is a living organism, too. In his “Introductory Note” to *Turtle Island*, he writes: “[t]he land, the planet itself, is also a living being—at another pace” (*TI*). His reverence for the Earth is personified in the deity of Mother Earth, Mother Gaia, who sustains life. He expresses his humble servitude to Her: “*in the service / of the wilderness / of life / of death / of the Mother’s breasts!*” (*TI*, “Tomorrow’s Song” 77, italics in the original).

Such a relation to the Earth as to our mother can be found throughout indigenous cultures as well as within Eastern philosophies: “Buddhist Tantrism is probably the finest and most modern statement of this ancient shamanistic-yogic-gnostic-socioeconomic view: that mankind’s mother is Nature and Nature should be tenderly respected” (Snyder, *EHH* 105).

On other occasions, Snyder refers to the Earth by the term Gaia, which is derived from Greek mythology and refers to the Goddess of Earth or Mother Nature. In ecological terms it refers to the hypothesis that Earth is a single living organism.⁵ In compliance with his philosophy that “we are one and at the same time we are many,” Snyder asserts that humans are inseparable from the Earth, that humans, in fact, are the Earth: “This living flowing land / is all there is, forever / We *are* it / it sings through us—” (*TI*, “By Frazier Creek” 41).

Taking into account Snyder’s rejection of the subject-object duality, one will understand that his goal is not to reach harmony with nature, but rather to create harmony within himself, in other words, to reach such a state within himself that would be equivalent with that of nature.

3. Shaman-poet: the healer of a community

Snyder believes that for the sake of community, inter-species communication should be re-established. It has already been proposed that, in Snyder’s view, nature and the non-human is Another, and as such it has a voice. He thinks that people who have regained (or kept) the ability to hear their voices, among whom he includes himself too, should take a political stand and transmit this knowledge to the community. This is what Snyder has aspired to become, a spokesman for nature: “The reason I am here is because I wish to bring a

voice from the wilderness, my constituency. I wish to be a spokesman for the realm that is not usually represented either in intellectual chambers or in the chambers of government” (*TI*, “The Wilderness” 106). He sees this trying to be “a voice for the non-human” as his responsibility transmitting in this way the knowledge that “the humans are indeed children of, sons and daughters of, and eternally in relationship with, the *earth*” (*TRW* 171–172).

Such a spiritual transmission of the knowledge from the non-human realm is, in fact, what is accomplished by a shaman. Mircea Eliade, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of shamanism, asserts that a shaman is a person who can link himself up with the spirits, be it spirits of the dead, of demons or the spirits of Nature (26). Snyder explains in his own words that “[t]he shaman speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through him” (*PIS* 50). A shaman has an entrance to the world which is “behind the world we see that is the same world but more open, more transparent, without blocks,” where it is “[l]ike inside a big mind, the animals and humans all can talk, and those who pass through here get power to help” (*POW* 164). Shamanism, then, is described by Snyder as a process, “which allows some individuals to step totally out of their human roles to put on the mask, costume, and *mind* of Bison, Bear, Squash, Corn, or Pleiades; to reenter the human circle in that form and by song, mime and dance, convey a greeting from the other realm” (*PIS* 51).⁶

Such a communication of shamans can then serve various goals—they use it to heal, to accompany the dead or otherwise. It can be stated that a shaman can fulfill various functions—that of a magician, medicineman (healer), priest, mystic, prophet or even a poet (Eliade 25). On this point Barnhill argues that Snyder identifies himself with a shaman in three principal respects: “[C]ommunication with the non-human (animals, spirits, and, more broadly, life’s network), giving voice to that contact in one’s community, and healing” (“An Interwoven World” 120).

As for his communicating with the non-human, Snyder claims to have experienced an animistic vision in which he could hear voices from the non-human realm. For instance, in the poem “The Uses of Light” he informs readers what the trees and other beings say: “It warms my bones / say the stones / I take it into me and grow / Say the trees” (*TI* 39). The poet functions here as a mediator of the feelings from the non-human realm. He seems not to have lost the capacity to hear the songs of his brothers and sisters, the capacity that all once had, as he believes: “There’s a sense of communication with all of life’s network that somehow happens in the wilderness for some people, and I’m one of them” (*TRW* 154). He compares this voice to what in the Western tradition is called the Muse: “You would not think a poet would get involved in these things. But the voice that speaks to me as a poet, that Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Mater. I regard that voice as a very real entity” (*TI*, “The Wilderness” 107).

The second aspect is giving voice to that contact in the community. Shamans can see and hear what others cannot, so they provide the tribe with their visions in order to help the whole community. Steuding argues that “[i]n a very real sense, the shaman is the first poet; he expresses, through incantations he sings and the visions of his trance which he reports, the anxieties of the group” (105). This corresponds quite well with Snyder’s understanding of poetry: “A reading is a kind of communion. I think the poet articulates the semi-known for the tribe. This is close to the ancient function of the shaman” (*TRW*

5). Snyder considers the shaman-poet to be “the man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams” (*EHH* 122). And through this “giving shape or form to the unconscious life of the people, giving it imagery—essentially through the act of naming—the shaman exorcises mental disorder and heals psychic wounds” (Steuding 105). Therefore Snyder emphasizes that shaman’s concern is “healing / not saving” (*TI*, “Without” 6).

The etymological root of the term to heal, Snyder often asserts, is to make whole. And this is the shaman’s task: to help others to reach wholeness, “like our oneness with nature, the oneness of mind and body, the oneness of conscious and unconscious, our oneness in society with each other” (Snyder, *TRW* 156–157). Thus, poetry reading fulfills the shaman’s healing function: “Poetry within the civilized area of history is the fragmented attempt to recreate a ‘healing song’ aspect of the shaman’s practice” (Snyder, *TRW* 175, see also *EHH* 121–122). Snyder’s focus, therefore, “is not on the shaman or monk as individual practitioner but on the community as the context for interdependent religious practice” (Barnhill, “Great Earth Sangha” 205).

4. The sense of place: where a community starts

In socio-economic terms we have been witnessing an increasing resistance to globalization in the form of a shift toward “localization.” The idea of localization is centered around a smaller bioregion, a localized community as a model for living a more sustainable life. Similarly, literature of place has begun to receive critical attention.⁷ Gary Snyder is one of its enthusiastic proponents. Kopecký asserts that Snyder “promoted small-scale projects whose aim was the fostering of the sense of community and sense of place. He has always seen the future of democracy in small, decentralized communities” (“Jazz” 86).

According to Snyder, a true community starts with people who share the place. Place is one of the oldest ways in which people organize themselves into communities, which is also a completely natural act because “[u]ltimately we can all lay claim to the term *native* and the songs and dances, the beads and feathers, and the profound responsibilities that go with it. We are all indigenous to this planet” (Snyder, *PIS* 250). Furthermore, becoming a real native naturally makes people “act as gentle stewards of the earth’s community of being” (*PIS* 32). He repeatedly states that this wise stewardship means that people should “find [their] place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there” (*PIS* 43). He says so because becoming a native of a place assumes that when you live in a certain place and you get to know it, then you develop a certain affection for it, so then, naturally, you care about it and prevent it from being damaged.

However, apart from the obvious ecological and economic benefits of becoming a native of a place, there is yet another, spiritual benefit: “Because by being in a place, we get the largest sense of community. We learn that community is of spiritual benefit and health for everyone, that ongoing working relationships and shared concerns, music, poetry, and stories all evolve into the shared practice of a set values, visions, and quests. That’s what the spiritual path really is” (Snyder, *TRW* 141). This passage reminds one of the words of Dōgen: “When you find your place, practice begins” (qtd. in Tan, 259). So for Snyder re-inhabitation does not only refer to “the tiny number of persons who come out of the industrial

societies . . . and then start to turn back to the land, back to place,” but he adds that “it is a moral and spiritual choice as well” (*PIS* 190–191).

If one wants to become a native of a place, the first step required is to get to know the place where one lives: “You know whether or not a person knows where he is by whether or not he knows the plants. By whether or not he knows what the soils and waters can do” (Snyder, *TRW* 69). Snyder acknowledges here that to know the plants is the basis for knowing the place, since plants are at the very bottom of the food chain that supports all other life-forms. Snyder gives the reader some accounts of his own journeys exploring the land surrounding his house, such as in the poems “The Wild Mushroom” (*TI* 46) or “Ethnobotany” (*TI* 51).

However, knowing the land intellectually is not enough; it should involve “one’s body, commitment, time, labor, walking” (Snyder, *TRW* 23). And to give it a yet deeper dimension, one should not omit to “consult the Indian mythology and ritual and magic of the area and try to understand why it was they saw certain figures as potent” (Snyder, *TRW* 16). To put it differently, one should try to listen to the spirits of the land. Anybody can do that if they stay long enough. Snyder cites a Crow elder who said: “I think if people stay somewhere long enough—even white people—the spirits will begin to speak to them. It’s the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren’t lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will influence them” (*POW* 39). Only then one can claim to be really educated: “To be well educated is to have learned the songs, proverbs, stories, sayings, myths (and technologies) that come with this experiencing of the non-human members of the local ecological community” (Snyder, *POW* 18).

Snyder’s vision of a spiritual bond to the land stems from the Native Americans’ respect for and knowledge of their land: “There is something to be learned from the Native American people about where we all are. It can’t be learned from anybody else” (Snyder, *PIS* 156). He admires how “[t]he people of precivilized times or places knew their specific watershed ecosystems and mastered those details with beautiful and empirical precision” (Snyder, *PIS* 96). However, he is not so naïve as to believe that we could return to the old ways. Snyder’s idea is not to return to the primitive, but rather to search out some ways to regain the consciousness of sharing, of being a partner rather than an exploiter: “Although it’s clear that we cannot again have seamless primitive cultures, or the purity of the archaic, we can have neighborhood and community” (Snyder, *TRW* 161).

5. Kitkitdizze: Snyder’s place in space

The use of the term ‘place’ as opposed to ‘space’ is not accidental here. They illustrate a different degree of man’s intimate relationship to the land. Snyder brings this important difference to our attention in the title of his book *A Place in Space*.

In his pursuit of leading a life spiritually bound to a particular place, Snyder settled in the Sierra foothills. “Gradually, he began to concentrate more and more on the specific needs of his home region and got involved in community-based projects aimed at the preservation of the natural environment” (Kopecký, *California Crucible*, 103). One of those projects was building his house Kitkitdizze. The way of living in Kitkitdizze is an example of living with an intimate understanding of the place. His self-built ecological house stands on a piece of land that had previously been destroyed by extensive mining during the Gold

Rush, but Snyder recovered it so that it would return to its original state. He employed features of local Native American buildings and used local materials for the construction so that it would be in symbiosis and interrelation with the place where it is located.

The philosophy of Kitkitdizze is in sharp contrast with those “ex acid-heads from the cities / Converted to Guru or Swami”, who “Do penance with shiny / Dopey eyes, and quit eating meat,” yet they fail to hear the song of the place (Snyder, *TI*, “The Call of the Wild” 21). Such people retreat from cities to live in the country, yet they fail to live where they are: their “oil-heated / Geodesic domes” are “stuck like warts / In the woods”—and even their dreams are displaced, dreams “of India, of / forever blissful sexless highs” (Snyder, *TI*, “The Call of the Wild” 21).

Snyder’s use of the old Native American names such as Kitkitdizze for his house, and Turtle Island to refer to the whole American continent, is also of significance. It clearly indicates that he wants to lead a reinhabitory life, in symbiotic relationship to that place, which also means taking into account its history, character and mythological significance. In his works he refers to places with these indigenous names, for he wants the readers to look at them from another perspective. For example, by calling the continent Turtle Island, which draws on the indigenous creation myth, he then speaks about a continent which does not have a 200-year nor a 500-year history, but a history covering hundreds of millions of years. In this way he wants his readers to realize where they really are.

Accordingly, Snyder’s action supports what he has been putting forward in his works, namely that it is man who should adapt to the place, not the other way round. Thus Kitkitdizze is a model of a life committed to a place that seeks a spiritual and ecological harmony with the land. And it is this commitment to the place where, as Snyder believes, a gradual path toward the revolution of the whole culture starts: “To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and a community, in time, grows a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore culture” (Snyder, *PIS* 250).

6. Sangha: the community of all beings

Sangha is a Buddhist term meaning a community of monks who are devoted to spiritual practice, separated from normal society. However, Snyder has deliberately expanded the original meaning of this term. He does not like the idea of a purely ‘intentional’ community, a community gathered around an idea, a single purpose, or—in Buddhist terms—a community that only ‘sits’ together. A real community emerges when people realize that they are going to live in a place “for a thousand years or more” (Snyder, *TRW* 117 and 140–141).

Snyder’s equivalent for sangha is “Village Council of All Beings” (*PIS* 74–84). For him it means a community which “includes all living beings” (*TRW* 136) asserting in this way that wholeness and health of human life can only be achieved in a community which also includes the Earth’s non-human processes and entities (Elder 34). Snyder suggests a new kind of society of “[m]en, women and children—all of whom together hope to follow the timeless path of love and wisdom, in affectionate company with the sky, winds, clouds, trees, waters, animals and grasses” (Snyder, *EHH* 116). He adds that this sense of community is daily lived by indigenous cultures, whereas Christian and Buddhist monks

have been trying to achieve this spiritual ascesis by leaving the world, which is artificial and cannot be equalled to it (*EHH* 121).

The Buddhists as well as the Native Americans teach respect for all life and for wild systems. They know that a lack of respect for growing, living things soon leads to the lack of respect for humans too (Chief Standing Bear, qtd. in Yip 80). Snyder, being aware of the fact that “a human life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems” (*PIS* 54), suggests that “[l]ove and compassion should extend to animals, rocks, dirt” (*TRW* 4). In fact, there is nothing unnatural about it as “we are many selves looking at each other, through the same eye” (Snyder, *PIS* 187).

Native Americans do not see human people as more important than anything else. In their tradition, all beings must share the land equally. Such an attitude is opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition where God gave the man the dominion over land and other living beings: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (*King James* 1.26, italics added).⁸ This passage from the Book of Genesis has become the subject of heated debates between deep ecologists on one side and Christians on the other. Ecologists consider the dominion and feeling of supremacy to be the foundation of exploitative consciousness and ecological crisis in the Western world. Christians, on the other hand, argue that the passage was not meant to be a call to arms against nature but a plea for wise stewardship.⁹

Following in the footsteps of Native Americans, Snyder does not see a human being as higher than any other animate or inanimate thing. He does not exclude humans from the animal realm; he claims that “[m]an is a beautiful animal” (*EHH* 120). By contrast, he calls other non-human beings “people”, just like the indigenous people call them—as people off on various trips: “*Solidarity*. The People. / Standing Tree People! / Flying Bird People! / Swimming Sea People! / Four-legged two-legged, people!” (*TI*, “Mother Earth: Her Whales” 48).

Snyder provides other examples of how the ancient is reminiscent of people’s kinship with animals, now from the realm of Eskimos: “The animal icons of Inupiaq people (‘Eskimos’) . . . have a tiny human face sewn into the fur, or under feathers, or carved on the back or breast or even inside the eye, peeping out . . . It is a way of saying that each creature is a spirit with an intelligence as brilliant as our own” (*POW* 20). On the other hand, neither do the Eastern philosophies exclude humanity from nature: “[t]he Buddhist iconographers hide a little animal face in the hair of the human to remind us that we see with archetypal wilderness eyes as well” (Snyder, *POW* 20).

In Zen tradition all beings, animate or inanimate, are considered to be endowed with Buddha-nature so their lives must be equally respected. This corresponds closely with the Native American basic notion of animism or the belief that everything is endowed with spirit. In fact, Snyder admitted having experienced a kind of animistic vision: “I have had a very moving, profound perception a few times that everything was alive . . . and that on one level there is no hierarchy of qualities in life—that the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life, say, of an Einstein” (*TRW* 17).

Snyder compares a community, where all the living entities are equally valuable, to the Buddhist mandala—which in Sanskrit means circle—where all entities depicted are equally important for the mandala as a whole. In terms of energy flow it is hierarchical, but from the standpoint of the whole, all of its members are equal (*PIS* 76). “Any single thing or complex of things / *literally* as great as the whole” (Snyder, *EHH* 31).

7. The magic of energy sharing: the food web

Snyder is well aware of the fact that community does not only mean sharing of place, but also sharing of the food it provides. The key process of the system is energy exchange, or the issue of maintenance of life. In fact, quite a significant part of Snyder’s work is dedicated to answering the question, “Where am I in this food-chain?” (*EHH* 32). If one turns to Buddhism to see how it relates to food, one will encounter the First Precept of *ahimsa* or causing no unnecessary harm, which is against hurting and taking life.¹⁰ This precept is commonly understood as an encouragement toward vegetarianism. However, the question remains: what is the minimum harm to be caused in order to sustain life?

Snyder does not identify with vegetarianism in the fullest sense. He has grappled with this question a lot because, as he argues, this precept was settled in an agrarian world, whereas he has been living in an area without adequate water where eating fish or animals is an economic necessity. Although he had been an on-and-off vegetarian, he realized that the distinction ‘vegetarian/nonvegetarian’ is too simple. During his studies in Japan, Snyder saw that some Zen priests and monks ate fish outside a monastery, so he once asked his master, a strict vegetarian, about it. The master then replied that it had been his own way of practice and that each person had to take the First Precept as a deep challenge and find his own way through life with it (Snyder, *PIS* 69). And so, it has proved to be one of existential kōans¹¹ for Snyder to solve for himself.

Consequently, Snyder looked at the solutions of societies which have always had to rely on much nonplant food, given their geographic latitude. What he found was that both primitive societies as well as Buddhists teach gratitude toward food, acknowledging that it represents a loss of life. “Primary people have had their own ways of trying to understand the precept of nonharming. They knew that taking life required gratitude and care” (Snyder, *POW* 183–184). They understand that “Other beings . . . do not mind being killed and eaten as food, but they expect us to say please, and thank you, and they hate to see themselves wasted” (Snyder, *POW* 20).

Such gratitude toward food is quite explicitly conveyed in Snyder’s work. He says grace and does a little meditation on his food before meals: “We offered our respects and gratitude to the fish and the Sea Gods daily, and ate them with real love, admiring their extraordinarily beautiful, perfect little bodies” (*EHH* 139). He explains that “The grace we say clears our hearts and guides the children and welcome the guest, all at the same time” (*POW* 184). So in his house the family say a Buddhist grace: “We venerate the Three Treasures [teachers, the wild, and friends] / And are thankful for this meal / The work of many people / And the sharing of other forms of life” (*POW* 185).

Thus on the question of vegetarianism he takes the side of the primitive hunter who believes that humility and gratitude expiate the blame for eating meat or taking furs, although it seems that for Snyder both of the attitudes are compatible (the attitude of a Zen

Buddhist as well as of a primitive hunter), and both are influences in his poems (Almon 85–86).

The issue of killing animals is further reflected in many of his poems, for example in “One Should Not Talk to a Skilled Hunter about What is Forbidden by the Buddha” (*TI* 66), or in “The Dead by the Side of the Road” (*TI* 7–8). The Buddhist and Native American visions in Snyder’s poems are more likely to reinforce than contradict each other. Both traditions condemn thoughtless slaughtering and killing for comfort or sport, which is a different matter than eating to sustain life. The poem “Steak” (*TI* 10) rejects such killing and criticizes the waste of animals practiced by modern agribusiness. A key statement in this poem is “slowly thinking / with the rhythm of their / breathing,” which reminds readers that all animals are sentient, as they are portrayed as thinking beings.

Another example of the author’s disapproval of people killing animals for mere gain or comfort can be found in the poem “The Call of the Wild” (*TI* 21). The poem presents a sad portrayal of people who have coyotes trapped because they make noise, and who sell their cedars because some logger tells them that “trees are full of bugs” (Almon 86). Peiffer explains what drives such people to that deeds: “Such folks do not know themselves, nor do they know much of the natural world around them . . . The logger’s appeal to the people’s fear of the wild (including insects) succeeds because they had not explored or studied or tarried in their woods long enough to know for themselves how beautiful the trees were. So they lost what could have helped enlighten them” (151–152).

Snyder mentions two important reasons why people are willing to sacrifice their environment: not knowing the place and the fear of the inner wilderness. His work reveals a powerful link between the fear of the outer wilderness and our own inner wilderness area. He believes that behind the destruction of the outer wilderness lies the fear of the wilderness within, of the unconscious. As Erban puts it, “The devastation of the inner nature goes hand in hand with the outer, ecological devastation. We cannot behave ecologically unless we reconcile with our inner nature and make it part and parcel of our identity” (“Konec přírody” 31, translation mine). Peiffer confirms this suggestion in her explanation: “People who fear the unknown in themselves also try to eliminate mystery in the world because it reminds them of their own fearsome wildness” (153).

In Snyder’s view, being part of the food-chain “acknowledge[s] the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world” (*PIS* 70). He sees eating flesh as inevitable and natural: “A key transaction in natural system is energy exchange, which includes the food chain and the food webs, and this means that many living beings live by eating other beings. Our bodies—or the energy they represent—are thus continually being passed around. We are all guests at the feast, and we are also the meal!” (Snyder, *PIS* 76). Everything that lives eats food and is food in return, and Snyder affirms that people should not try to escape from it, but rather join in Indra’s net.¹² Barnhill argues that Snyder ecologizes the Buddhist notion of interpenetration of the Indra’s net and Buddhacizes the notion of ecosystem: “The implication is that the ecological net of Indra is made not of jewels but of flesh: that of plants, animals and our own (“Great Earth Sangha” 189).

Snyder acknowledges that biological desire and need drive everything in this world. Thus living depends on eating each other: “Food chain: salts-diatoms-copepods-her-ring-fishermen-us.eating” (Snyder, *EHH* 31). And for Snyder, this eating each other is a sacramental act rather than a brutal necessity. His acknowledgement that we will all

be eventually 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” (Snyder, *POW* 19). It is, in fact, an act of joy, an act of loving: “the joy of all the beings / is in being / older and tougher and eaten / up” (Snyder, *TI*, “Night Herons” 36). Snyder once even said that after his death he hoped it would be by being eaten by a bear that he could reenter the food chain (Laughlin 247).

Those who cannot accept this natural exchange of energy cut themselves from the very life, from the real communion of beings:

If you think of eating and killing plants or animals to eat as an unfortunate quirk in the nature of the universe, then you cut yourself from connecting with the sacramental energy-exchange, evolutionary mutual-sharing aspect of life. And if we talk about evolution of consciousness, we also have to talk about evolution of bodies, which takes place by that sharing of energies, passing it back and forth, which is done by literally eating each other. And that’s what communion is. (Snyder, *TRW* 89)

Snyder believes that such an approach is one of the greatest contributions of the primitive cultures because it solves the critical problems of life and death in relating to food. Snyder encapsulated this approach in the formula: “You sing to it, you pray to it, and then you enjoy it” (Snyder, *TRW* 89). Hence his following remark: “As Buddhists we have something yet to learn on that score” (*PIS* 70).

It must be pointed out that Snyder has been fascinated by the hunting tradition of the indigenous people. For them it was not a mere question of food supply; the hunters took part in a deep spiritual practice as they had to pray and become pure. They had to establish a relationship with the hunted animal and ask it to sacrifice itself for the sake of people (Freke 46). Steuding argues that if properly undertaken, hunting is holy and sacred to Snyder (80). The ancient forms of hunting therefore did not consist in man’s manifestation of his lordship over other non-human beings, but rather it meant taking direct part in the life of animals and being aware of his own dependance on them (Erban, “Kulturní pluralismus” 34, compare Steuding 79).

Snyder describes that real hunting requires tuning up one’s consciousness with the hunted animal, “like in love or hunting, you must become one with the other” (Snyder, *EHH* 139). That is why Snyder states that “[t]hey didn’t hunt with tools, they hunted with their minds” (*TRW* 107). Hunting is not thus portrayed as a brutal act but rather as a compassionate deal: “Hunting magic is designed to bring the game to you—the creature who has heard your song, witnessed your sincerity, and out of compassion comes within your range” (Snyder, *EHH* 120). Such a compassionate deal is portrayed in “This Poem Is for Deer” where the author must undergo purification and penance before he is worthy of the compassion of the deer: “Deer don’t want to die for me. / I’ll drink sea-water / Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain / Until the deer come down to die / in pity for my pain” (*M&T*, “Hunting 9” 28).

The act of hunting is even compared to the state of meditation, as they share common features: “the necessities of identity, intuition, stillness, that go with hunting make it seem as though shamanism and yoga and meditation may have their roots in the requirements of the hunter” (Snyder, *EHH* 139). It is no wonder then that Snyder has been criticized,

particularly by other Buddhists, for writing poems about eating meat and killing animals. However, as Murphy points out, his poems do not promote hunting but rather they show that if a person wants to eat meat, there is a right way to do it and there are wrong ways (*A Place* 115).

8. Conclusion

The essay has manifested the complexity and coherence of Snyder's perception of community. It has been mentioned that Snyder compares the nature of a community to the shape of a circle because an important feature of a circle is that it connects. In the Far East, as well as in Native American spirituality, the circle has always had a spiritual significance. In the Native American view, all the vital processes of the Earth are believed to occur in circles—Earth itself and other planets are round, birds make round nests, seasons come and go in circles, even human life proceeds like a circle. In Hinduism as well as in Buddhism the circles are to be found in the omnipresent mandalas that represent the oneness in the universe. A community, too, is a circle that links the human with the non-human world. Snyder argues that a community rooted in place and including all the living beings is the secret of success if people want their children to be here. Despite its complexity, his answer to the principal question of how to be in this world is simple enough: “stay together / learn the flowers / go light” (*TI*, “For the Children” 86).

Notes

¹ See for example Bob Steuding: *Gary Snyder* (Boston: Twayne, 1976) p. 66.

² *No Nature* (New York: New Directions, 1992) is also the title of one of Snyder's books.

³ Bakhtin makes explicit the difference between relational and alienational otherness by employing the different Russian words for “Another” in Appendix II in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). He also addresses the issue in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

⁴ See Patrick D. Murphy: *Literature, Nature and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), and David L. Barnhill: “An Interwoven World: Gary Snyder's Cultural Ecosystem” (*Worldviews* 6.2, 2002) pp. 111–144. Barnhill recognizes ten main points of difference when approaching nature as Other or Another, which is summarized in an online article on <<http://www.uwosh.edu/facstaff/barnhill/490/other>>.

⁵ The so called Gaia hypothesis was first presented by James Lovelock in 1979, postulating that the biosphere was a self-regulating entity. It did not receive serious attention from the scientists at that time. It did receive closer attention, though, from ecologists. What was meant to be a scientific hypothesis was gratefully interpreted as the romantic Mother Earth by some ecologists. For a more comprehensive analysis see Erazim Kohák: *The Green Halo: A Bird's-Eye View of Ecological Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), pp. 129–135.

⁶ Snyder's interest in primitive cultures is visible in his work most obviously via his references to shamanism and mythology. It should be noted that he is not a layman in this sphere due to the fact that he graduated in anthropology. Therefore any possible deviations from established theories are not due to his ignorance, but rather due to his own beliefs and approach to the issue.

⁷ For more about the shift to localization see Reidar Almas, Geoffrey Lawrence, Ed. *Globalization, Localization And Sustainable Livelihoods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), Colin Hines, *Localization: A Global Manifesto* (London: Earthscan, 2000).

⁸ Bearing in mind the wide range of different versions of the Bible available, I have decided to make use of the King James version as it is the most widely used English translation of the Bible.

⁹ Lynn White in his influential study “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (1967) was the first to squarely blame Christianity for its exploitative approach to nature. Although there have been green initiatives among Christians, associated with personalities such as Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Albert Schweitzer, Teilhard de Chardin or even Pope John Paul II, it cannot be denied that the Bible is more anthropocentrically oriented in comparison with other spiritual traditions. Protestantism especially is regarded as a strongly anti-nature stream within Christianity, in particular the Puritans and Quakers (Librová 30). The basis of their worldview was their work ethic, which emphasized hard work that would transform nature into useful products. Having a rest, observation of art or admiration of nature was regarded as a waste of time and even a sin. “This negative approach to nature has been inherited in American society for a long time” (Librová 30).

¹⁰ “Ahimsa,” “Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms,” Site created and designed by Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc., 5 May 2010 <http://buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b_gloss2.htm>.

¹¹ Kōan (Japanese) study is one of the three principal methods of Zen. It is a type of challenge that prompts its students to step outside of traditional concepts of dualism, language and rationalism, and beyond conventional truths, to ultimate truth or awakening. The student is teased and frustrated into relinquishing his hold on logic. The most typical example of kōan is: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Through repeated failure to solve it, the student gradually realizes that the kōan cannot be solved logically. It makes the student understand, to see in a different way. The first kōan given to Snyder—that took him a year and a half to solve—was to show what his face looked like before his parents met.

¹² Indra’s net refers to the Buddhist metaphor of a jeweled net.

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