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## “The Only Way Out Is In”: Transcending Modernity and Embracing Interconnectedness in Gary Snyder and Kenneth White

# ABSTRACT

It seems that in order to overcome the current ecological crisis we need a new (global?) narrative. If the narrative of “progress” that has functioned as one of the Western cultural myths is linked to the notions of modernity and Enlightenment, then perhaps we need a new vision of modernity and “enlightenment.” This change might become part of a paradigm shift associated with a new view of ecology and the natural world, as proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh, the father of engaged Buddhism in the West. This paper aims to show how Gary Snyder and Kenneth White, two like-minded world-renowned poets and environmental activists, contribute to a new cultural paradigm: transmodernity. The non-dualism and Eastern philosophy that White and Snyder find valuable represent a rejection of Western modernity, and its cult of progress and telos. The emphasis will be placed on the importance of the Hua-Yen Buddhist philosophy, centred upon the metaphor of “Indra’s net,” and the ways in which it informs Snyder’s and White’s writing and Earth-centred activism. Snyder’s Buddhist anarchism is nowadays, more than ever before, intertwined with deep ecology. White’s radical geopoetics is becoming more and more popular, showing that the paradigm is shifting. As I will argue, the impact of “Indra’s net” on the dynamics of this gradual process is undeniable.

**Keywords:** transmodernity, Gary Snyder, Kenneth White, interbeing, geopoetics, engaged Buddhism.

“Mind is fluid, nature is porous, and both biologically  
and culturally we are always fully part of the whole.”  
(Snyder, “A Village Council of All Beings,” *A Place in Space* 81)

“Delusion is seeing all things from the perspective of the self.  
Enlightenment is seeing the self from the perspective  
of the myriad things of the universe.”  
(Dōgen 77)

“I stand neither in the wilderness  
nor fairyland  
but in the fold  
of a green hill”  
(Jamie 131)

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## AFTER “NATURE”?

The theme of transcending Western ideology will be central throughout this essay. In his 2015 book *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy offers an insight which connects Snyder’s and White’s writing on radical geopoetics and the need to go beyond the paradigm of Western culture:

The history of environmental lawmaking suggests that people are best able to change their ways when they find two things at once in nature: something to fear, a threat they must avoid, and also something to love, a quality they can admire or respect, and which they can do their best to honor. The first impulse, of fear, can be rendered in purely human-centered terms, as a matter of avoiding environmental crisis. The second impulse, of love, engages animist intuitions and carries us toward post-humanism, which is perhaps just another name for an enriched humanism. Either impulse can stay the human hand, but the first stops it just short of being burnt or broken. The second keeps the hand poised, extended in greeting or in an offer of peace. This gesture is the beginning of collaboration, among people but also beyond us, in building our next home. (288)

The second attitude—motivated by love, affirmation and care—might also be called the attitude of “interbeing.” This term has entered the Anglophone world thanks to the teaching of the late Thich Nhat Nanh, a world-renowned Buddhist Zen master, poet, author, scholar, and activist for social change, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thich Nhat Hanh established hundreds of meditation centres around the world, but in the 1970s he moved to France,

and ever since that time he lived in the Plum Village monastery near Bordeaux, and served as a Dharma teacher in Europe, America, and Asia, practising and (thus) transmitting the philosophy of engaged Buddhism. In his view, Buddhist precepts must be practiced in the form of working for society (hence his tradition is often referred to as one of the schools of engaged Buddhism), particularly in the context of promoting peace, and saving the environment.

Nhat Hanh has written extensively on the philosophy of “interbeing.” In his article “The Order of Interbeing,” he introduces the core of his teaching which can be seen as a practical application of the *Heart Sūtra* and *Hua-Yen Sūtra*:

To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. If we want to be in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life—the snowflakes, the moonlight, the songs of the birds, the beautiful flowers—and also the suffering—hunger, disease, torture, and oppression. Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality. (Nhat Hanh 205–06)

*Tiep* means “being in touch with” and “continuing”; *hien* means “realizing” and “making it here and now” (205). In order to “inter-be,” to use one of Nhat Hanh’s favourite verbs, we need to “bring and express our insights into real life” (206). And as only “the present moment is real and available to us” (206), understanding and compassion must be seen and touched in this very moment. Nhat Hanh stresses that “[t]he secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now. There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way” (207). I would argue that Nhat Hanh’s teaching is very close to Snyder’s *tzu-jan*—a concept which continuously appears in Snyder’s essays: “Tao seen as the ten thousand individual things we encounter in *contact*” (Hinton 135)—and his practice of the Wild: mindful affirmation of the moment, being open to what happens, being ready to welcome any obstacles, being *in contact* (see Kocot, “A Celebration of the Wild” 102–03). In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder quotes Dōgen who says: “When you forget the self, you become one with the ten thousand things” (160), and he adds: “[T]en thousand things means all of the phenomenal world. When we are open that world can occupy us” (160). Being open and *in contact* also means that we are not afraid to look within in order to find root causes of the problems we find around us. At some point of the

practice the distinction between within and without naturally disappears, but the path of non-duality needs to become our daily reality first.

For Thich Nhat Hanh and for Snyder, the web of relationships in an ecosystem resembles the Hua-yen Buddhist image of Indra's net, where, as David Landis Barnhill puts it,

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 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 as whole. The jewels interpenetrate each other and, in Huayan's sense of the term, they share the same identity. Yet each one contains the others in its own unique way in its distinctive position, and so they are different. This type of identity does not imply being identical or involve merging into an undifferentiated One. ("Relational Holism" 86–87)

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Indra's net is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all reality. The *Hua Yen Sūtra* (Sanskrit *The Avatamsaka Sūtra*) is one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, rendered in English as *Flower Garland Sūtra*, *Flower Adornment Sūtra*, or *Flower Ornament Scripture*. It is particularly important for Zen and Ch'an Buddhists. Cook notes that without the practice and realization of Zen, Hua Yen philosophy "remains mere intellectual fun, never a vibrant reality" (26). One of the ways of making it a vibrant reality is to acknowledge and affirm the interdependence of all the elements of the net, to see the other as a reflection of oneself. This practice has been one of the most important legacies of Thich Nhat Hanh's life-long service for humanity.

"The Way Out Is In," the phrase figuring in the title of my essay, comes from Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching but, interestingly, it is also the name of the podcast made last year (2021) by the Plum Village's abbot, Brother Phap Huu, and Jo Confino, a lay Buddhist practitioner and journalist. This recent podcast, featuring Sister True Dedication (a former journalist and monastic Dharma Teacher ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh), discussed Thich Nhat Hanh's recent book, entitled *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (2021). Here is how the author describes the need for change of our individual minds so that a collective change may follow:

When you wake up and you see that the Earth is not just the environment, the Earth *is* us, you touch the nature of interbeing. And at that moment you can have *real* communication with the Earth. . . . We have to wake up together. And if we wake up together, then we have a chance. Our way of living our life and planning our future has led us into this situation. And

now we need to look deeply to find a way out, not only as individuals, but as a collective, a species. (2, 4–5)

Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism, practiced in the field of ecology since the 1970s, is very much in line with the message of Kenneth White, the founding father of the geopoetics project. On the website of The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics (founded in 1995 by Tony McManus and others, affiliated to the International Institute of Geopoetics founded by White in 1989) we can read the following:

If, around 1978, I began to talk of “geopoetics,” it was for two reasons. On the one hand, it was becoming more and more obvious that the earth (the biosphere) was in danger and that ways, both deep and efficient, would have to be worked out in order to protect it. On the other hand, I had always been of the persuasion that the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from a plunge into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the lines of the world.

Since then, the word has been picked up and used, in various contexts. The moment has come to concentrate those currents of energy into a unitary field.

That is why we have founded the Institute of Geopoetics. (White, “Inaugural Text”)

I would argue that White’s vision of “geopoetics”—a responsible and mindful attitude of “plunging into biospheric space”—can be seen as an important voice in the world-wide discussion of the Anthropocene. Concentrating the currents of energy into a unitary field translates into a transdisciplinary (scientific and artistic) dialogue which in White’s view might offer deep and efficient ways of protecting the Earth. The history of the geopoetic movement shows that when scientists and artists engage in collaborative action, new and alternative ways of looking at our existence here on Earth emerge. What needs to be emphasized here is that, contrary to various “schools” of the Anthropocene, man is not posited at the centre of the picture. Man is seen as an important part of the system, but the positive change that is envisioned is predicated on the philosophy of non-duality, of showing respect for the sentient and non-sentient beings here on Earth. This is where White is at one with Gary Snyder and his call for Earth Democracy, a “place-based sense of communion where all beings are interconnected and all beings matter” (Wirth xxiii). For Snyder, this communion seems impossible to achieve without the cultivation of a practice of peace, and in that aspect his vision is very much in line with that of Thich Nhat Hanh.

The need to raise awareness about our unity with nature is of crucial importance, especially in the West. As Brother Phap Huu puts it in the aforementioned podcast, “there is no separation between us and the environment; we are the environment. How we live, how we act, how we are *is already a contribution*” (emphasis mine). That is the essence of deep ecology. “We should fall in love with the Earth,” Sister True Dedication adds in the same podcast, then new possibilities of non-reductive action emerge. Looking deeply means continuous training in being rooted and grounded in the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh stresses that our attitude of “interbeing” and reclaimed agency in the here-and-now form sustainable ways to save the planet. Strikingly similar views have been shared by Gary Snyder and Kenneth White since the 1960s. Their insights as poets and environmental activists can be appreciated for their innovative and often radical take on the issue of saving our planet. It could be argued that Snyder, as an engaged Buddhist, and White as an educator and creator of groups (clearly disassociated from any religious practice), have been laying down a strong foundation for the peaceful and sustainable existence of future generations for half a century.

As Norman Bissell recalls, White created the Jargon Group, “devoted to ‘cultural revolution’” (25), in Glasgow in the early 1960s, and in France, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he created the Groupe Feuillage, then the group he called The Feathered Egg, “to indicate a potential in society that hadn’t yet found its full wings” (Bissell 25). And in 1989 he established the International Institute of Geopoetics. From the very beginning of his career as a poet, academic, and researcher, he has embraced Western and Far Eastern cultures, aiming at a creative intercultural dialogue. Even though his writing features hundreds of quotes from Buddhist or Taoist masters, White quite openly rejects religious discourse. In the introduction to *Le Plateau de l’albatros*, for instance, he states:

[O]ne could say that it [geopoetics] concerns a new mental cartography, a conception of life disengaged at last from ideologies, myths, religions etc., and the search for a language capable of expressing this other way of being in the world, but making it clear from the start that this is a question of a rapport with the earth (energies, rhythms, forms) not a subjugation to Nature. (qtd. in McManus 74)

In White’s writing this rapport is often associated with the affirmation of life, the joy of life force, which, as Thich Nhat Hanh stresses, is part and parcel of the process of working for our planet. In his view, appreciation of and finding joy in what we still have might give us energy needed in the struggle for protecting the planet in our neighborhoods (*Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* 54, 77).

When we read White’s message in Jargon Paper 1, it is not difficult to see mental affinities between him and Thich Nhat Hanh: “[I]t is the animation to life with which we are concerned, and with those more-than-literary books that pull the doors of the mind off their hinges: releasing the spirit” (qtd. in Bissell 30). Interestingly, in his 1990 speech entitled “Earth Day and the War Against Imagination,” Snyder also addresses the issue of spirit: he provides a whole list of losses we are facing, and among soil loss, the rapid loss of biological diversity, loss of local cultures, skills and knowledges, he mentions “loss of heart and soul,” and he adds: “This is serious! To lose our life in nature is to lose freshness, diversity, surprise, the Other—with all its tiny lessons and its huge spaces” (*A Place in Space* 59). For White, the quality of aliveness and subtle poetic spirit needed in the process of changing the world is essential. In the already quoted Jargon Paper he writes: “[I]t is not for nothing (i.e. because they have ‘artistic leanings’) that the Taoist and Zen masters who have arrived at Nature (Cosmos-Chaos), are also poets. It is because they are men alive, and exalting in their aliveness” (qtd. in Bissell 30).

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Obviously, one does not need to add that Thich Nhat Nanh’s and Snyder’s main shared point of reference (and reverence), Eihei Dōgen (1200–53), is also a poet. It takes poetic genius to compose passages in prose which read like poetry. The following one comes from Snyder’s essay on Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters Sūtra.” To make matters more intertextual, the opening paragraph in Snyder’s poetic essay is also the opening paragraph in Dōgen’s sūtra:

The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. Each, abiding in its own phenomenal expression, realizes completeness. Because mountains and waters have been active since before the eon of emptiness, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are liberated and realized. (qtd. in Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* 104)

For Snyder, the image of “mountains and rivers” and their movement (“The blue mountains are constantly walking”) is rhizomatically linked with the theme of liberation and self-realization (see Kocot, “A Celebration of the Wild” 101).

Kenneth White’s favourite literary persona, the “intellectual nomad,” walks along the path which leaves behind the “Motorway of Western Civilisation,” the “motorway” of “Platonic idealism, Aristotelian classification, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, Cartesianism, Hegelian historicism” (Fazzini 42), with their more or less implicit idea of progress. As White himself puts it, the intellectual nomad (a term used, in passing, by

Spengler in his *Decline of the West*, and whose scope White was to develop), “is engaged, outside the glitzy or glauzy compound of late modernity, in an area of complex co-ordinates. He is trying to move out of pathological psycho-history, along uncoded paths, into fresh existential, poetic space” (*The Wanderer and His Charts* vi). The in-betweenness, processuality and movement are of crucial importance here:

walking in the stillness  
 halfway between the Old World and the New  
 trying to move in deeper  
 ever deeper  
 into the white world  
 neither old nor new. (White, *The Bird Path* 187)

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For White, walking in stillness means discovering a new world, the white world of interbeing; to enter this new territory means to leave behind the old and new worlds loosely associated with Europe and the Americas, the roots of Western civilization.

Snyder also openly dismisses Western civilization and its “ideals.” In an essay “Energy Is Eternal Delight” (1974), he writes:

For several centuries western civilisation has had a priapic drive for material accumulation, continual extensions of political and economic power, termed “progress.” In the Judeo-Christian worldview humans are seen as working out their ultimate destinies (paradise? perdition?) with planet earth as the stage for the drama—trees and animals mere props, nature as vast supply depot. (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 53)

For Snyder, the Western concept of “progress” is nothing more than political and economic power struggle and the cult of materialism. He sees the root cause of the problem in the Judeo-Christian ideologies which place emphasis on the vision of the afterlife, and dismiss the importance of the here and now, seeing it as a mere “prelude” to the future life. Is there any way out? Yes, Snyder is saying. The way out is in:

The longing for growth is not wrong. The nub of the problem now is how to flip over, as in jujitsu, the magnificent growth energy of modern civilisation into a nonacquisitive search for deeper knowledge of self and nature. Self-nature. Mother Nature. If people come to realize that there are many nonmaterial, nondestructive paths of growth—of the highest and most fascinating order—it would help dampen the common fear that a steady state economy would mean deadly stagnation. (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 53)

These words were written in 1974 (one year after the *Limits to Growth* report), and published in Snyder’s most famous book of poems, *Turtle Island*. In a way, they are a continuation of Snyder’s thought-provoking article called “Buddhist Anarchism” (1961), reprinted as “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution” in 1968. Here is what Snyder says: “[T]he 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. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (*prajña*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and morality (*śīla*)” (*Earth, House, Hold* 92). For Snyder, morality means practicing wisdom and meditation through personal example and responsible action for the benefit of “the true community (*sangha*) of ‘all beings’” (*Earth, House, Hold* 92; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 181). In his “Earth Day” speech (1990), there is a meaningful shift in tone, with an emphasis on non-ethical attitudes and culturally justified irresponsibility: “There are socially and politically entrenched *attitudes* and *institutions* that reinforce our misuse of nature and our cruelty toward each other. Our major civilisations objectify and commodify the natural world” (*A Place in Space* 61). This is where Snyder’s emotional tone changes: “I could say that this is bad metaphysics, but it is worse than that: it is a failure of imagination. Failures of compassion and charity are failures of imagination” (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 61). The Western concept of “progress” is seen here as a negation of genuine progress, based on compassion and working for a common good.

One could argue that Snyder’s vision of a new society and new collective consciousness is gaining momentum. We can view it as part of a larger cultural shift—a transmodern revolution-revelation of quantum physics and quantum activism as proposed by Amit Goswami, Willis Harman’s Transcendental Monism, and Irena Ateljevic’s global relational consciousness, all of which bear striking resemblance to Buddhist teaching of totality, emptiness, and interdependent existence (Cook 3, 17; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 179). The next section of my essay will explore these interconnections.

## TRANSMODERN (R)EVOLUTION AND THE PATHLESS PATH

Both Snyder and White can be seen as two major figures involved in the transmodern turn. According to Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, one of the most recognized proponents of the new paradigm, we can define transmodernity as a synthesis of modernity and postmodernity, even

though some critics see it as a form of counterreaction to modernism or postmodernism (Rodríguez Magda; see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 178–79). Paul C. Vitz offers a list of implications associated with transmodernity (they are further explored in an interdisciplinary book entitled *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis*, edited by and Vitz and Susan M. Felch, featuring contributions by experts in the fields of literature, biology, theology, philosophy, psychology, and physics):

[A] spirit of hopefulness; a desire for wisdom; a concern with religions and transcendent spiritual themes; a rediscovery of the importance of truth, beauty, goodness and harmony; a concern with simplicity and the quest for a mature and balanced understanding of experience. It is not so much a spirit of new theories or ideologies, but an integration of existing valid intellectual approaches, including those from a premodern tradition. (113–14)

All these aspects of transmodernity are in full operation not only in White’s geopoetics, but also Thich Nhat Hanh’s and Snyder’s practices of engaged Buddhism.

For Vitz, “transmodern” means that “many of the valid modern and postmodern ideas are kept but they are transformed by being placed in a new understanding or context, and they may be transcended by the addition of an explicit transcendent framework,” which, he adds, “may be clearly religious, or possibly spiritual in a general sense, or possibly idealistic” (qtd. in *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* 205). It should be noted, however, that a religious framework does not necessarily mean that it should be viewed as “explicitly transcendent.” On the contrary, by referring to Far Eastern philosophy, we emphasize the importance of our grounded presence in the here and the now. This idea will be further developed in the latter part of this essay.

In his discussion of the transmodern paradigm in *Global Mind Change: The Promise of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1988), Willis Harman, a philosopher, social scientist, and futurist, stresses the importance of consciousness, experience, intuition, causality, and interconnectedness (see Kocot, “Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness” 179). This emphasis on interconnectedness and relational consciousness is shared by many contemporary scholars, including the physicists Frijtof Capra, Irena Ateljevic, and Amit Goswami. For example, Capra states that “the new [scientific] paradigm may be called a holistic world view, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts” (6). Similarly, Ateljevic argues that we are witnessing a peculiar process: human consciousness is evolving

towards a new state, a “global relational consciousness [that] goes beyond the Western ideology and tries to connect the human race to a new shared story” (203). In her view, this implies

a call to move from the current geopolitics—and its assumption that the environment is a giant battleground where we all fight for our survival—to biosphere politics, or the premise of the Earth as a living organism made up of interdependent relationships on which we all can only survive by stewarding the larger communities of which we are part. (212)

Ateljevic stresses the importance of the shift in our perception; instead of a fear-based fight for survival against other beings, we can learn to notice vast, net-like dimensional planes of interdependence. This move inevitably involves “a change of sensibility towards mutuality, interconnectedness and empathy towards the other and the environment” (Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Yebra-Pertusa 8). As Capra observes, “[d]eep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature” (6). Similarly, for Amit Goswami, a theoretical quantum physicist, the new era of transmodernity begins with a quantum leap in our attitudes: “[F]rom human over nature to human within nature, from reason over feeling to reason integrated with feeling, from simple hierarchies to tangled hierarchies, from ego separateness to the integration of the ego and quantum consciousness/God” (47). As he argues, when we take this leap, “then we are truly back on track for the emergence of a new age of ethical living” (Goswami 46–47). Goswami endorses Harman’s contention that transmodernity involves a shift in metaphysical assumptions from what he calls Materialistic Monism—“matter giving rise to mind” (Harman 30)—to Transcendental Monism—“mind giving rise to matter” (Harman 30). Harman stresses “value emphases” within our modern society: “[H]umans in harmony with nature, humans in harmony with one another, individual self-realisation, an ecology of cultures” (137). For Goswami, this shift in prevailing metaphysical assumptions is possible thanks to what he calls “quantum activism”: “[O]rdinary activism is based on the idea of changing the world so that you don’t have to change. By contrast, spiritual teachers tell us constantly that we should concentrate on our own transformation and leave the world alone” (12). This last observation does not apply to all spiritual teachers. As I have already mentioned, Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhist teaching clearly promotes working for society. It seems that in order to introduce “a middle path of quantum activism” Goswami relies too much on

dualistic thinking, but, quite surprisingly, the end result of the mechanism he describes resembles the practice of many engaged Buddhists (or any non-proselytizing spiritual practitioners, for that matter):

You acknowledge the importance of your own transformation, and you travel the transformational path earnestly, the difficulties of quantum leaping and nonlocal exploration notwithstanding; but you don't say that it is transformation or bust. You also pay attention to the holomovement of consciousness that is evolving in the world around you and help it along. (Goswami12)

There is no doubt that Goswami's scientific language foregrounds the complexity of the whole process, and that might, at least to some extent, eclipse his main message: that our inner growth affects those around us, even if we do not acknowledge the existence of this natural interdependence.

The question remains of how literature can contribute to the construction and materialization of this new cultural paradigm. Snyder's and White's revolutionary writing may offer an answer, more often than not triggered by radical geopoetic insights promoting transnational, intercultural dialogue. As both Snyder and White draw heavily on Far Eastern philosophy (Taoism and different schools of Buddhism) and literature, especially from China and Japan, it is not surprising that the philosophy of non-duality (which might be loosely associated with transmodernity) should inform their writing (poems, essays, travel books). This is why in my reading of Snyder's and White's work I make references to two anthologies of essays: *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* and *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. In my view, the way they address critical issues of our time adds an important perspective on the transmodern turn.

Snyder's and White's vision of (deep) ecology, of the oneness of all living creatures, and of interconnectedness is inextricably linked with the Buddhist concept of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), as well as the Taoist concepts of the Way, *wu-wei* and interdependent becoming. What informs Snyder's and White's writing equally strongly is the idea that the "Way" cannot be followed. This can be seen in Snyder's translation of the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching* in *The Practice of the Wild*: "The way that can be followed ('wayed') is not the constant way" (161) or, as he puts it in his own words, "[a] path that can be followed is not a *spiritual* path" (161). In line with this, the "pathless path" in the title of this section refers to the practice of going beyond the prevailing modes of discourse. Going "*an-arche*," which means "without pattern," will be linked here with revolutionary, transmodern, transdisciplinary and transcultural practices in Snyder's and White's work.

Snyder is clearly interested in using Buddhist philosophy to practice his civil disobedience and create a (universal and/or bioregional) community (*saṅga*) based on his philosophy of the Wild, as well as on the Hua Yen Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness and interbeing. White is at one with Snyder and all those who practice deep ecology or, as White calls it, mind-ecology. By modifying the expression, White foregrounds the fact that ecology begins with the right view of the self which in turn translates into the right attitude to the world. Because our vision of the self and the surrounding world is predicated on the perspective we take, the importance of the issue of interdependent being/existence cannot and should not be underestimated.

## TRANSMODERN ANOTHERNESS, TRANSMODERN SEEING

In his book *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995), Patrick D. Murphy asks: “What if instead of alienation we posited relation as the primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity and other specificities? What if we worked from a concept of relational difference and *anotherness* rather than Otherness?” (35). Murphy clearly sees the same vision, and the same need, in Snyder, who “argues for each of us to move from objectifying detachment from the other to subjectivity-sharing engagement with the other as another” (115). Such a view of anotherness, as Barnhill observes, deconstructs a rigid dichotomy of self and other, and this is what makes it similar to Buddhism and ecological thought (“Great Earth Saṅga” 202). He refers to Bert Almon who says that in Snyder’s poetry “animals and plants appear as autonomous presences” (Almon 121). Barnhill comments that perhaps “it would be better to argue that for Snyder animals and plants have their own *integrity*—not in being autonomous but by being *integrated* in the interdependent web as ‘others’” (“Great Earth Saṅga” 203). By writing “web,” he means Indra’s net.

Snyder’s vision of our fellow creatures includes plants and even mountains and rocks, which he considers as part of a larger community. In one of his “Little Songs for Gaia” he speaks of the great earth *saṅga*:

As the crickets’ soft autumn hum  
is to us,  
so are we to the trees

as are they

to the rocks and the hills. (Snyder, *Axe Handles* 50)

The inspiration for this poem came from Lew Welch who once asked Snyder whether he thought the rocks were paying attention to the trees. Snyder said he had no idea, to which Welch replied that the trees were “just passing through” (qtd. in Barnhill, “Great Earth Saṅga” 195). Snyder gives this narrative account on the audio tape titled tellingly *This Is Our Body*. Snyder seems to suggest that we (human beings, animals, rocks and hills) are just passing through: we are in constant movement, we evolve together, and we inter-are, whether we are aware of it or not. One should not be surprised by the idea of rocks and hills as constantly moving; for Snyder, the insight of geology is linked here with Eihei Dōgen’s view expressed in his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra”: we-rivers never stop and we-mountains never cease (see Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End* 140–41). The typography of the poem, the empty spaces between the lines, seem to evoke the Buddhist concept of *Śūnyatā* (the Great Void) understood as dependent co-arising, and emptiness of the separate self.

It is easy to see the mental affinities between Snyder and White, even if we look at how they tackle the issue of small insights and grand visions of unifying emptiness. Let us have a look at White’s vision of geopoetics, which goes beyond deep ecology or a literary school. As White puts it, we should see it as “a major movement involving the very foundations of human life on earth” (“Inaugural Text”). These “foundations” may suggest that we are entering the sphere of philosophy—to be precise, ontology and epistemology—but in order to discover the depth of White’s vision, we need to add the art of poetry:

In the fundamental geopoetic field come together poets and thinkers of all times and of all countries. To quote only a few examples, in the West, one can think of Heraclitus (“man is separated from what is closest to him”), Hölderlin (“man lives poetically on the earth”), or Wallace Stevens (“the poems of heaven and hell have been written, it remains to write the poem of the earth”). In the East, there is the Taoist T’chuan-tzu, the man of the ancient pool, Matsuo Bashō, and beautiful world-meditations such as one can find in the *Hua Yen Sūtra*. (“Inaugural Text”)

By taking a closer look at White’s text, we can discover whole maps of associations between poets-thinkers, with an emphasis placed on those for whom nature becomes a major a source of inspiration, on those who are able to discover the organic nature of our relationship with the Earth. White is certainly drawn to Western and Eastern (Chinese, Indian, Japanese) aesthetics and the philosophy of non-duality, and to texts exploring the complex dynamics of the One and the Many. In the passage quoted above, he refers to T’chuan-tzu, Matsuo Bashō (the Japanese master of *haiku*,

*haibun* and *renga*), and, indirectly, to the metaphor of Indra’s net in the *Hua Yen Sūtra*.

White clearly indicates that one of the most important elements in his geopoetic vision is establishing a sensitive contact with the earth, in other words, “grounding ourselves” in the here and now: “geopoetics is concerned with ‘worlding’ (and ‘wording’ is contained in ‘worlding’). In my semantics, ‘world’ emerges from a contact between the human mind and the things, the lines, the rhythms of the earth” (qtd. in McManus 183). White juxtaposes this subtle contact with what he calls “a pseudo-culture.” In the next section, we will see how White’s practice of communication between the self and the world and Snyder’s relational holism connect with the concept of Indra’s net.

## INDRA’S NET AS OUR OWN?

In an essay tellingly entitled “Nets of Beads, Webs of Cells,” Snyder refers to Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching and emphasizes two things: the notion of the view, and practice. His argument might offer an important perspective on the issue of saving the planet and on the problem of burnout experienced by many activists:

In the course of our practice we will not transform reality, but we may transform ourselves. Guilt and self-blame are not the fruit of practice, but we might hope that a *larger view* is. The larger view is one that can acknowledge the simultaneous pain and beauty of this complexly interrelated world. This is what the image of Indra’s net is for. (*A Place in Space* 70)

In “Four Changes with a Postscript” Snyder offers a poetic summation of his practice:

My Teacher once said to me,  
—become one with the knot itself,  
‘til it dissolves away.  
—sweep the garden.  
—any size. (*A Place in Space* 46)

The knot is the primary *kōan*, or theme one needs to confront, and, in accordance with Zen teaching, one does that by becoming one with it until it disappears, or appears only an illusion. Later in the essay, Snyder defines the garden and the sweeping: “[N]o transformation without our feet on the ground. Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the

planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there” (46). By writing “—any size,” Snyder emphasizes that each action, each gesture, however small, matters, as each *is/becomes* part of the net of being.

Similarly, for White, discovering the vibrant reality of Indra’s net begins first and foremost when poetry, thought and science come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration, when “all kinds of specific disciplines can converge, once they are ready to leave over-restricted frameworks and enter into global (cosmological, cosmopoetic) space” (“Inaugural Text”). In the poem “Walking the Coast,” White decides to offer a grand scale image of how this dynamic operates. The poem’s typography seems to evoke either the perceived “jaggedness” of our understanding of what this “cosmopoetic space” might look like, or the continuous and clearly non-linear process of our grounding/self-realization in the world of nature-culture.

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believing

that the biological

aim of art

is to project around us

the images

the proofs

the manifestations

of a power of synthesis

at one with life

and maintaining life

against solitude

and fragmentation

the cold aggressiveness

of the space-time world (White, *Open World* 137)

We also find many (short) poems in which White decides to focus on the particular, on the “part of a part,” on emptiness, whiteness, birds’ cries, and moving, mind-bending, heart-opening silences. The processuality of self-realization involves coming into subtle contact with what *is* in the here-and-now, as only this way one can come into contact with self-nature (within us), or Self-Nature (without us), as we see here:

This pool of water

holding rock and sky

traversed by the wing-flash of birds

is more my original face

than even the face of Buddha.

(White, *Open World* 204)

The image of the pool of water "holding," embracing rock and sky is seen as a manifestation of the speaking persona's "original face" (a subtle reference to one of the classic kōans on one's face before one is born), juxtaposed with the face of the Awakened One (Buddha). It is a poem about a landscape-mindscape "in which you no longer feel the need to talk about Buddha or whatever at all, you just live it in and for itself" (White, *Handbook* 13).

To conclude this essay, I would like to connect the philosophical and existential message of Thich Nhat Hanh's, Gary Snyder's, and Kenneth White's writing the transmodern message of interbeing, of coming into contact with self-nature, or Self-Nature, with a passage on Indra's net from Francis H. Cook's *Hua-yen Buddhism*: "When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence" (122). But Cook immediately adds that it is not just that "we are all in it" together. "We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body" (Cook 122). Despite the differences in their poetic expression, what Thich Nhat Hanh, Snyder, and White have in common is the belief that the message of Indra's net for us as individuals is that through our own self-realization and transformation, we affect everyone and everything on this planet, precisely because we inter-are. That is why, in order to overcome the current ecological crisis, we need to transform ourselves first. The way out is in.

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