

Singing Me into this Land: The Territorialization of a Spiritual Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

The fear of environmental catastrophe is very real in our daily lives. Dealing with fear at times means combating it. A small pagan community in Washington State gathers together up to eight times a year to ritualize their connection to nature. These rituals use music as a magic to transform the consciousness of the participants. Becoming one with nature in a spiritual-ecosystem allows the forces of nature to become animate and real. This is the magic of music.

In this special edition of *vis-à-vis* each of us was asked to think about how our research deals with issues of fear. Sadly, one does not have to look very far these days to see fear. It is a central topic every time we turn on the radio, TV, almost every time we go to a film or watch a documentary. Fear is becoming less an emotional state than it is an operational state; we are living and working against a backdrop of fear. Fundamentalism, terrorism, nihilism, ecological collapse, natural disasters, run-away capitalism, political corruption, epidemic disease, poisoned pet food, and poisonous children's toys are just some of the daily issues we confront. How can we not live in fear? In the fieldwork that I have been undertaking, with a ritual group in Washington State, the act of not living in fear could be seen as a socio-political position or an act of group will. To not live in fear though seems to require a type of tension.

During this fieldwork I have been reflecting on fear itself, or more specifically, on the options available to agents who are reacting to fear. It seems that if one considers the reactionary nature of fear you are left with two well-known possibilities, fight or flight. In this paper I am going to outline what it means to fight against one of these fear sets that I have listed above. Fear, when it is dealt with in a fight, becomes a struggle. This struggle or conflict should not be seen as a lack of fear but more properly as a strategic engagement with

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the roots of the fear itself. In this fieldwork case the fear of ecological collapse has inspired agents to employ strategies to combat fear by replacing helplessness with empowerment.

The community of people that I have been working with are ritual practitioners of a Goddess worshipping pagan belief who meet together according to the pagan calendar. The main ritual dates are the solstices (summer and winter), the equinoxes (spring and fall), and the four fire festivals (Imbolic, Beltane, Lughnasadh, Samhain) which taken together split the calendar into eight sections which follow the cycle of the seasons. Special rituals such as a marriage, pregnancy, birth, naming, a female's first menstruation, menopause, or healing ceremonies, and certain birthdays, are conducted as needed by members of the community. Throughout this paper I will refer to this group as simply “the community” or as the “fair-faith community” as it has no official name and does not refer to itself by any particular moniker.

This lack of name stems from the fact that membership in the community is only through active participation in community ritual. There is no initiation, no secret membership creed, no advertising for members, no website, and no financial exchange. Interested individuals are invited to participate in the ritual life of the community. Some stay and some do not. Some leading members have been active for nearly twenty years and others come to a ritual every couple of years. Members of the community live all along the west coast as far south as Los Angeles and as far north as British Columbia and Alberta. A very few members fly from New York for important rituals like the summer or winter solstice which are by far the most popular and well attended.

Goddess worship is part of paganism and often considered as a subset of the New Age movement. While taxonomically this may be a useful way of conceptualizing where alternative spiritual communities fit in a large schema it does little to enrich an understanding of Goddess worship. To avoid the unnecessary, and often pejorative, connotation of New Age as a flaky, west coast, middle-class, hippie-capitalist, mind-expanding extravagance, I will avoid classifying Goddess worship under a New Age rubric. Instead I will situate Goddess worship more properly at the crossroads of revival paganism and eco-feminism. Of course both of these are widely considered to be elements of the New Age movement but in the course of my research I have not come upon any members of the community who think of themselves as being members of any movement at all. I concede that while this community may indeed be representative of an aspect of the New Age it would require a lengthy article to discuss the ways in which the community embodies certain aspects of the New Age while it rejects many other aspects. So we will proceed with the tacit acknowledgement that the New Age is a complex social matrix with many aspects.

The full history of the pagan revival dates back to Romantic period and includes works on the occult and theosophy.¹ Paganism today is a combination of revivalist documents published in the early years of the 1900s and many publications from the 1960s onwards. Revival paganism includes witchcraft, Druids, shamanism, and the fairy-faith among others. There is a strong connection between second-wave feminism and witchcraft,

Consciousness-raising provided an opportunity for women (some of them for the first time) to talk about their lives, make decisions and act upon them, without the presence of men. Women used such groups to explore their relations with women, men, work, motherhood and children, their own sexuality, lesbianism, their past youth, and the coming of old age. Many women began to explore their dreams and fantasies; sometimes they tentatively began individual and collective psychic experiments. (Adler 184)

It is quite easy to see how the symbol of the witch could be a very empowering image for spiritually minded feminists, “The Witch, after all, is an extraordinary symbol—independent, anti-establishment, strong, and proud. She is political, yet spiritual and magical. The Witch is woman as martyr; she is persecuted by the ignorant; she is the woman who lives outside society and outside society’s definition of woman” (185). Witchcraft (Wicca) and many pagan revival groups grew slowly from the 1960s to the 1980s with a predominance of women members. Things began to change however, “Starting in the 1980s, many Pagan groups began adding “male” or “god” verses to “female” or “goddess” changes. And a number of Pagan festivals added men’s rituals. Several articles in Pagan publications argued that it was time to look at the pain that many men were feeling about their own roles” (355). So by the 1980s many Wiccan groups had begun to include male members and entire families. Revival paganism began to become multi-generational and the number of groups continued to expand.

In San Francisco a Wicca group called the Reclaiming tradition began in 1978 and with the publication of Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* in 1979 and subsequent tenth and twentieth anniversary editions has become one of the central texts of the Reclaiming tradition. Starhawk wrote that, “The values of the Reclaiming tradition stem from our understanding that the earth is alive and all of life is sacred and interconnected. We see the Goddess as immanent in the earth’s cycles of birth, growth, death, decay, and regeneration. Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing, and to the linking of magic with political action” (Starhawk 6). With this, Starhawk provided a link between ecology, feminism, and paganism. This connection has remained one of the primary characteristics of the Reclaiming tradition. Reclaiming built upon the earlier pagan traditions to craft a new Wicca tradition open to both men and women, “The rituals of the eight solar holidays, the Sabbats, are derived from the myth of the Wheel of the Year. The Goddess reveals her threefold aspects: As Maiden, She is the virgin patroness of birth and initiations as Nymph, She is the sexual temptress, lover, siren, seductress; as Crone, She is the dark face of life, which demands death and sacrifice. The God is son, brother, lover who becomes his own father; the eternal sacrifice eternally reborn into new life” (53).

One of the organizational hallmarks of Reclaiming is that there is no central organization. So many groups use rituals that Reclaiming has published without necessarily identifying themselves with the Reclaiming tradition. The community in which I have been working is one such example where *The Spiral Dance* is considered a must read, and some

ritual concepts utilized, but much of the communities rituals have been created by members within the community. One very important aspect of the ritual life of the community is music. Before I explore the function music plays in the ritual life of the community I must outline the purpose of the ritual proper.

Many of us are used to, or at least familiar with, some form of spiritual ritual. Beliefs behind what rituals are useful for differ between groups and range somewhere along a continuum from fun social activity to formal application of magic. If we look at differences within the Christian ritual, between Catholic and Protestants for instance, we can see a small but important difference in the outlook towards social ritual. For the catholic ever Sunday the priest performs an act of magic called transubstantiation. This magical rite transforms a wafer of unleavened bread into the body of Jesus Christ. The Protestant on the other hand celebrates the symbol of Jesus Christ with bread. The difference seems small on the surface but there is a big difference between believing “bread as flesh” and “bread as bread”. One uses magic and the other does not.

Magic in the pagan sense is equally divided. There are those that believe magic is the act of changing consciousness through an act of will and those that believe magic is the manipulation of matter through an act of will. As you can see the Catholics believe the second, although I am sure the majority would disagree. For the community there is a equal mix of the two although the predominant belief is that magic is the transformation of consciousness. The consciousness in need of transformation is the inherited majority consciousness of western society, “A natural culmination of these trends [scientific] was the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes in the era of Enlightenment which held that only one kind of power, mechanical motion, governed all physical events (Tambiah 17). This transformation is created through the practice of rituals designed to transform the Cartesian mechanistic world into a sensuous and living world, “Real knowledge is not merely discursive or literal; it is also, if not first and foremost, sensuous” (Berman 268).

What is real here is ingested, taken into oneself, “The symbolism is that of making the unfamiliar familiar: we literally eat the other, take it into our guts and as a result are changed by it” (268). The ritual process for the community is designed to transform the world for those who enact the ritual.

The purpose of this transformation stems from the concern with the state of the environment. With the co-existence of eco-feminism and Wicca the enchantment of the natural world becomes the central spiritual task. Magic is utilized to transform the consciousness of the ritual members and to allow for an ontological change which accepts the equality of the natural world as living entities, “For I too suspect that what is at stake in this too-troubled generation—as much as our physical survival on this planet—is the survival of the visionary energies. By which I mean the survival of our ability to perceive, if only dimly, the life-enhancing truths to which myth, ritual, sacramental symbol, contemplative object, magic rite, the natural wonders, and ecstatic communion bear witness” (Roszak 42).

Roszak suggests that, “The way forward is inevitably the way inward” (239) but how to get inward and what happens when you get there remains a question. This research picks

up on this suggestion and forwards that the awareness of one's place within your ecosystem could very well be a spiritual as well as political task. This fieldwork explores the way music is utilized and conceptualized for one pagan revival group in Washington State. This group has been inspired by Starhawk's work and the Reclaiming tradition but has incorporated aspects of the fairy-faith (explained below) and First Nations beliefs brought to the group by its chief bard (songwriter) Daveed.

Music and Magic

Daveed and I sat back in his living room, lit our pipes from small pieces of wood taken from the wood stove in front of us, and hit record on my field recorder. The Edirol R-4's record button glowed as Daveed prepared himself to describe the songs that he had just finished singing. I picked up the Rode stereo microphone in my right hand and switched my pipe to the left. I sat across from Daveed with the microphone like a small dagger between us. We sat facing one another, quiet and focused.

It seemed, as we prepared to do the last interview of the project, that we were now on a quest together to get to the bottom of what we had started. I suppose it could be called metaphysics of song composition. Together, we had been struggling to create a mutually comprehensible vocabulary that would approximate his spiritual experience of the fairy-faith songs that he had received.

The aspect of the study that I will engage with in this article is a notion of the active affects of language used in song. J. Edward Chamberlin asked in his 2004 publication: *If This is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* He writes, "The idea that we live our lives in language, and that we understand the world differently because we speak different languages, goes back a long way...Leibniz argued that language was a fundamental determinant of thought and behaviour" (17). So if language is a fundamental determinant can the use of language impact our way of being in the world, our ontology? Does the language used in song play an active role in transforming the consciousness of the practitioner? Can familiar words and sounds, in the form of music, become re-territorialized, in the Deleuzian sense, to take on new significance within a new frame of meaning?

It was my intention to explore this Fairy Faith community's ritualized music within a frame introduced by Chamberlin when he writes, "After a while, any metaphor begins to lose its strangeness and to become so familiar that it seems simply true...Metaphor is the basic trick of language, and we are sometimes impatient with tricksters. But the door between reality and the imagination can't do without a hinge...taking metaphor seriously brings us face to face with the most subversive act of language" (162). What follows is an exploration of on such "hinge" on the doors of perceptions.

A Spiritual-Ecosystem

Environmentalism and sustainability are prime motivating concerns for members of this fairy-faith community. The metaphors used in Daveed’s songs promote a conscious natural world which humans participate within. Daveed employs a metaphor of a spiritual ecosystem where all actors inter-relate. This philosophical view is widely documented by scholars interested in the ritual customs of Aboriginal North Americans. Ojibway writer Basil Johnston explains a part of this belief system in *Ojibway Heritage*, “The elders said that Kitche Manitou created the world in a certain order; first, the physical world of sun, moon, earth and stars; second, the plant world of trees, flowers, grasses, and fruits.... Plants were therefore prior to animal...each plant being of whatever species was a composite being, possessing an incorporeal substance, its own unique soul-spirit” (Johnston 33).

I suggest that song may work as a metaphor enabling the singer or singers to repetitively acknowledge the hinge between realities and in so doing participate in the re-articulation of their world-view. To be quite frank the fairy-faith community members that I have interviewed are all disappointed with what they could only describe as the modernity project (see Mary Richardson’s “Polycultures of the Mind: Human and Non-human Agency in the Organic Farming Network of Quebec” in this volume) and particularly with the environmental impact of industrialization which is tied, at least in the minds of the people I have interviewed, to the Enlightenment and the Roman Catholic period of spiritual colonialism which preceded it. The metaphor of the spiritual-ecosystem seems to have its roots in a version of Totemism although reworked somewhat which I will get to later. In a critical overview of *The Invention of Primitive Society* Adam Kuper wrote of this metaphor which over the years has been championed and opposed by competing camps, “Totemism therefore served as a foundational myth of rationalism; yet at the same time it offered a symbolic idiom in which a poet could celebrate a more natural time, when man’s spirit was at one with plants and birds and beasts, and mythical, poetic thought was common place, and sexual instincts uninhibited. It was the anthropologists Garden of Eden. In contrast, the modern age was a wasteland indeed” (121). The songs used in this fairy-faith community have built upon this romantic notion of Totemism as an articulated challenge to Western colonialism and as a response to current ecological distress. They are attempting to decolonize themselves by creating a ritual song practice dedicated to the development of an earth centered spirituality and a communally shared indigeneity.

While the entire process of developing what I call a materialist-spiritual ecosystem is far too much to deal with in this short article I would like to, by way of example, describe one small detail of this belief structure. To do this I will explore the notion of song composition as practiced by the bard of this community, Daveed.

Daveed

Daveed discovered music very young and played harmonica in bands in Winnipeg, Canada for a number of years. He moved out to the west coast after he finished his Masters degree at the University of Toronto. Daveed worked with a project to protect the Stein Valley, BC from development. During this time he became close with a number of elders from various First Nations communities with whom he worked. This is one excerpt from an interview with Daveed:

There was a man who was disheartened about the politics around songs... this song belongs to so and so...so you can't sing this, or this song belongs to this person so you can't sing that...and it troubled him. I was told that this was a Lakota person from back east. He went on a vision quest for a song, he quested for a song, he went on a vision quest...he fasted he made the Humulchia where you fast for a song and you may receive a song. He quested for a song that anyone could sing...an honour song that could be used by anyone and this is the historical and cultural context within which I was introduced to this idea of receiving songs. So you can receive a song from a person and you could receive a song directly from the creator, the great mystery, from the spirits or the ancestors, the grandmothers or grandfathers. I was also taught that there are songs IN places.

After a number of years working in the Stein Valley Daveed decided to do his PhD at the University of British Columbia and sat down with First Nations elders to ask their advice. They said essentially that he should explore his own mythologies and use what he had learned there with them to understand how he could work within the world of white culture where his real work needed to be done.

Daveed began exploring Celtic mythologies and made a number of trips to Scotland, England, and Wales to explore ancient 'Celtic' sites. His deep interest in discovering his own mythologies or histories helped to shape his understanding of indigeneity where Daveed's notion of composition emerged.

The Fairy Faith

The Fairy-faith is a belief in the existence of fairy. Not exactly the Tinkerbelle type fairy from Peter Pan but fairy, as they are believed to have existed within the Celtic world. Mythology and oral history from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany are used as the basic platform of the belief structure. W.Y Evans-Wentz published *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* in 1911, a collection of first hand accounts of fairy lore followed by a critical analysis of the belief structure. Its 515 pages provided Daveed with a key document upon which to base much of his belief structure.

This community has, through Daveed, incorporated the Fairy-faith into a series of pre-existing Goddess rituals developed by a witchcraft collective developed in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1980s called Reclaiming. This combination of ritual practice, history, lore, early 20th century anthropology, and an understanding of some Canadian First Nations philosophy, helped to shape this fairy-faith community.

The connection was assisted by Evans-Wentz in a creation myth for fairies he provided. In a tale of the settling of Ireland by the Celts, Ireland was already populated by the Tuatha De Danann and led by their Queen Danu (later Brigit and then St. Brigit) who, in one story at least, led them to retire from view but not from the island as the Celtic settlers arrived. Queen Danu's people the Tuatha De Danann became invisible to the colonizing Celts unless they wanted to be seen. They were said to live in small mounds which were called Sidhe. Eventually, the word for mound became the name of the fairy. According to Evans-Wentz the Sidhe played an important philosophical role in the daily lives of the Celts at least until the early years of the 20th century when his ethnographic information was collected (Evans-Wentz).

Daveed positions the fairy-faith as a philosophical view of the world opposed to a dogmatic religious practice. He claimed for the fairy-faith what Abraham Maslow claimed could be the role of peak-experiences when he wrote, “I want to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not the exclusive possession of organized churches, that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them, that they are well within the jurisdiction of a suitable enlarged science, and that therefore, they are the general responsibility of all mankind” (Maslow 4). An important aspect of the fairy-faith practice is the singing of songs which in themselves constitute a spiritual practice.

Composition

The idea of composition as it is defined in the western musical tradition was abandoned very early in my exploration of this project. Daveed explained that he did not make up the songs but instead received them. To receive suggests that the song then comes from elsewhere but it also suggest that you are, in some senses at least, given the song. The song has a place of origin outside of the person we would normally identify as the composer. The consequence of this change in focus, which I outline below, is the manifestation of a series of complex relationships that become central to the musical and spiritual experience for this community.

I asked Daveed outright if the songs come from spirits that reside in the land and are given directly to the receiver. He claimed that this was one possible source of a song but went on to complicate his answer. He suggested that the songs he receives have their origins in a specific context. This context could be personal or spiritual need, an emotional experience on a specific piece of land, or the ritual needs of the community. While personal

or ritual needs require little definition to be understood Daveed's relationship with the land requires more explanation.

Context

The context for song reception can be understood as the purpose or need for the song within very specific relationships. Daveed does not discriminate between a human produced context (personal community relationships) and a land-produced context. In the land-produced context Daveed identifies the land as having a communicative feature. Keith H. Basso in his ethnographic work with the Western Apache writes about the use of place names, "After stories and storytellers have served this beneficial purpose (supporting community conformity), features of the physical landscape take over and perpetuate it. . . . Geographical sites, together with the crisp mental pictures of them presented by their names, serve admirably in this capacity, inviting people to recall their earlier failings and encouraging them to resolve, once again, to avoid them in the future" (60-61). Daveed shares with the Apaches discussed in Basso's work a communicative relationship with the landscape but in Daveed's case the land plays a more active role. The communication could take a variety of forms such as dreams, visions, inspiration, and reception during meditation. Daveed also made it clear that this form of communication is a basic aspect of an indigenous worldview that he had learned from elders with which he had studied.

The context for song composition is created when there is an initial impulse or need. This need is transformed into what Daveed referred to as a call for a song. This call is usually enacted in the form of a focused meditation. For instance an upcoming ritual may need a new song. In this instance Mela, (the high female figure of this community) could turn to Daveed and say, 'We need a song for this event', and Daveed would "put out the call" for this specific song. The song received would be the song for that event, or more specifically that event type (naming ceremony, birthing ceremony, solstice, an equinox). The song that is received for this event type is used each time this event type occurs. Max Weber writing on religion remarked on this type of social actor, "The typical service of magicians and priests becomes the determination of the factors to be blamed for suffering, that is, the confession of 'sins'. At first, these sins were offenses against ritual commandments. The magician and priest also give counsel for behavior fit to remove the suffering"(Weber 273). The sins dealt with by this community are not perpetrated by the individual but are seen to be environmental and social sins perpetrated by the western world and the song is used to address what is seen to be the root of this 'sin'. Each ritual act has two aspects in relationship to Weber's analysis. The ritual itself is a statement of opposition and the fairy-faith members see their spiritual membership as a statement against 'the way things are'. The second statement is within the workings of the ritual itself as each ritual attempts to enchant the social process that is taking place so that, in the words of the ritual leader, "the world

can be more beautiful”. Each ritual is composed to be used repeatedly. The repetition of the ritual and the accompanying song allows for the community to learn the song lyrically and musically and its necessary ritual context. The song would be considered successful if another member of the community within a proper ritual context could lead it. Therefore successful songs are passed onto other members of the community and less successful songs are forgotten.

The song engages the community in many ways. The idea of ritual song is understood by the community as an ancient human spiritual practice which is meant to transform its participants. This style of music, repetitive ritual music, is used by many and diverse spiritual groups. The musical style therefore does not suggest any definite or fixed underlying meaning. Daveed uses pre-existing forms that he associates with pre-Christian spirituality and attaches texts that he receives through meditation upon the context.

In Daveed’s introductory explanation of song reception he explained that aboriginal elders who had adopted him guided his musical exploration. In these explanations it was made clear that the land was seen as a communicative entity with which one must commune and that the land (and all of its peoples) was communicating. F. David Peat wrote of this communicative process, “The nature of Native medicine lies both in the plant and the ceremony, in the way that plant was picked, the exchanges and relationships that were entered into that would lead to its use, and in the relationship between that plant and other people in the circle and the relationship to the sick person” (133). Daveed also made it clear that this form of communication while a basic aspect of an indigenous worldview indigeneity does not necessarily mean exclusively aboriginal.

Indigeneity

The Oxford English Dictionary considers indigeneity as native born or produced naturally from the land the word in its popular use refers to aboriginal populations. Its negative and popular use means non-white. Daveed argues that, for a pagan, being indigenous is a complex negotiation. Daveed understands indigeneity in the terms the OED used for its first definition: a natural part of the land. Daveed believes that he receives songs from a matrix of communicative beings. This belief is a manifestation of an inter-related ecological perspective which elevates the position of the environment (other people, plants, animals, ancestors) to a central position. It is a concentrated effort to re-enchant landscape but without the pejorative connotations of new age, animist or totemic. Daveed is quite clear about his motivations behind his enchantment of nature. He believes that a major philosophical error occurred at the end of the Romantic era when we (western European culture) collectively turned our backs on the enchanted, intelligent, natural world in favour of industrial expansion and unchecked capitalism.

Conclusion

Daveed believes that re-imagining the landscape as a matrix of communicative entities may complicate the objectification of the land, which he believes, we have socially inherited. The land has been transformed into a resource supply instead of an ecosystem. Animals have been turned into soulless property. I am quite sure that many parents still stumble over the question of the family pet getting into heaven (my parents certainly did). In response to this dilemma Thomas Berry wrote: "The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world" (18). Daveed calls this enchantment of the natural world a spiritual ecology instead of an animist religion because he is trying to keep the focus on the contexts of the relationships of actors within the ecosystem. He describes the ecosystem as a complicated matrix of living entities but also includes the past (ancestors) and future generations often using the language that he had learned with aboriginal elders. Song reception is seen as an expression of his relationship within a spiritual ecosystem. The use of song provides the space and the focus for a closer attention to the relationships within the system.

The song is received, not composed; it lives in its application not in its static form, the song is social. These songs, as metaphors, are used like prayer or mantra. They are statements of belief about personal, psychological, emotional, and physical interactions with the web or relations that is the natural world. To this end these ritual songs are instructional and are performed with the intent to ontologically impact the performer so that they experience being in the world as an act within a balanced spiritual-ecosystem.

Notes

1. While some contemporary popular authors claim that witchcraft and contemporary Druids have an unbroken heritage to pre-Christian Europe it is widely believed today, among many popular authors and scholars, that the pagan revival is a combination of historical documents, anthropological studies, popular fiction, myth, lore, and earth-centered traditions begun since the late 19th century.

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