Trumpeter (1995)
ISSN: 0832-6193

The Place and the Story: Where Ecopsychology and Bioregionalism Meet

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ECOPSYCHOLOGY MAY BE DEFINED AS THE expansion and revisioning of psychology to take the ecological context of human life into account (Roszak et al., 1995). It is *not* a variation of environmental psychology, which mostly deals with the impact of institutional environments on psychological states. It offers a critique of all existing schools of psychology, including the psychodynamic, object relations, cognitive, behaviorist, humanistic and transpersonal, for focusing their research interests solely on the intrapsychic, interpersonal and social dimensions of human life, and ignoring the ecological foundation. The most basic facts of our existence on this Earth - that we live in these particular kinds of ecosystems, in biotic communities with these kinds of species of animals and plants, in these particular kinds of geographical and climatological surroundings, appears to be irrelevant to our psychology. Yet our own personal experience as well as common sense contradict this self-imposed limitation.

In that regard, ecopsychology, parallels similar revisionings taking place in other knowledge disciplines: philosophy is being challenged by environmental ethics and deep ecology (Zimmerman, 1993); economics by green or ecological economics (Ekins, 1992); religion and theology by the concept of creation spirituality and other ecotheological formulations (Tucker & Grim, 1994); and new ecological perspectives are emerging in sociology and history (Ponting, 1992). All of these foundational revisions may be seen as part of an emerging ecological or systems worldview (Metzner, 1991); a worldview that can also be called ecological post-modernism (Spretnak, 1991).

Underlying these fundamental revisionings of our systems of knowledge is a major paradigm shift in the natural sciences: a shift from physics to ecology and evolution as the foundational or model science (Goldsmith, 1992). Ecology has been called the "subversive science" because it deals with systemic interrelationships, and is therefore in essence transdisciplinary and subversive of academic specialization. Ecological concepts are ideally suited for helping the knowledge disciplines transcend their specialized blinders, and consider the wider contexts of ecosystem and Gaia.

Bioregionalism I regard as one of four socio-philosophical movements that could be characterized as "radical ecology" movements, the other three being deep ecology, ecofeminism and social ecology (with socialist ecology a possible fifth). Each of these philosophical and social movements are radical or revolutionary because they do not limit themselves to advocating conservation or anti-

pollution legislation: rather they critique the very foundations of the modernist industrial worldview, its most cherished value systems and deeply engrained attitudes and habits of thought. The focus of the deep ecology critique is what is called "anthropocentrism", but can more accurately be described as a humanist superiority complex. The ecofeminist diagnosis of our eco-cultural malaise is that it is based on patriarchal "androcentrism", rather than anthropocentrism. The social ecology movement, propounded by Murray Bookchin, critiques all social structures of hierarchy and domination, whether toward ethnic groups, the poor, women or nature. For socialist ecologists, the crucial diagnosis is via the analysis of capitalist class oppression, which includes the domination and exploitation of nature.

Bioregionalism offers a radical critique of the conventional approach to *place*, which revolves around the idea of ownership of land and the attendant right to develop and exploit. Political control over the ecology and economy of local regions rests with the nation-state government, which is generally allied with and supportive of the interests of large industrial corporations. The bioregional approach advocates ignoring the man-made, historically arbitrary political boundaries of nations, states and counties. Instead it suggests using natural ecosystem features, such as watersheds, mountain ranges and the entire biotic communities as the defining features of a given region. The primary values, from a bioregional perspective, are not "property rights" and "development" but the preservation of the integrity of the regional ecosystem, the viability of the biotic community, and maximizing economic self-sufficiency within the region. Political control should rest with the community of people actually living in the region: this is the concept of "reinhabitation" (Sale, 1985).

The bioregional movement, like the other radical ecology movements, contains within it a challenge to change our perception and understanding of the human role in the natural world. It encourages us to become aware of native plants and animals in the region where we live, so we can feel and experience our place in the natural order. It encourages us to learn about the historical and present-day indigenous people of that region, and how they sustained themselves, before the arrival of European culture with its industry and technology. It thus forges an explicit connection and solidarity with existing native peoples, their cultures and their struggle for autonomy. These cultures are clearly bioregional in their explicit sense of rootedness in the land, and have been gently offering a radical critique of the Eurocentric arrogance ever since the time of Columbus and the conquest (Mander, 1991).

Bioregionalism also involves something like a consciousness-raising practice, or we might say, an ecopsychological practice. Such a practice can affect our sense of identity, our self-image. As Wendell Berry has said, if you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are. By creating bioregional maps that depict watersheds, rivers, forests and mountain ranges, rather than roads and cities, we come to a renewed appreciation of the actual natural complexity of the place

we inhabit. There is a bioregional self-questionnaire, which tests our knowledge of the place where we live. My favorite consciousness-expanding question on it is: "could you direct someone to the house you live in without using any human-made buildings or signs?" When I first attempted to do this, it led me to notice much more of the landscape through which I was mindlessly driving every day. Another principal question is whether you can identify the four directions in the place where you live or where your are. This again connects us to the Native American practice (also found in other parts of the world) of beginning every meeting, whether political council or religious ceremony, with a prayer in the four directions.

What better way to come into communion with the natural energies and features of a place or region, than by tuning into the four directions? Here in California, for example, it is hard to escape the dominant presence of the Pacific ocean in the West, even when you can't see it. The native practice of aligning ourselves with the four directions (as well as the Above and Below, or Father Sky and Mother Earth), coincides with the bioregional practice of attaining a deeper sense of the place, and reminds us of ancient, pre-Christian European concepts of the "spirit of place", the *genius loci*. Surely the spirit of a place is constituted by the whole system of interdependent relations, in the bioregion. The biotic community is also a spiritual community - if we approach it from the intuitive, perceptual, subjective stand-point, and do not confine our observations to those that can be quantified.

In doing so, we are back in the realm of polytheistic animism - the religion of our ancestors in the ancient world, prior to the take-over by transcendental monotheism. William Blake described this process in his visionary prose poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

> The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods and Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity. Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood.

The coming together of the ancient and indigenous spirit of place with the ecological consciousness of the bioregional orientation may be a small example of the larger coming together of spirituality with science and environmentalism.

I'd like to now use this combined bioregional and ecopsychological approach to come to a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of "place". What is a place, and how does it relate to and differ from the concept of space? And, since time and space are the fundamental organizing categories of our knowledge of

the external world, how does time relate to space and to place? *What is related to time, the way place is related to space?*

A place is a localized, concretely defined region, whereas space is the abstract infinity, out of which a place can be defined and delimited, mapped and described. In the unfathomable vastness of macrocosmic space, a galaxy, a solar system, a planet, are localized, identifiable places. On the continental land-masses of planet Earth, we can map and identify local places of different size: deserts, mountains, lakes, plains, forests, cities, houses, trees, rocks, caves (which open into interior space). Speaking geographically or topographically, a place always has *boundaries*. They may be very definite or fuzzy and indistinct; and certain boundary regions or borderlands are themselves identifiable places, often of special significance. A key aspect of the bioregional agenda is to change the way we define the boundaries of a place.

Places always have a certain *size* or *extension*: they are the background for the Cartesian *res extensa*, the "extended substance", which still commands the highest ontological status position in the Western worldview. Surveyors and cartographers measure and map the size of the place with all its details and features. The size of a place may be large, medium or small; and in that regard, the bioregion provides a sort of middle-ground perspective, between the global and the local. If we are to *think globally* and *act locally*, should we perhaps learn to *live bioregionally*?

There is another kind of space, less abstract, more psychological or psychic: as when we say to a partner "I need more space in this relationship", or when we feel our "personal space" intruded upon in a crowded elevator. There is also the psychological notion of a "altered state of consciousness", which one may have experience of travelling or being "on a trip" or a journey, traversing a kind of inner landscape. In traditional cultures such experiences are referred to as a "shamanic journey", or an "otherworld journey", which clearly implies that consciousness is regarded as analogous to some kind of terrain or territory. In this interior world, this space of our subjective experience, there are also three axes of orientation, or six directions of movement and of attention: forward and backward, left and right, upward and downward. Contrast these with the six directions of objective space: East, South, West, North, Zenith & Nadir. The two coordinate systems, inner and outer, constantly change in relationship to each other.

A place has *internal divisions* and structural features, in which it resembles and differs from other places in a large variety of ways. These internal features and divisions can also be mapped, described and named. The exception to the principle of internal divisions are the oceans (and to some extent certain deserts). The vast, undifferentiated expanse of oceans is often disorienting to land dwellers such as humans, precisely because we cannot find landmarks or other distinctive structural features. Scientists can map the ocean floor, with its ridges and troughs, and sailors can learn to navigate by the stars and in-

struments to traverse the ocean, but "being at sea" is similar to being lost, and even the sailor has to "comes home from the sea".

Most places, at least on land, also have a *center*: this is the fulcrum or hub around with the actions and activities in the place organize themselves. Ayer's Rock is right in the dead center of Australia; the Black Hills of South Dakota are exactly in the middle of North America. Both places have an undeniable magnetic kind of power; and the native people have long regarded them as sacred and performed rituals in these centers. Towns and cities have centers, often marked by a plaza or other public structure, where people tend to congregate for trade and entertainment. In older towns the center of community life is usually marked by a church, cathedral, temple or shrine. In a dwelling, the center of family life is usually the living-room, perhaps with a fire-place, or in some dwellings it might be the kitchen and eating area.

A place may also be said to have *inhabitants*, dwellers, those who are "from there". Both human and non-human dwellers make up the community of that place; whether the humans recognize that or not. They might be natives (humans, plants, animals), or immigrants, or invaders. Part of the bioregional agenda is to raise consciousness about native plants and animals, and therefore sustainably adapted to the regional environment; and to recognize how non-native plants and animals can sometimes be invasive and destructive to the ecosystem. It might be thought that this approach translates to anti-immigrant policies at the human political level. But it's just the opposite: in the Americas, it is the white Europeans and their descendants who are the immigrants and invaders, who have had devastating effects on the land and native peoples. The bioregional philosophy advocates that we should learn from the surviving native people in a given bioregion, how to live sustainably and in balance in that area. This is the project of *reinhabitation*: learning the *habits* of living, that will enable us to survive sustainably in the *habita*t.

We give *names* to places, which allows us to talk about them, and to talk about the spirits of that place, and about our own relatedness to that named place. The name of a place was related to the spirit of the place. In ancient times, as Blake pointed out, our ancestors associated nature spirits, gods and goddesses, a *genius loci*, with particular places. The whole planet Earth was the home of the goddess Gaia or Gaea, from which our words "geology" and "geography" are derived. The Sun, the Moon and the planets were given the names of gods and goddesses.

In indigenous societies such as the Native Americans and also the Australian Aborigines, great importance attaches to the relatedness of a person to a particular named place. Such a person might introduce themselves by saying: "I am from this place, and my father's family comes from these mountains, and my mother's from this river." It is only after describing in some detail their relationship to that place, that land, that they can proceed with the business at hand. In Euro-American society, we are much more likely to introduce ourselves

and friends by saying "what they do", their profession, accomplishments, and the like. We don't know where we are "from" very often; even if we own a house somewhere, we might not really be "inhabiting" that place with consciousness, or feel at home and rooted there. The Indo-European tribes have always been nomads, wanderers, emigrants and invaders. They invaded Europe, conquering and dominating the aboriginal civilization known as Old Europe, thousands of years before they set sail for the so-called "New World." It has been aptly said, that as the Euro-American descendants of the European invaders and colonizers begin to understand the true story of what happened, perhaps the time for the real discovery of America has now come.

Time, like space, is an abstraction of the philosophers and scientists. If we want to localize and identify a particular segment of time, we do so by *telling a story*. "Once upon a time..." begins the fairy tale. "What happened here before, what took place here?" we ask when we want to get to know a place. "What's your story?" we ask when we want to get to know someone. Or we might say, metaphorically, "where are you coming from, with that attitude, or that point of view?" Just as time and space are really a continuum, rather than separate categories, so place and story are intimately and mutually related. Wallace Stegner, that great interpreter of the American West, has written: "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends or monuments." (Stegner, 1993)

Thus we study the history and mythology of our ancestors, our people and the places they inhabited, and what happened there, in order to understand how we have become who we are. Biologists study the evolution of species, the story of life on this planet, how species have adapted to changing environments and habitats. Cosmologists now speak of the "universe story", the story of cosmic evolution, starting with the "Big Bang", or the "Primordial Flaring Forth." (Swimme & Berry, 1992) As every place is defined by its boundaries, *every story is bounded* by its beginning and ending. Every life story is bounded by a birthing and a dying. Creation myths start with "in the beginning" and end with eschatological visions of the end-times.

Just as every place has a certain size extension that can be measured and mapped, so does every story, every temporal process, every developmental sequence, have a certain *extended duration* that can be measured and recorded, using clocks and chronographs. Time on planet Earth is measured by reference to the orbit of the Earth around the Sun, and by the rotation of the Earth itself, in other words, by the movements of planetary bodies through space. Some people and cultures have conceptions of time as a cyclical, recurring process, probably based on their perception of the rotations of planets and the recurrence of seasons. Others, impressed by irreversible events such as birthing and dying, have thought of time as a linear vector, like a stream, moving ineluctably in one direction only. When Heraclitus said "We can step into the same river", he was speaking about a place with boundaries; when he added "it is always differ-

ent water flowing past", he was describing the irreversible stream of temporal process.

There is a psychic experience of time, just as there is psychic space. In altered states of consciousness such as dreams and visions time can be "shortened" or "lengthened", or seemingly by-passed altogether. When we are excited and stimulated, time passes quickly; when bored or burdened, it crawls at a snail's pace. In near-death experiences and other extreme situations, we may have the experience of being suspended outside of time, of having ample time to make complex decisions, even although only seconds have elapsed in clock time. In the inner worlds of dreaming and shamanic out-of-body journeys, time is different: we can travel instantaneously across the globe, as well as backwards and forwards in time, on the wings of thought and desire.

Like places, stories too have *internal divisions*, structural features and parts. Every developmental sequence, for example the growth and maturation of animals and plants, has its definite stages. The grand Universe Story contains nested within it innumerable other stories: the story of the galaxy, the story of the solar system, the story of planet Earth, the story of life on Earth, the story of animal and human life, the story of human culture; continuing the lineage, we then come to the story of our ethnic group, our ancestors and family, and our personal story. This personal story too has its sub-divisions: the story of my childhood, my youth, my work, my relationships, children, and so forth. Every story-line or narrative has endless permutations of plot and subplot. Every cyclic process too has its crests and troughs: the seasonal cycle, the sleep-wakefulness cycle, hormonal cycles, the swings of mood between elation and depression, and many others.

And stories have *centers*, the core issue or central theme around which the whole story is organized. One central theme in a person's life-story is often the mid-life crisis or transition. The central theme in the Darwinian story of evolution is the principle of *natural selection*. When bioregionalists and deep ecologists advocate abandoning a homocentric perspective, where everything is seen from our hopelessly muddled and arrogant human perspective, they advocate an ecocentric ("ecosystem-centered") or biocentric ("life-centered") perspective instead. Of course, in one sense, we are always and inevitably looking at life and the world from the human-centered perspective; just as dogs have a canocentric, cows a bovicentric and foxes a vulpocentric point of view. But perhaps this is not as fixed and obvious as we think. Using empathic identification, we can perhaps learn to transcend our homocentric prejudice, and understand the life-story of another animal from the inside. Certainly, this is what numerous myths and legends of native peoples seem to suggest: in ancient times humans and animals could understand each other's language, maybe even get married to each other on occasion.

As a place has its *inhabitants*, so does a story have its characters, actors, heroes and antagonists, role-players and support crew. They are the agents in the

dramatic action, performing the story or play, as scripted by the laws of nature, the genetic code, the cultural tradition, the family upbringing, the karmic predispositions, the traits of character and temperament, our thoughts and our intentions. According to Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenesis, the laws of nature are really more like *habits* that have developed over time, than they are abstract principles existing in a timeless dimension (Sheldrake, 1988). The forms of the cosmos and nature develop the way they do by resonant similarity to previous forms. Thus, organisms of different species inhabit the niches and habitats for which their ancestors have developed the habits of adaptation. The ecological crisis shows us that the human species has learned some extremely maladaptive and destructive habits in relation to the natural environment. The bioregional vision is that humans need to humbly learn *reinhabitation*, -dwelling in a place in a balanced way, with respect for the stories of the other inhabitants.

Places have *names* and so do stories. Indeed, the name of a place is inextricably connected to the story of "what took place there". We think of a place, say Egypt or Rome, and myriads of images crowd our minds, the images of the history and peoples of those places. The life-story of an animal or forest cannot be imagined separately from the place it inhabits. In the life-story of humans too, biography and geography are intimately interwoven. The story of a city-dweller is different in spirit than that of a country-dweller. In medieval times, the difference was thought to be so significant that church-dominated city-dwellers asserted that country-dwellers, *pagani* or heathens, had no religion. For indigenous people, the name of the place often *is* the story, as in these lines from a poem by Kim Stafford called "There Are No Names but Stories" (Stafford, 1987). ¡POEM¿When the anthropologist asked the Kwakiutl for a map of their coast, they told him stories: Here? *Salmon gather.* Here? *Sea otter camps.* Here *seal sleep.* Here we say *body covered with mouths.* ¡POEM¿How can a place have a name? A man, a woman may have a name, but they die. We are a story until we die. Then our names are very dangerous. A place is a story happening many times.

Just as particular places each had a deity or genius associated with it, so did the divisions of time. The Babylonian calendar, which the West has inherited, invented the weekly cycle of seven days, each associated with the deity of one of the planets (e.g. Saturday with Saturn, Monday with Moon). The ancient science of astrology was based on the view that the spirit of the time and place of a person's birth can be determined by the pattern of the planetary positions at that moment. The rising or culminating of a given planet at the time of birth symbolically indicated something of that person's character and spirit. For instance, a person born when the planet Mars was rising might have a "martial" temperament; those born when Saturn was prominent were said to have a disposition to melancholia.

Every person's life-story begins at a certain moment in time in a particular

place; and it ends at a certain time, also in a particular place. In the worldview and mythologies of many cultures, the life-story is thought of as a journey, to and through a series of places: it might be a hero's journey of transformation, or the mystical path to enlightenment, or an exploration of hidden worlds, or the quest for vision in wilderness. The destination of our life-journey is the metaphor for our destiny. Ancient traditions tell us that as we come closer to the end of our life, we begin to gather the wisdom of old age, the understanding that comes from really having lived in those places. As T.S. Eliot wrote,

> And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

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Citation Format

Metzner, Ralph (1995) The Place and the Story: Where Ecopsychology and Bioregionalism Meet *Trumpeter*: 12, 3. http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.12.3.3

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