City, Nature and our Muted Totemic Imagination

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We can overcome division only by refusing to be divided.
Raymond Williams The Country and the City 1973

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I use data from fieldwork in Metropolitan Toronto to discuss how western societies shape their collective identities in relation to the natural world.

An Urban Myth

It began with a curious paradox. In the course of fieldwork, I would ask people about nature. Most respondents, defining nature as nonhuman living beings, would answer: "Nature is where I go to when I want to get away from the city." People would say that urban life was inimical to nature. "Nature is where the city is not," they would insist when I probed.

And yet the city teems with animal and vegetable life. Flora and fauna in innumerable forms reproduce their species in every available crevice of the concrete jungle. Wildflowers bloom in abandoned lots. Domestic gardens attract earthworms, butterflies and countless insect species. Unmanaged landfills erupt into biodiversity. Many animal species are drawn to the city because of the cityscape itself, with its abundance of food sources and enhanced range of nesting territories. Raccoons, rats and other scavengers seek out household garbage cans, fast-food waste bins, city dumps, Bats and sparrows take to house attics, pigeons to apartment balconies, hawks to skyscraper ledges. Warm concrete and asphalt lure reptiles. Urban parks, gardens and cemeteries all support a wealth of wildlife (Grady 1995).

Furthermore, people actively seek out animals, constantly trying to connect with other life forms. Throughout recorded history humans have valued encounters with other living things: groves, gardens, waterfalls, and animals as companions or curiosities or entertainment (Tuan 1984). Urban North Americans frequent conservation areas, zoos, bird sanctuaries, 'African safari' parks. They provision birdhouses, seek pets to care for at humane societies, look forward to the weekend escape to the country (and 'nature'), plan leisure-time pilgrimages to glimpse a whale. Toronto is built atop a system of deep natural ravines that shelter vegetation, streams and animals from urban development, creating favourite haunts for walkers and cyclists. One of the most popular draws to downtown Toronto in recent years was a duck that had chosen an ornamental pond between two massive high-rise

complexes where she bred and launched her ducklings annually. Her human fans were legion, loyal and protective, but baffled by the duck's choice of nesting place.

It appears, then, that the absence of nature in the city is an urban myth. What we *can* recognize, on the contrary, is a strong current of *biophilic* practice—practice motivated by an intense interest in and attraction to other life forms (Wilson 1984)—that seems to be an integral part of western urban society. Yet this biophilia tends to be muted in urban society and is mostly unnamed as a motivating force.

Muting

Although anyone can easily observe the state of human–nature co-existence in a western city, its actuality seems to escape the consciousness of most urbanites in favour of a tenacious faith in nature's absence. For the most part my respondents stood their ground, quite unwilling to acknowledge as 'natural' any urban interactions with nonhuman life. When individuals did acknowledge the presence of nature in the city, they would do so offhandedly or playfully, suggesting that the subject neither merited nor received much thought or articulation. People, it seems, are disinclined to recognize any urban being, human or nonhuman, as natural. One person mused: "If you did away with all the animals in the city, you would be missing something, but you'd be hard-pressed to say what it is." Western society's common metaphors, it is said, no longer derive from the natural world (Merchant 1982).

This paradoxical state of affairs might simply be a curiosity were it not for our current environmental crisis.

Environmental crisis

The difficulties western urban people seem to have in thinking about and articulating human-nature relations and biophilia gives pause before the urgency of the decisive global crisis we face today. While the need for change in human relations with the environment is now widely recognized, scholars, policy makers and world leaders have been quite unsuccessful in coming to grips with the totality of it: global warming, the risk of collapse of major ecosystems, the arrival of unforeseen disasters, the threat of many more of these, and sooner. We find, to our bewilderment, that the loss of the use of metaphors from the natural world has resulted in a dulled, ill-equipped imagination, with significant consequences for our ability as a society to deal with this emergency.

What lies in the way of coming to sound and benign solutions for a

matter so critical for every inhabitant of the planet?

Muting of Totemic Imagination

There must have been a time for our ancestors when they felt truly native: not separate, but a part of the given order of things, living with other beings in a shared habitat. If this is possible, isn't it possible that all of humanity, including ourselves, might have been forwarded some vital aspects of character and inclination from this early imprinting? Some echo in the structures of feeling that would permit us, at times at least, to rediscover our interdependence with the rest of life? Yet, apart from that odd, mostly unaccounted period of ecological affinity and spontaneous wonder in childhood that writer Edith Cobb explores so effectively (1977), individuals in western culture no longer seem able to tap effortlessly into this state of belonging for any length of time. What appears to have been lost is our *totemic imagination,* that is, our ability collectively to envision, name and experience the world as natural beings-in-habitat, as animals sharing the world in complex reciprocal relationships with other living beings.

Having suppressed our totemic imagination, we have lost critical elements of language and imagination with which to make sense of the rest of the natural world, and of ourselves in it. We manifest a poverty of discourse related to nature, to other animals, to human—animal relations. We are not able to speak coherently about animals as 'experiencing *subjects* of a life' (Regan 1985, my emphasis). Nor can we talk about human beings as natural creatures, as *animal* subjects. As a result of our impaired totemic sensibility we are deeply perplexed in the presence of the real and not scientized natural world. Our depleted collective imagination cannot contain the irreducible complexities of nature.

Nature as a cultural system

Cultural historian Raymond Williams warned some time ago: "We need different ideas because we need different relationships" ( ). It is widely recognized that new ideas about human beings and nature will be critical in changing humanity's destructive interactions with the biosphere. Yet we continue to share an attitude "we *know to be false but can't seem to shake:* that we somehow stand outside, or apart from, nature" (Pollan 2001:xxv, my emphasis).

A major body of scholarly critique in the 1980s and '90s, eschewing traditional technical analyses and basing itself on a realization that our the environmental crisis lies in the very sources of how we think, in the basic and

often submerged premises we hold about the world, has determined that our ecological impasse has a lot to do with the way in which Western society has defined nature and prescribed or influenced human relations with the rest of the biosphere (see, e.g., Merchant 1982, Winner 1986, Evernden 1985, 1992, Devall & Sessions 1995). In other words, we are suffering as a direct result of the way in which we in the West have *constructed nature as a cultural system.*

In the same way that culture is understood to be constructed by human beings as a way to interpret their experienced world in a stable, ordered and collective way, so, too, is nature a constructed concept, "a hypothesis every society needs" (Evernden). 'Nature' is one of our principal ways of knowing: of ordering our percepts, concepts, emotional responses, our social and political interactions, our productive practices and our metaphysics. General agreement on an accepted and acceptable relation of humankind to nature—nature as a cultural system—makes up one of the most significant ways peoples everywhere tend to the ordering of their world.

A characteristic feature of nature as a western cultural system is the dualism that pervades our modern view of humanity-and-nature. In depicting the passage from nature to culture as the central problem in anthropology, Levi-Strauss summarized well the evolutionarily-tinged, progressivist leaning which presumes a decisive split between these worlds: nature and culture, animals and humans, as separate orders of being. While there is evidence of some significant change in people's thinking, it is still the case that this presumption forms the basis for much of everyday and scientific discourse to this day. Even when people assert an idea of humanity as part of nature, the ensuing declaration, whatever its substance, is consistently built on the nature–culture divide: nature quite rapidly metamorphoses into all that is nonhuman. This divide is so deeply ingrained in our ways of knowing that the discrepancy between assertion and argument is seldom noticed (Glacken 1967).

Another distinguishing feature of nature as a western cultural system—the muting of any totemic imagination or sense of human being as creaturely being and as sharing the same phenomenal world with other beings—stems directly from the nature–culture divide. While changes are apparent here too among the public at large, this muting tendency is still prevalent in contemporary scientific disciplines directly related to environmental concerns, where differences between humans and other animals are highlighted while continuities are downplayed or discounted altogether. Pollan's observation is accurate: even though we know it to be wrong, we still can't seem to get rid of the notion that we stand apart from nature; it is embedded in our current structures of feeling.

How, then, can we expect conceivers of planetary solutions—such as the people toiling on the International Panel on Climate Change, or those who pulled together the Kyoto Accord—not to mention ordinary society, to improve relations with the rest of the natural world in the face of such a serious failure of imagination, leaving us with a poverty of categories of shared discourse in which to cast and scrutinize such human-nature relationship? Can people think clearly and broadly enough about nature and human—nature relations if they cannot exchange ideas, if they cannot talk clearly enough about what really matters? If they have lost the shared totemic imagination?

PART I:
THE CITY AND THE CULTURAL CONTRACT: MISSING METAPHORS

Does the city itself have something to do with the observed poverty of thought and language about nature? The city is, after all, the principal setting for the creation and recreation of contemporary western cultural life, and a primary medium out of which has developed much that is characteristic of western ways of approaching the world. Additionally, cities are important in the quest to find solutions to the ecological crisis. As the shaping milieus of more than half the world's population and as the greatest consumers and producers of raw materials, commodities and waste, cities everywhere have an enormous impact on the natural environment.

Yet to many who have given much thought to such things, it is not the city itself as a form of human settlement that has been so destructive, but its modern function as an engine of globalized capitalism (Caulfield and Peake 1996, Williams 1973).

City and Country

"It was divine nature which gave us the country, and man's skill that built the cities," wrote the Roman scholar Varro (in Rybscynski 1996:36), expressing a point of view that remains robust in the West today. Cities are believed by many to be among humankind's greatest achievements, for the built environment symbolizes human ingenuity, accomplishment, wealth. In frontier America, it was generally understood that the city's role was to rework nature: "Chicago is an instance of a successful, contemptuous disregard of nature by man," was an appreciative nineteenth century observation (in Cronon 1991:14). A common metaphor for the city is the machine, as, for example, an "engine for commerce." Such cities are thought of as practical

and functional, taking form and growing according to material requirements alone (Rybczynski op.cit.:43f). To others, the city is an engineering apparatus used mainly for controlling people (Harvey 1996: 418). For Williams, the idea of the city as an artifact is an evocative symbol in Western culture, but the evocation is not always or unmitigatedly one of human triumph. He writes: "On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition. . ." (op.cit.:1)

Basic to these observations is an assumption that the city and the country are fundamentally opposed entities. Indeed, this opposition is central to the history and definition of both terms. The term *'country,'* nature-endowed, appeared, precisely *as* its opposite, when the artful *'city'* was born in the late sixteenth century—along with industrial capitalism (Williams 1983). This understanding of country and city, nature and art, as separate worlds, and the related emphasis on difference rather than connection between them, have fostered a conviction that human beings *could* actually build a world separate from nature. And, indeed, in modern Western thought cities are frequently envisioned as unmoored, isolated from countryside and nature, and self-sufficient. The fact that many of the resources an urban centre actually needs in order to survive are increasingly acquired from far away and not from nearby hinterlands, only serves to strengthen this perception (Wackernagel and Rees 1996). Urban reliance on the natural world is thus generally invisible: in the city, nature is always somewhere else. Whether cities are thought of as the height or blight of human achievement, in the conception of most people, social scientists included, they are without any doubt the product and reproducer of *Homo faber*.

How has the modern Western city come to be so thoroughly dispossessed of the natural? "At what moment, exactly," asks William Cronon (1991:18), "did the city of Chicago cease to be part of nature?"

The Logic of Capital

Williams places the beginnings of this process in Britain coincident with the emergence of capitalist modes of production at the end of the sixteenth century. The 'logic of capital,' its drive to accumulate, became most fully materialized in the city. While the city's most prevalent metaphor may be the machine, in terms of advanced capitalism the city is increasingly viewed in more global and less grounded terms as the 'spatial expression of the production, reproduction, circulation and organization of capital' (Caulfield and Peake 1996).

Williams' argument in *The Country and the City* (1973) is that capitalism as a mode of production underlies most of the history of country and city. In fact, he says, the total character of what we know as modern western society has been determined by capitalism. Its abstracted economic drives, fundamental priorities in social relations, criteria of growth and profit, have over several centuries altered the country and created the kinds of cities we live in today; in its imperialist forms it changed the world. In this current global era, unhooked from its nearby hinterlands to range far afield, the city seems even less grounded than ever.

The vast and disparate hinterlands that provision the city are mostly out of sight and out of mind to city-dwellers. Goods for trade or consumption arrive from all over the world with the imprint of their origins and histories erased.

Advantages of Nature as a Simple Cultural System

The immense utility of the nature-culture divide in modern Western society for keeping the engine of capital stable is manifold and obvious. For one thing, the habit of representing nature as a separate order of being, as all the material world except us, allows us to forget that it is we human beings who have shaped our own perceptions of nature, our polarizations and our practices. If we believe we have nothing to do with nature, we can do nothing about it. In addition, the maintenance of nature and culture as separate orders of being is necessary to keep the idea of humanism alive. "Unless we have this absolute separation," Evernden comments, "we cannot claim the unique qualities that justify our domination of the earth" ( ).

The polarity of city and country has also served to mute our recognition of the dependence of urban life on a larger ecological habitat: not only its own hinterlands (Cronon 1991, Williams 1973), but also far-flung places unknown to most western urban citizens, where resources, labour and environments are exploited and altered to maintain preferred forms of urban life in the advanced industrial countries (Wackernagel and Rees 1996). Further, since the goods consumed arrive from all over the world with the imprint of their origins and histories erased, erased also is any knowledge we might have obtained about geography, social relations, habitat transformation, national debt and exploitation. We cannot know the full costs of what we consume, and we remain ignorant of the damage we do. Without the direct experience of economic activity, city-dwellers have no coherent way to recognize or respond to unsustainable land and resource management practices, whether local or global (ibid.).

Thus, 'confounding' information not friendly to 'getting and spending,' turning nature into commodities, or maintaining the nature-culture divide, is muffled. Language, thought or feeling about issues not directly related to capital tend to be diminished. In such an environment, urbanites' awareness of the natural world as other than raw materials for production or consumption—e.g., as the source of non-utilitarian but essential relations, including biophilic and totemic tendencies—is bound to be stifled.

Our failure to name whatever experiences of being we do at times apprehend, such as totemic or biophilic impulses, ensures that we no longer attend seriously to any 'confounding' emotional experiences of biophilia or creatureliness we may personally have; and it ensures that we will ignore the turn these experiences might urge toward biocentrism

The Logic of Cultural Systems

The city is a also a cultural system in that it is a cultural arena ruled by an organizing metaphor that shapes and constrains its inhabitants' perceptions and conceptions, their actions and language. In such a cultural system, organized by the metaphor of a machine for increasing capital for its owners, city-dwellers' awareness of the natural world as other than raw materials for production or symbolic consumption (e.g., awareness of biophilic tendencies and of totemic imagination, of human beings as natural beings in habitat related to the rest of living nature in a non-utilitarian relation), tends to be muted. In ordering the natural world, the West vastly privileges human dominance, manipulation, technique and the transformation of nature, and mutes the collective appreciation of bioconnectedness and the free rein of the totemic imagination.

As a cultural milieu, the city is not inert but exerts a vital if hard-to-define shaping force on human consciousness and behaviour. It is as if the city, as the emblematic 'humanly-built environment,' can be experienced in no other way. As a cultural sphere delimited and defined by its built environment, the city is apprehended by its inhabitants as *an arena for not-experiencing the living world.* What has been created by human resourcefulness is registered as suitable and remains unmarked, while what is not built and thus does not fit is marked—as anomalous: "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966). A common response to matter out of place is to ignore it, or not-perceive it. This may explain somewhat why, all dispassionate evidence to the contrary, the city is experienced by its natives as a place where "nature is not."

Given the limits of human cognitive ability to follow contradictory

demands, the very need for a knowable order necessitates a certain blindness to glaring contradictions. The logic of cultural systems thus stems not only from the human need to order and to understand our world, but also from the need to resolve, remove, or ignore contradiction. How can we, however precariously, satisfy two basic but seemingly incompatible motivations in one system of nature: the capitalist economic imperative to preserve the stance of 'alienation from nature' in whatever way possible in order to commodify everything and every relationship more easily and thus ensure sustained market growth, and the desire to nurture biophilic, life-enhancing inter-species relations? The simplification of our understanding of nature is thus primarily achieved through muting to achieve a sense of coherence and order, and through the resultant poverty of our system's metaphors. We lack metaphors to understand other creatures or ourselves as creatures. Despite the wealth of knowledge we have from centuries of field naturalism and scholarship on the subject, there is a stubborn sparseness of language or other shared means to popularly reflect an acknowledgment of the complexity and intricacy of the lives of other animals and plants, as individuals and as communities. We still find it fanciful to attribute individual histories—biography—to real animals' lives.

Further, we have little language to reflect the variety of needs, interests, and vital concerns of humanity *as animals*: our needs to survive and reproduce, to nest, to produce, to exercise our own funkionslust [29], to relate and cooperate, to forage and to kill in order to eat. We suffer a poverty of expression for anything not bought or sold, not made or unmade, not lost or won. And of all these, the crucial metaphors that are missing with respect to our subject relate to biophilia, the totemic relation, and the sense of oneness with the biosphere.

Missing Metaphors and the Cultural Contract

Our Western idea of nature with its associated practices—that is, nature as a cultural system—depends for whatever coherence and order it can claim to have not only on what we agree to perceive, but also on what we jointly *agree to elide from our perceptions.* This human capacity to not-see, to not-register or to actively mute some aspects of the given world is crucially important for maintaining this sense of order. For, erased from urbanites' awareness is the natural world with which they cohabit; muted are any biophilic tendencies; and gone to ground is their totemic imagination.

The loss of totemic imagination and the muting of biophilic tendencies are more than losses: they are, *active forfeitures* we all pay out in the service

of a sense of coherence and continuity. They are part of a contract we have accepted as the price of cultural order. This is the essence of our *cultural contract.* It is this *cultural contract*, that threatens our capacity to think with appropriate complexity about our endangered environment, and it accounts in large part for difficulties in finding our way to environmental solutions. Our failure to act in concert to forestall environmental collapse is related to this contract. Our sense of order depends on our missing metaphors (totemic imagination, biophilia, relationship—all outside the net of capital) *remaining missing*. This muting is part of the *bargain we make* in order to live with a sense of order in western city under capitalism. In contemporary capitalist society with its penchant for universal commodification, our biophilic inclinations tend to be circumscribed and privatized, or otherwise disguised in everyday practices, reinforcing a conviction, contrary to research findings, that we are profoundly alienated from the rest of nature. Our Western cultural system of nature depends on its *missing metaphors*: that is, nature as we understand it depends on these metaphors *remaining missing*. At the very least, they need to be securely compartmentalized.

Consequences

The hegemony of economic language in ecological thought has cost dearly, reducing environmentalism to managerialism, dangerously narrowing the social imagination. "We feel unable to speak what is so hard to say in the language of self-interest." (Orr 1993:419)

Today's politics, limited to the pursuit of material self-interest, has rendered people …unable to talk of larger and more important things (Orr ?1993:418). This leaves us with an impaired conscious intelligence and depleted mental resources resulting in difficulty imagining a biocentric, totemic cultural perspective from which to elicit appropriate responses to climate change;

"The citizens of the industrial world suffer form a collective ecological blindness that reduces their collective sense of 'connectedness' with the ecosystems that sustain them" (Wackernagel & Rees 1996: 132).

As a result of our impaired totemic sensibility we are unknowingly but deeply perplexed in the presence of the real and not scientized natural world. Our depleted collective imagination cannot contain the irreducible complexities of nature. It leaves us with an impaired conscious intelligence: difficulty imagining a biocentric change: our mental resources are too depleted to work effectively. Mutes our ability to solve the ecological crisis we are facing today. It all adds up to a colossal *failure of imagination.*

Opportunities: Ecological Footprint

The Ecological Footprint, the concept and accounting instrument invented by Rees and Wackernagel to assess the sustainability of current human activities vis-à-vis the natural world, can become a way to re-inscribe into urban consciousness a sense of connectedness to a city's supporting ecosystems. By disclosing the ties a city actually has to its hinterlands, EF grounds the city in a natural habitat; together, city and hinterland are grasped as a dynamic unity, an ecosystem. Since a city's EF includes resource imports from anywhere in the world and waste assimilations of any part of the global commons, it also represents the user population's appropriated carrying capacity (ibid.). EF may thus be used as an instrument for the critique of capitalism, uneven development and traditional economics. Built into its calculations is the full awareness that human carrying capacity is as much a product of cultural factors as of ecological productivity.

The concept of the Ecological Footprint claims to be rooted in the basic environmentalist premise that human beings are organisms embedded in nature and that human society is a subsystem of the ecosphere. However, Wackernagel and Rees themselves point out that their instrument contains a major flaw: the assumptions underlying the concept are deeply anthropocentric. It does not take into account the ecologically productive land area needed to support other species independent of any service they may provide to humans; it allows only for humankind in its calculations. They believe that even if humanity's survival alone were considered, the instrument would have to take biodiversity and general ecosystem integrity into account to a much greater degree. Even more effective, they maintain, would be a shift to more ecocentric values: "Respect for, and the preservation of, other species and ecosystems for their intrinsic and spiritual values would automatically ensure human ecological security" (ibid.:38).

New Image of City Needed

As Cronon writes: "…the commodities that feed, clothe, and shelter us are among our most basic connections to the natural world. If we wish to understand the ecological consequences of our own lives —if we wish to take political and moral responsibility for those consequences—we must reconstruct the linkages between the commodities of our economy and the resources of our ecosystems" (1991: xv). The city and the country do have a common history, he insists, and their stories must be told together. We can no longer isolate human life from the ecosystems that sustain it. The study of urban settlements and of people in them is no longer possible without a grasp

of the entanglements of nature/culture: city forms are expressions of local ecology. "A city is not an artificial construct, superimposed on a natural landscape: it is part of the landscape it inhabits" (Grady 1995:2).

We need to alter our image of the city from an unmoored, denatured, mechanized form of settlement fueled by the logic of capital to one embedded and sustained in local biophysical habitat; and beyond this, to find the requisite metaphors to describe its role and that of its inhabitants as major participants with other life forms in the biocultural dynamics of regional and global ecosystems.

PART II:
RETRIEVING THE TOTEMIC IMAGINATION: RELATIONSHIP AND IDENTIFICATION

Given the oversimplifications of nature urban-dwellers tend to live by, the mutings and elisions paid out as the cost of maintaining psychological order and coherence in the city, is the failure of imagination depicted above just that, a failure, or have we instead reached the limits of our imaginative capacities? If the former, perhaps we are not totally bereft of possibilities for recapturing our totemic imagination.

Let us look at some of the evidence for the ability of human societies, to whatever degree, to take the imaginative leap and join perceptually, emotionally or cognitively in the natural world in relationship with other living beings.

Inter-Species Relationship

Anthropological fieldwork records offer copious vignettes depicting non-utilitarian human-animal interactions. Clifford Geertz describes how Balinese men related to their gamecocks:

> [They] spend an enormous amount of time with their favorites, grooming them, feeding them, discussing them, trying them out against one another, or just gazing at them with a mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption. Whenever you see a group of Balinese men squatting idly in the council shed or along the road in their hips down shoulders forward knees up fashion, half or more of them will have a rooster in his hands, holding it between his thighs, bouncing it gently up and down to strengthen its legs, ruffling its feathers with abstract sensuality, pushing it out against a neighbor's rooster to rouse its spirit, withdrawing it toward his loins to calm it again (19??:).

Geertz notes that the men spent " . . . what seems not only to an outsider, but also to themselves, an inordinate amount of time with them," seeing to the minutest details of their feeding, grooming, ceremonial preparation, exercise, and general care. [12]

Inter-Species Subjectivity

From the many descriptions of human - animal relations in the anthropological literature, one may easily gain the impression that for many of the peoples studied the animals in question are subjects: recognizable individual beings of another species with whom people have significant, often emotional relationships. Of the village people and their relation to their cattle in Asturias, Spain, James Fernandez says:

> Cows and calves have an enormous weight in village life. They are a constant topic of conversation. When one is shown the family pictures, photos of cows and calves are as likely to tumble out amidst the shuffle. And a family given a picture taken five years earlier of the father and baby posing before a cow team pulling a hay cart spent most of an excited half hour remembering those cows with nostalgia (1986:4).

'Totemic' Relationship

This portrayal by anthropologist Richard Nelson of the Koyukon Indians of North America may come closest to what I mean by a 'totemic imagination.' It may also be the most difficult to truly comprehend.

The Koyukon Indians of the boreal forest of sub-Arctic Alaska and Northern Canada were the subject of Nelson's research and a part of his life for many years. Nelson's own background frustrated his desire to understand the spiritual relationship between humans and animals in that society in any depth, as he himself freely admits. For example, the Koyukon recognize reciprocal moral codes between humans and animals. A Koyukon man said of the Canada goose: "'Even if it had the power to knock you over . . . I don't think it would do it'" (1993:). Restraint is perceived as part of all of living nature. Human beings not only must practice self-control but are also tempered by the rest of nature. The world that humans watch and interact with returns the gaze, keeping humankind within the bounds of moral restraint: "'There's always something in the air that watches us,'" a village elder told Nelson. On another occasion he was told: "'The country knows. If you do wrong things to it, the whole country knows. It feels what's happening to it. I guess everything is connected together somehow, under the ground.'"

An all-embracing affinity and connectedness with nonhuman life pervaded the thought, behaviour and belief of these people. Among hunting-gathering peoples, says Nelson, the intricate weaving together of nature and culture is like the exchange between living cells and their surroundings. "'Animals are our food,'" they say. "'They are our thoughts'" (ibid.).

It is likely, Nelson believes, that from earliest times most of humanity has understood the natural world according to principles similar to those of the Koyukon and other Native North American peoples.

What is Totemism?

"Ototeman— He is a relative of mine" (Levi-Strauss 1963).

Totemism is broadly defined as "...an aspect of the way in which man conceives of the relationship between the social and the natural world" (Kuper 1983:57). A similar set of ritual practices linking people and the natural world was recorded by anthropologists in a wide variety of places. At its core is a cluster of three essential traits: the existence of groups in a society named after some animal or plant; the idea that the human group is descended from and related to this animal or plant; and the treatment of the totem as sacred. While anthropologists argued for close to a century about the meaning of this phenomenon without coming close to any agreement, there was one clearly discernible commonality they could agree on (although they deemed it trivial): These varied practices all represented or celebrated a profound *relationship,* marked by a transparent and intense sense of affiliation and continuity between humans and other animals. Totemism revealed an only partially mediated state of being and connection between species.*

'Europe and the People Without Natural History' **

It is not only in other cultures that human-animal interactions suggest bonds of relationship, identity or belonging to the same moral universe. Western culture holds surprises of its own that inform this discussion.

It is only within the past century and a half that animals have become marginal in our lives. Descartes may have laid the philosophical foundation in the seventeenth century but the actual trivialization of animals in western

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* Elsewhere I speculated that totemic ritual may have been a way for human beings to express and celebrate *their own animal subjectivity* in the midst of other subjects, human and animal, inhabiting the natural world together (Sabloff 2001).

* * This section is taken largely from Sabloff 2001, pp 142-145.

society began in the nineteenth century with the growth of industrial capitalism, and greatly accelerated in the twentieth. “Before then animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man…they were with man at the center of his world” (Katcher and Wilkins 1993:190-91).

Social history concurs, and is bringing us closer to understanding the sense of common cause with the rest of the natural world that existed in western cities before the end of the nineteenth century. A folk tradition of human—animal relations existed among populations we might call, borrowing from Eric Wolf, the ‘people without natural history’: people whose interactions with other life forms were seldom recorded intentionally. It is only by interpreting this indirect historical record that we can glimpse the extraordinary extent to which ‘human society’ really meant, in early modern Europe and America, ‘human – animal’ society. For well into the Modern period, to a degree largely incomprehensible by our current standards, humans and animals shared in each others’ society. Humans and animals actually lived in closer proximity than the regnant ideologies implied (Thomas 1984). They often shared accommodations. Far more numerous in the early Modern period compared to the human population than today, all kinds of animals—cattle, pigs, horses, sheep, poultry, dogs and cats, kept to work or to be eaten or as pets—could be found everywhere in both rural and urban areas. One came upon animals in the most unlikely places in the cities, roaming the streets unattended, being milked in the road, or kept and bred within townhouses. Wandering pigs were a notorious hazard to urban existence. London poulterers kept thousands of live birds in their cellars and attics, while another citizen was known to have had two hundred pigs in his backyard. In 1842 a contemporary found that chickens were still being reared in town bedrooms, and that dogs and even horses lived inside the townhouses. Thus, even in the city, people lived intimately with all kinds of nonhuman beings.

People ‘without natural history’ behaved in most circumstances as if none of the grand metaphors of the Modern age—neither the inalterable stasis of God’s Great Chain of Being nor the Cartesian depiction of animal and plant life as inert clockwork mechanisms—made any great difference to their actual relations with the natural world. Animals were known individually, many were named, and people matter-of-factly trained them to work and perform tricks without worrying about the creatures’ supposedly limited ability to understand. As Thomas points out, “their owners, unlike Cartesian intellectuals, never thought them incapable of understanding” (ibid.: p#). Inter-species interaction showed time after time the abundance of

discrimination, inventiveness, sociality and curiosity displayed by all creatures: “Farm labourers knew that animals could be taught to perform many complicated operations. Shepherds had never doubted the sagacity of their sheepdogs. Horse-trainers had always regarded it as axiomatic that their charges had memory, imagination and judgment. The bee, thought an agricultural writer in 1616, had ‘a kind of wisdom coming near unto the understanding of man’” (ibid.: #). Thomas writes, “[F]armers and poor people made very little difference between themselves and their beasts. They went out with them in the fields in the morning, toiled with them all day and returned home with them in the evening” (ibid: #).

Thus, in a not-so-distant historical past, in a past we call modern, in fact, we can make out a closer, more interactive everyday practice between human and non-human species—although certainly not always a completely benign one—than any ideology would have us believe, and much evidence for more permeable boundaries between the species than we would recognize today. Ordinary people were content with an everyday, practical logic that included the rest of life as a matter of course. They went on interacting with the animal world in much the same way as they had through millennia past.

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Despite claims to the contrary, it looks as though the pull of biophilia and the totemic imagination are not entirely unfamiliar to western culture. However, as we saw earlier, the shared *expression* of these sensibilities has been severely attenuated. The acknowledged experiencing and valuing of affiliation with other living beings, and the sense of human being as animal being, long submerged in the pursuit of the artifact metaphor—in getting and spending all of nature as a resource—may have been too long neglected and impossible to retrieve.

PART III: BIOPHILIA AND THE OTHER

Ecological Imagination in Childhood

Researcher Edith Cobb was fascinated by that period in children’s lives when they are beginning to venture away from parents and discovering the outdoors. She describes a child’s utter delight in engaging in the natural world, the joy of discovering order and logic in nature’s aesthetics, every child’s passionate need to name and to know the outer world. The joy expressed by a young child out of doors is the joy of recognition, a delighted

awareness that knowing and being in some way coexist in them and in nature. In their urge to explore and affiliate with other life forms, they appear to be giving expression to an ecstatic biophilia.

- Children express wonder in response to the *novelty of* experience. The child's sense of wonder, displayed as surprise and joy, is aroused as a response to the mystery of some external stimulus. They are attracted to the unknown other. "A child's questioning of the nature of the real is largely a wordless dialectic between self and world" (Cobb 1977:31).

Biophilia

- Biophila as attraction to radical otherness: different from oneself.
- Enlargement of empathy and transcendence of the self
- We do not know how to fully exploit the depth of the human urge to continue to find satisfaction in knowledge of the outer world. 111
- The child appears to experience both a momentary sense of discontinuity— an awareness of his unique separateness and identity— and a revelatory sense of continuity-an immersion of his whole organism in the outer world …this is a preverbal experience of an aesthetic logic [88]
- The child momentarily suspended in a clarity of unmediated awareness [88]
- Biophilia as a fundamental attraction between and among organisms
- Combination of wonder and an acceptance of not knowing brings with it a special type of humility infused with joy. 107
- The evolution of plants proceeded according to a new motive force: attraction between different species. The desires of other creatures became paramount in the evolution of plants, because plants that could gratify those desires wound up with more offspring. ;108]

The Other

Ex. Of not attending to the otherness of the other: with revision of assumptions that culture is uniquely human, anthropological study of great apes is becoming not about what makes them great apes (and not humans) but just how much like us they are…"just how much like us we can construct them to be." (Mullin 2002). Compare here my diary extract re cats:

Once I kept a diary observing a mother cat and her kittens. I found the mother cat's behaviour so striking because so very similar to human maternal behaviour. I wrote down: "How human this cat mother is!" Only later did I realize I had put the emphasis in the wrong place. it was not how human this cat family was but rather how catlike human families are: in other words, how

similar both species were when it came to maternal behaviour. i.e. how similar are human and other mammalian behaviours. The original inversion was an example of how we tend to mute the animal in human beings.

- Hallowell notes: the natives were wise enough to minimize the outward differences and compared human and other beings' including plants' internal organization as we do in biology and see their essential similarity of plan; thus one sees that kinship seems to mean more than differentiation.
- Perhaps other organisms have a tendency to focus on living things, including ourselves. The other. And cf. anecdote about lions.
- Imagination is a barrier to the biophilia revolution: hard to envision a biophilia centred world and believe ourselves capable of creating it. Also the scale: we are not very good at comprehending things at scale of whole societies, much less that of the planet [431]
- We all need to become ecologically literate, understand the biological requisites of human life on earth.
- "We need a new relationship with animals, rising 'above prejudice to a position of respectful regard toward everything that is different from ourselves.' [434] quoting Barry Lopez.
- Transition to economy that foster biophilia requires a decision to limit the human enterprise relative to the biosphere [435]
- The decisions necessary to lead us toward a culture capable of biophilia are finally political decisions, 435
- We need to be able to admit that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence [436 quoting Vaclav Havel.]
- A childhood survival need is to know, learn, organize 107
- "Compassionate intelligence permits the kind of understanding and sharing of 'otherness' that we call 'identification.'" 107

The Other

What do we mean by the 'Other'? The meaning I want to pursue here is a way of thinking that stems from viewing nature as a complex system, and it presumes that others—other humans or non-human beings—are in the last analysis mysterious and unknowable. Once perceived to be beyond complete human understanding, other beings, human or non-human, can only emerge as Other—that is, as other subjects, and most particularly, as subjects apart from and unrelated to human need or desire. This is not to say that we cannot

mutually understand something about one another, person to person, species to species, for it appears in practice that we can, but simply, that we cannot presume to ever completely know, or be known. It is from this stance that philosopher Tom Regan called for the valuing of non-human lives: precisely because they are Other, because they are the experiencing subjects of a life, with inherent value outside and beyond the human cultural or ethical domain.

Animal Being as Other

As we saw earlier, other societies view members of various animal species as subjects. My own fieldwork left little room to doubt that even in urban western society, people value relating to nonhuman beings in a variety of ways. This was a clear manifestation in western society of some level of recognition of the animal as Other.

Human Being as Other

Thoreau and the night creatures.

Is it possible for human beings to truly remove ourselves from our centre of concern, and think of ourselves merely as subjects among other subjects? Here is Wilson once more, this time watching insects:

> In a twist my mind came free and I was aware of the hard workings of the natural world beyond the periphery of ordinary attention, where passions lose their meaning and history is in another dimension, without people, and great events pass without record or judgment. I was a transient of no consequence in this familiar yet deeply alien world that I have come to love. ..[47]

Possibly one of the key attractions of wild places and wild beings for human beings is the experience of a world beyond the human, where the human being is of no consequence. Getting to experience an emptying of ego, we carry away from such encounters a fresher intimation of humanity's place in nature: as just one kind out of an infinity of accidental creatures.

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Nature As a Complex System

When we give one name, nature, to a multiplicity of phenomena and processes, we are left with the illusion that in naming nature we understand

its ‘essence’. We think that nature is, if not simple, at least a graspable and controllable entity. The truth is, only the word ‘nature’ is simple. The effect of gathering many complex phenomena and ideas under one name is to obscure the ceaseless dynamism and infinite diversity of the activities, processes, relationships and things that make up the natural world. To give it unity, even a complex unity, is to reduce it and distort it. Ultimately, this reductionism feeds humanity’s ignorance of what our actual relations with nature may be. We will need a far more complex understanding of natural systems, and maybe the result will be more complex, or multiplex, relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world. [33]

The rise of ecology as a discipline would appear to be part of this same orientation toward understanding organized complexity. Yet there has not been as much application in ecology or other mainstream fields. These analyses are just beginning to be tackled elsewhere, however. Among the more astonishing finds are the later journals of Henry David Thoreau, discovered to hold extraordinary ideas very much akin to complexity theory today, directly applied to the natural world (Dassow Walls 1995). Cultural systems, like all natural systems, are more accurately thought of as far-from-equilibrium, open systems, systems closer to the ‘edge of chaos’ than we used to think. It is time for our popular ideas of nature and human - natural relations to be disturbed as well. Perhaps a greater tolerance for complexity, ambiguity, disorder and chaos in our customary thinking about cultural systems will lead to the discernment of deeper order, and an appreciation for a more fluid and unpredictable systematicity in nature and humanity’s place in it.

Nature can become a more complex cultural system when we dare to name more of our experience of it, more of its missing metaphors. Existentialist philosopher Martin Buber suggests that in the I - Thou relationship, the quintessential being-relation, “[t]here is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget ( ).” In this understanding of a more complex human - nature relation, none of its aspects is privileged above the others, none masked or muted in the service of coherence. Naming missing metaphors would introduce a renewed cultural discourse which, in turn, could lead to a shared acknowledgment of biophilia, biocentrism, and totemic sensibility as cultural values.

The task ahead of us is to struggle against the tendency to adopt a simplistic, unitary view of nature, and to learn to live within a more complex and dynamic paradigm. Our contemporary challenge is to complicate our everyday understanding and our experience of nature through naming more

of what we experience, even when—especially when —these experiences are contradictory. Perhaps the most important factor in living within nature as a more complex cultural system will be the capacity of human nature and western culture to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty well. We would need to build more ambiguity, more seeming chaos into our very perceptions, expectations, and representations of systems, and to invest these with value rather than resignation. The engagement with complexity would have to become part of our western habitus.

Raymond Williams has commented that "what a society needs, before all . . . is as many as possible conscious individuals." That means to me as many people as possible who are able to simultaneously register contradictory perceptions, inconsistent thoughts, dissident values, discordant emotions—who can, in short, name, praise, and even, at times, live conflicting experiences. To echo Buber, there is nothing that conscious individuals must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that they must forget. They would have the capacity to remain perpetually struck by wonder at nature's infinite variety.

The ability to tolerate and integrate more ambiguity, disorder and restraint into conceptions of order would mean a great change in western thinking. It would suggest that our categories of meaning would hold contradiction, heterodoxy and irresolution. We would recognize that nature as a cultural system is an artifact; and artifacts, as Edward Wilson noted, are incomparably poorer than the world they imitate. All of our systemic thinking would be understood as metaphorical thinking. An increased capacity to tolerate ambiguity might lead to the final realization and acceptance that as human beings our understanding of order is forever limited, forcing us as a society to acknowledge and live with this limitation. "The truth is," says Wilson, "that we never conquered the world, never understood it; we only think we have control." Friedrich Engels' vision sounds right, and chillingly prescient: "If man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him, by subjecting him, insofar as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of all social organization." If we were to adopt nature as a complex system, this attitude would demand that we perceive and honour the natural world as infinitely complex, "uncanny and unpredictable" (Evernden), and ultimately beyond human control or complete comprehension. Nature would have to be understood as a radical Other.

- Complexity: childhood interest in complexity of nature and of self
- The difficulties folly of controlling nature. The problem with using a linear machine metaphor to deal with a process as complex and nonlinear as evolution: the more thorough over control of nature is the sooner natural selection will overthrow it. [Pollan 213]

- A more complex, less human order—the order of an ecosystem. The very complexity of such fields, the sheer diversity of species in both space and time. [Pollan223]

These are all central preconditions to embarking on the long revolution toward a biocentred world view.

Re the Other: with revision of assumptions that culture is uniquely human, anthropological study of great apes is becoming not about what makes them great apes (and not humans) but just how much like us they are…"just how much like us we can construct them to be." (Mullin 2002) Compare here my diary extract re cats

(Katcher and Wilkins 1993: 427) says that when people crossed the divide from pre to post Descartes they had to discard belief that the world was alive and worthy of respect if not fear. We can extrapolate this and conjecture that we can cross (or close) the divide from post Descartes to a biocentric view of life, where the world is again alive and worthy of respect and fear.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

Point 1: review of biocentred perspective—renewed totemic imagination; respect and belonging; biophilia. The retrieval/invention of a collective totemic imagination is critical to the cultural transformation that would lead us to a biocentric/ecocentric perspective.
In order to collectively embrace a biocentric understanding as a metaphor to live by —ie as a model for new thinking and also for new structures of feeling
To move toward a biocentric world view at least 2 changes are needed in our ideas and especially in our relationships:
- first we need to recognize and acknowledge our own close relatedness to all other creatures: the embrace of a collective totemic imagination.
- Next is recognition of other beings as radically other, ultimately unknowable

subjects of their own lives; and ourselves as radically other too. A 'biophilic imagination' would welcome the attraction of different life forms to one another, as other subjects, radical others.

- [see Pollan 2001 on coevolution]
- Altered collective consciousness: intertwinement of totemic/biophilic
- imagination and human belonging

- Interdisciplinarity is critical to develop and foster diversity of perception and assumption, toward a complex perspective.

Point 2 Interdisciplinarity as a Form of Biodiversity; Colloquium as a cultural arena for Coevolution

Restoration of Missing Metaphors

Need for as many as possible conscious individuals

- Interdisciplinarity: way to attract diversity to common cause
- Interdisciplinarity: way to acknowledge differences, commonalities, relationships, and celebrate diversity
- Interdisciplinarity: way to unearth the missing metaphors in one another's disciplines, and at the same time find common metaphors to allow people to communicate fully
- Interdisciplinarity: way to seed the frontier:

If ecosystems are in large part produced by the organisms of which they are comprised, then language, through sharing imagined better possible worlds, can be productive of new possibilities in the ecosystems of which humans and cities are a part. For instance, Grady lifts the veil on the secret life of the modern industrial city as a natural habitat for wildlife. By offering a different frame of analysis, this activity may result in new ways of thinking and new relations in the world. [see Thoreau]

A wide divergence in perspective and background, and a common focus and commitment : collegiality I diversity; relaitonality

To discuss:

- As the geopolitical reach of environmental science has become more and more expansive, its intellectual temper has become more reductionist

Whereas [the 1987 Brundtland Commission] articulated a basic political,

moral and social framework from which to define policies for environmentally sustainable global development, IPCC began from a scientific origin—defining and managing a sustainable climate —from which should be derived the necessary social, economic, and other policies for survival.
Int'l Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences online

- "…there is no case in which the priorities of a capitalist system have not, from the beginning, been built in." (Williams 1973:294) cf. Kyoto accord, IPCC.
- We need a much better understanding of human nature
- We need to be able to think much more complexly.

  Each culture may have resonant ways of bringing to our attention aspects of life that our own culture has been unable to frame in any useful way. It is an ancient condition of life, borrowing: someone else had a way to get at something you [perceive or are somewhat aware of, but cannot put a word or a picture or a sense to. The ability to welcome plurality, diversity, very important .

- We are still in denial. Orr. Our crisis is not fundamentally one of technology; it is one of mind, will and spirit. [430] we would need first oof all to admit to failure: of our economics which became disconnected form lie; of our politics which lost sight of the moral roots of our commonwealth; of our science which lost sight of the essential wholeness of things." [430-1

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