Neo-Primitivism: The Loss, Recovery and Sustainable Development of Northern American Aboriginal Culture

Wei Chen

1 Krirk University, Thanon Ram Intra, Khwaeng Anusawari, Khet Bang Khen, Krung Thep Maha Nakhon 10220, Thailand

E-mail: Chen.Wei@staff.krirk.ac.th

Abstract. This paper aims to discuss the loss, recovery and sustainable development of native American culture from the perspective of the world-systems theory, and further illustrates how neo-primitivism is combined with psychotherapy to heal aboriginal individuals through reconnecting them with their sustainable tribal tradition. I will also try to clarify how Gary Snyder’s Myths & Texts, The Practice of the Wild, and The Old Ways were inspired by the sustainable native American neo-primitivism, its oral tradition and shamanism to advocate a wild culture and the concept of a poet-shaman to heal the binary opposition of Western civilization and its subsequent ecological crisis. If we can comprehend and conserve northern American aboriginal culture as it is, the goals of DESD and SDG such as good health and well-being, environmental conservation and protection, intercultural understanding (cultural diversity), reducing inequality, and sustainable cities and communities concerning northern American aboriginal culture can be realized ideologically, culturally and realistically.

Keywords: sustainable development, world-systems theory, neo-primitivism, reconnection therapy, Shamanism

1. Introduction

DESD (the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014) [1] was delivered by UNESCO as lead agency, which was supported by RCE (Regional Centres of Expertise) networks and the GUPES (the Global Universities Partnership on Environment for Sustainability) to promote its goals. After DESD, SDG (Sustainable Development Goals, 2015-2030) [2] was put forward by the UN to follow and extend the goals of DESD. Not only does the UN urge governments to fulfill the goals of sustainable development, but a great number of schools and private enterprises also strive to upgrade their teaching content or running modes to meets these sustainable ideals and standards. Both DESD and SDG share some crucial and urgent concerns for the well-being of all creatures in our vulnerable planet and the two projects and their respective goals are interconnected.

We can see the goals of DESD as follows: (1) Overcoming poverty (2) Gender equality (3) Health promotion (4) Environmental conservation and protection (5) Rural transformation (6) Human rights (7) Intercultural understanding and peace (8) Sustainable production and consumption (9) Cultural diversity and (10) Information and communication technologies (ICTs).

While the subsequent SDG further extends the goals of DESD into a more comprehensive scope of 17 items: (1) No poverty (2) Zero hunger (3) Good health and well-being (4) Quality
education (5) Gender equality (6) Clean water and sanitation (7) Affordable and clean energy (8) Decent work and economic growth (9) Industry, innovation, and infrastructure (10) Reducing inequality (11) Sustainable cities and communities (12) Responsible consumption and production (13) Climate action (14) Life with water (15) Life on land (16) Peace, justice, and strong institutions (17) Partnerships for the goals.

On the other hand, the renaissance of northern American aboriginal culture started in the 1880s and reached its peak in the 1990s. Ecological poet laureate Gary Snyder figured out the reason of its renaissance as it conveyed the valuable and sustainable companionship between humankind and non-humankind in our critical times of ecological crisis. Nevertheless, while Snyder resorted to northern American aboriginal culture to heal the trauma of Western civilization, northern American aboriginal culture itself has undergone the process of loss and recovery. The world-systems theory, which appeared in the 1970s, views the world as an incessantly circulate process and has tried to interpret the diverse cultural phenomenon of the reconstruction of northern American aboriginal identity as the long-term historical and evolutional motive force. Until then, Western medical system had seldom put the personal Indian dilemma within the context of his/her social and cultural community.

Psychiatrist Carl Hammerschlag indicated that the aboriginal witchcraft is a powerful cultural ceremony and the therapeutic process will have better healing efficacy if the aboriginal patient who is undergoing the psychotherapy can also resort to his/her healing tradition simultaneously. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko further advocates neo-primitivism. In her view, the root of native American substance abuse and addiction lies in their cultural loss; therefore, “cultural resistance” can be a sound strategy to heal their culture-related trauma. Resisting a dominant culture from the level of community can thus be viewed as a sustainable reconnection therapy which can enable an individual or a group to regain their cultural identity. As “Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development” has said in 2002, our abundant diversity is our common strength. This paper aims to discuss the loss, recovery and sustainable development of native American culture from the perspective of the world-systems theory, and further illustrates how neo-primitivism is combined with psychotherapy to heal aboriginal individuals through reconnecting them with their sustainable tribal tradition. I will also try to clarify how Gary Snyder’s *Myths & Texts, The Practice of the Wild*, and *The Old Ways* were inspired by the sustainable native American neo-primitivism, its oral tradition and shamanism to advocate a wild culture and the concept of a poet-shaman to heal the binary opposition of Western civilization and its subsequent ecological crisis. If we can comprehend and conserve northern American aboriginal culture as it is, the goals of DESD and SDG such as good health and well-being, environmental conservation and protection, intercultural understanding (cultural diversity), reducing inequality, and sustainable cities and communities concerning northern American aboriginal culture can be realized ideologically, culturally and realistically.

2. Aboriginal sustainable cosmology in Gary Snyder’s works

Aboriginal cosmology, which can be viewed as nondual, this-worldly and sustainable, influences Gary Snyder’s eco-poetry profoundly. Stanley Diamond took the Anaguta tribe as an example to define aboriginal sustainable cosmology, in which time will pass through the center of the eternity in the center of the world, where time and space will converge. Snyder also indicated that for Australian indigenous people, different worlds were overlapped and geographical environments were combined into one: “The Australian aborigines live in a world of ongoing recurrence—comradeship with the landscape and continual exchanges of being and form and position; every person, animals, forces, all are related via a web of reincarnation—or rather, they are ‘interborn’” [3].

Snyder further cited D’arcy Thompson’s view to illuminate that the form of a spiral will remind us of fractal geometry, which keeps resembling itself, of the stardust, the conch, the vulva and the womb, which in turn symbolizes the goddess in an expanding motion of the Indian creation.
dance in the spiral nautilus; its vertical orthoceras, which is the niche of the thread of a screw, will resemble its previous structure to distinguish the passing of time. Snyder added that we can find similar structures in “the maze dances, spiral processions, cat’s cradles, Micronesian string stars-charts, mandalas, and symbolic journeys of the old wild world [which] are with us still in the universally distributed children’s game” [3]. All of these symbolize the natural life form of sustainability but have been piteously lost in our modern times of alienated and fragmented civilization.

2.1 The recovery of Indian identity in light of world-systems theory

Though Snyder himself resorts to aboriginal sustainable culture to heal his own Western civilization, aboriginal culture itself has undergone the process of loss and recovery. Even though Ken Wilber criticized world-systems theory for it missed the ultimate One [4], world-systems theory can still explain the recovery of Indian identity in historical evolution. As Carol Ward, Elon Stander, and Yodit Solomon have pointed out, the Western healing program for indigenous people rarely puts the personal problems of Indian people within Indian communities [5]. Not until the appearance of the world-systems theory have the Indian issues been put within their social context. Psychiatrist Carl Hammerschlag remarked that for a wise native Shaman: “healing is a powerful, culturally endorsed ritual. . . . if you share the same cultural myths, healing is better achieved” [5]. It is better that Indian patients under psychotherapy also cooperate with traditional healers. The deeper cause of Indian substance abuse and addiction often resulted from their loss of indigenous culture. Moreover, “cultural resistance” can also become a means of healing for cultural-related dis-ease: “traditional healing represent[s] a new form of community-level resistance to dominant cultural forms both at the individual and the collective level” in order to regain their cultural identity: “individual ethnic renewal is . . . replacing a discarded identity . . . or filling in a personal void. . . . Collective ethnic renewal involves the reconstruction of community,” as Nagel has said [6].

World-systems theory in the mid-1970s was a response to dependency theory; the latter concerns “the causes of underdevelopment to be the exploitative and uneven nature of trade among nations and the continued flow of surplus from the periphery to the core areas” [5] while the former investigates long-term historical dynamics. As Albert Bergesen suggested in 1995, world-systems theory could explain ethnic cultural renewal and highlight multiculturalism [5]. According to world-systems theory, worldly changes often take place in cyclical processes; it can also explain why the current American Indian recovery community will resort to traditional medicine for their collective cultural recovery and individual healing; such sustainable healing is through “reconnection” to their family and community.

Traditional ceremonies such as the Sun dance will make participants part of and connected with their community, the Mother Earth and the universe. Learning to live for the land also contributes to their sustainable healing because the sense of place will make the disempowered Indian people empowered again; it is a kind of self-empowerment. Native healing tradition often strengthens people’s direct link to their traditional and sustainable heritage. Leslie Marmon Silko also posed the idea of “neo-primitivism” for native American tribes in the modern era. Totem, the powerful cultural symbol for native people, originated from the vernacular of native American tribe Ojibwas, meaning “his family and relatives”; Indian people will worship animate and inanimate beings as their tribal ancestor or genius loci. In totem worship, harm to and hunting of the totem animal were forbidden; thus totem worship has suggested ecological and sustainable awareness. Totem worship is the broadening of the identification of men and the other; in totem worship, the other is even holier than humankind.

2.2 Coyote, the native sustainable survivor in Snyder’s works

Snyder’s “Hunting I” in the Myths and Texts is his first shaman song, in which he represented his experience directly without artificial judgment: “I sit without thoughts by the log-road/ Hatching a new myth” [3]. Nevertheless, Geary Hobson has observed the problem in Snyder’s poetic choice:
[the] ‘white shaman’ fad among mainstream American poets seem[s] to have begun with Snyder and his ‘Shaman Songs’ sections of *Myths and Texts* (1960), while Leslie Marmon Silko has advised Snyder to look into the history of his own (white) ancestors in his search for a genuine American identity, rather than borrowing from the myths of Native peoples. [7]

Nevertheless, in my opinion, Gary Snyder’s resort to native American Sustainable Cultures is neither racism nor New Age arbitrary appropriation but a kind of cultural translation which can broaden and adjust the horizon of his own culture. Moreover, central to native north American mythology, trickster tales as stories of survival and transgressing taboos are a symbol of sustainable tradition continuity and cultural resistance in time of cultural fragmentation in order to survive from death to rebirth when facing the horror of Western imperialism. Coyote is the pan-Indian trickster in native art and literature and has conveyed the sense of the “other” in Western geographical or psychological frontiers. Snyder once mentioned in “Western Writers Talk” that coyote has conveyed two messages: (1) the sense of the west as a (lived) place for 40-50,000 years; (2) the antheroic and anarchic coyote could satisfy disaffected writers of the 1950s and 60s.

Shackleton also contended that the “Indianness” in Snyder’s poetry is a “symbol of white disaffection” [7]; for example, in Snyder’s “Curse on Men in Washington, Pentagon” (1967), we perceive the spiritual and sustainable support he got from native American rituals: “ghost dance:/ to bring back America, the grass and the streams” [8]. In Snyder’s *Myths and Texts* [9], both Buddhism and the native American trickster serve as alternatives to America culture. The poem “Berry Feast” (1957) in the *Back Country* [10] also depicted a coyote with beer and wine in section 3 to defy against Buddhist enlightenment in a life of excess and wandering mobility: “(who wants/ nirvana?) ‘drowned and drifting’ in a river, moving.” “Hunting 16” and “Burning 16” are also the combination of Buddhism enlightenment and Indian defiance: “Got the Buddha-/ nature/ all but/ coyote” [9]. In the end of “Burning 16” of *Myths & Texts*, we can perceive that Coyote as a transgressing antihero is like a transformer and stands for the ultimate nothingness and freedom:

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Dream, Dream,
Earth! those beings living on your surface
none of them disappearing, will all be transformed.
When I have spoken to them
when they have spoken to me, from that moment on,
their words and their bodies which they
usually use to move about with, will all change.
I will not have heard them. Signed,
(     )
Coyote. [3]
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This poem shows that all that exists on earth, sentient or nonsentient beings, will undergo the process of transformative and changing energy, physically (“bodies”) or spiritually (“words”). Coyote’s not hearing them anymore reveals the impermanence of our temporary state of existence, even though the sustainable energy of the vital force in the cosmos will never disappear but keep undergoing further transformation.

*Myths and Texts, Back Country* and *Turtle Island* are all endowed with Buddhist and native American sustainable elements though *Turtle Island* is more about the native American tradition, and coyote has further symbolized the “call of the wild.” In its second section of *Turtle Island*, Snyder satirized Western culture’s longing for Indian culture to heal their own spiritual dis-ease: “In the forests of North America,/ the land of Coyote and Eagle,/ They dream of India, of/ forever blissful sexless highs” [7]. Though in “Trees Full of Bugs,” Snyder’s attitude toward men’s innate wildness is paradoxical: “Coyote is forever/ Inside you./ But it’s not true” [7]. Snyder’s “new myth” for a sustainable Earth household with a sense of place endorses the ecological wisdom of survival from Buddhism and native American folklore in the form of storytelling to promote a West-East
dialogue to transform his own Western culture; Snyder’s view of “poetry as an ecological survival technique” [11] can lead to the transformative process of sustainable healing energy in the universe.

3. Indian sustainable healing rituals and systems ecology

Peter Harries-Jones claimed that some environmental movements have combined Indian respect for the land into a “cult-like vision of new-age ‘spirituality’” [12] to elevate our consciousness. Eyerman and Jamison also suggested that environmental cosmology was derived from systems ecology [13]. In Nurit Bird-David’s words, systems ecology is the tribal “metaphorization of human-nature relatedness” [14]. In aboriginal cosmology, energy in the cosmos is sustainably connected, and even “the killing itself then is metaphorized as sexual intercourse between hunter and prey” [15]. Though in Snyder’s view, the process of the food-chain should be undertaken with respect and avoid waste and unnecessary pain.

The “medicine complex” in Indian religion and cosmology is essentially about pairing people with the natural environment through dances, songs and medicines, which echo Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese views of healing as a harmonious and sustainable connection. As for the concept of names in Snyder’s poetry, it can contribute to the “name-sake ties, crossing between and linking nature . . . society and culture” [14]. Lewis-Williams also supposed the “identity between a shaman and the animal” [16] and the role of a medicine-man is both a trancer and curer. Indian medicine dances would evoke “protective powers of the universe to bear on the patient”, and it is a dance of “competing kinship claims over ill persons, between their living relatives and their dead, supernatural relatives”. In native American culture and Eastern culture, healing is often identical to spiritual rituals; both rely on our faith and willpower to change and heal; while an ancient healing environment will encourage our spiritual faith and cultural conventions to express our emotion; in contrast, Western medicine will only apply medical treatment to remove outer and superficial causes of diseases but often in vain for its ignorance of the whole context.

3.1 Native sustainable healing rituals and Snyder’s eco-poesy

For Dolores La Chapelle, shamans are conscious ecologists for they have seen the cosmos as a sustainable “circuit of energy” and keep communicating “between society and nature” [17]. Sustainable ritual and ceremony can be regarded as spiritual technology; seasonal festivals of myths, art, dance and games are all sustainable rituals to connect humans with nonhumans and can reconnect the conscious with the unconscious. As for Totemism, a totem can evoke the power, goodness and mutuality in the locale and awake our respect for other species. Seasonal and natural rituals as archetypal patterns can convey supernatural wisdom and reconnect us with the sustainable land; as Heidegger has said: “dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space” [17]. Gary Snyder also affirmed that ecology is a discipline which explores the counter-science and household science of “relationships, energy-transfers, mutualities, connections, and cause-and-effect networks within natural systems” [18]. Being ecological means being environmentally conscious of our being part of it in this world. Furthermore, the science of ecology confirmed the sustainable, competitive, co-evolutionary and cooperative interactions in living systems. As Snyder has mentioned, our ecosystem is like a mandala with god or demon figures of multiple relations. Though they are hierarchical in energy-flow, members within are equal. A natural system of energy-exchange and food-chains can be expanded to food-webs. Snyder added that the biological nature is like a puja and ceremony of offering and sharing, and the interconnection of frailty, impermanence and pain (the continuity of process and its ultimate emptiness) will lead us to compassion (Bodhicitta caused by Shantideva, 寂天).

3.2 Aboriginal sustainable ethics in Snyder’s works

In Myths & Texts, Snyder holds that human beings should protect the ancient forests of the far West lest our primitive, wild knowledge of nature, customs, myth and tradition will disappear along with the wildlife habitats due to humankind’s encroachment. In the Old Ways, Snyder also asserts that
nature is significant for the sustainability of life; what he opposes is not science and technology but their instrumentalization. In *Myths & Texts*, Snyder extols the pre-modern culture of logging, hunting and burning for a new myth [9]. For Snyder, Native American culture, their sense of place and their old ways are all useful compost for our future imagination [9]. His second book of poetry *Myths & Texts* exposes Western environmental racism. Snyder suggests that the development of civilization actually lies in our “mind,” and his imagination of the watershed is based on eco-justice, the land ethics of bioregionalism and a sense of community which will include nonhumans for sustainable development. In his opinion, old ways are always concerning our heart [19]. As critic Rod Philips [20] has mentioned, before ecology became worldwide, Snyder had discussed ecological aestheticism in college with his classmate James Welch to integrate an American Indian ecological outlook and Asian philosophy to cooperate with nature rather than control nature [20].

For Snyder, Western culture has already deviated from nature, and he is eager to combine nature, ecology and *Chan* (Zen) Buddhism to re-create a culture of the wild in our contemporary society [21]. Snyder further questioned that our overemphasis of individualism and humanism has made public land disappear under the privatization of capitalism, in which everything needs payment [21]. For Snyder, the way to resolve the problem will only be the practice of the wild.

4. The healing and sustainable environ, the sacred space and Snyder’s sense of place

Snyder’s eco-poetry is profoundly a kind of poetry of nonself. Snyder mentioned that before writing poetry, he would try to find out the sense of place, and he further admired that the West Coast in America is just endowed with such a sense of place. A healing and sustainable environment, according to Barbara J. Huelat, is more than a space; it is a sacred place for our body, mind, and soul. Snyder also regards nature as a place of overwhelming power. He likes to visit the Buddhist sacred places to perceive the healing and sustainable energy. In *Healing Worlds*, Larry Dossey indicated that in double-blind research, scientific statistics proved that the healing effect of prayer and confession will increase the amount of endorphins to strengthen our immune system. Dr. Robert also claimed that according to American National Institute of Health, 75% of 300 patients who pray often will have better recovery (qtd. in Arnot 193-201). Dartmouth Medical School also reported that a pious believer will reduce the frequency of his/ her medication and heart attack, and will recover three times faster than an atheist.

Snyder has practiced Buddhist prayer and meditation since his youth. A labyrinth can also be used as a useful design for a healing and sustainable environment; a labyrinth is different from a maze; while a maze aims only to confuse people, a labyrinth is just like life itself, though without clear routine, it will lead us toward the core of life in the end. The labyrinth originated from ancient Greece, and the most often imitated labyrinth pattern is the marble mosaic floor of the Chartes Cathedral in France. A labyrinth will relax our intelligence and keep us vigilant; our walking in a labyrinth is like a walking confession or prayer, which often symbolizes the transition, transformation and convention of the sustainable natural cycle. Snyder often practiced Buddhist walking meditation off trail, for him, even a single, long walking journey or a sweat bath can offer poetic inspiration, which resembles walking in the labyrinth of life without expected destination.

Because human civilization originated from the ocean, living water often symbolizes the healing and sustainable power of spiritual liberation in Christian baptism (deriving from an Egyptian ritual), Greek purifying ceremony, Japanese Shinto (Japanese animism, 神道), Confucian ceremony, and in Hindu bathing convention. Snyder in his marriage in Japan also applied the wine to worship the earth and further asserted that poetry has attested to the evolution of human species from “cell mandala holding water” [22]. Even crying (our natural flowing of the water of life) will serve as a sustainable ritual to get in touch with our spirituality.

As a Navajo proverb goes, our body tomorrow results from our mind today. Medical historian Jean Starobinski has also acknowledged, while disease is as old as life, medicine is still young; in most primitive cultures, sustainable healing often resulted from human beings’ intuitive response to natural forces such as stars, oceans, rivers, ancestors, heaven and earth. Hippocrates, Father of
Western Medicine, once said that food was the best medicine and also built a sanctuary on the Greek island Kos in the 5th century B.C. to attain the natural and wholesome sustainable healing power of wind and the sea, which would in turn evoke humankind’s sustainable healing power of the inner self.

Different rituals such as burning incense, ringing bells, chanting, worshiping holy images, statues, and having holy meals will communicate and elevate our secular senses to sacredness, which is immanent in the natural world [23]. Snyder in the Golden Gate Park also practiced similar Buddhist rituals for world peace. The ecological crisis is not merely an environmental but a spiritual problem of sustainability; Senator Al Gore has ever decried thus: “what does it mean to redefine one’s relationship to the sky? What will it do to our Children’s outlook on life if we have to teach them to be afraid to look up?” [24]. Snyder also held that we should bring up our Children in a natural environment. In Gore’s view, as we have two lungs, our Earth has two lungs as well: that is, forests and the ocean; both possess the Earth’s ability to breathe; both also appeared in Snyder’s poetry as sources of life. Nevertheless, “we are so used to taking the weather for granted that we forget that our climate operates in a state of dynamic equilibrium” [24]. And the most catastrophic ecological crisis is global warming: “ice and snow glare back at the sun almost like mirrors, reflecting more than 95 percent of the heat and light that strike them. By contrast, the partly transparent blue-green water of the ocean absorbs more than 85 percent of the heat and light it receives from the sun” [24]. As soon as the Earth loses its ability to breathe, our breathing will stop simultaneously; as Snyder has said, the whole universe is a breathing body. The catastrophe of global warming also echoes the Buddhist depiction of the world as a burning house under the poisonous fire of greed, anger and attachment and lack of the sustainable cooling and healing water.

Patrick Murphy in Understanding Gary Snyder asserted that “poetry” is “a material thing. . . . place is also a relationship” [23]. Snyder’s eco-poetry strives to restore the natural and sustainable connection of the physical, spiritual and environmental worlds of the wild and wilderness. Human beings have “to connect . . . with an ‘other’ that was not within the human sphere by venturing outside the borders and going into your own mind-wilderness, unconscious wilderness” [23]. Snyder’s eco-poetry, which was inspired by native American oral literature, focuses on the spiritual “oneness with nature, the oneness of mind and body, the oneness of consciousness and unconscious, our oneness in society with each other” [25]. Additionally, Snyder insisted that human and nonhumans would become one, depend upon and coexist with their sustainable surrounding environment for survival and economic activities. A poet as a healer can convey the wholesome, sustainable and healthy power through his poetry. As Snyder has urged, when one finds the sense of place, one will begin to connect with the natural cycle in that place [26]. In Myths & Texts, Snyder referred to the white goddess for our reverence for the sacred nature; in his Old Ways, he even worships Gaia, the Earth Mother instead to reconfirm the sustainable sacred space on Earth.

4.1 The nonduality in healing traditions and Snyder’s works of sustainable primitivism

From aboriginal cultures, a shaman for Snyder will take on the role of a sustainable healer. Voice in aboriginal oral tradition and Hindu cosmology has endowed poetry with sustainable healing energy through its vibrating frequency; a poet thus becomes a sustainable healer. Here the trinity of a shaman-poet-healer is assumed. In neo-paganism, native healing rituals have contributed to sustainable environmentalism because a shaman-healer will serve as a bridge for connecting nature and culture, the conscious and the wild unconscious. Snyderian sense of place and inhabitation were inspired by the native American myth “Turtle Island,” Chinese Confucianism and Taoism. His council of all beings in an ecological and sustainable community is also the combination of aboriginal cultures and Chinese Tien Tai Buddhism. All of the above oriental and native traditions forged his sense of a harmonious and sustainable relationship of nature and culture, which can redeem our contemporary ecological crisis.

Snyder has observed cosmic sustainable symbols connecting body and mind as follows: “The conch shell is an ancient symbol of the sense of hearing, and of the female; the vulva and the fruitful
womb. . . . (from our most archaic past transmitted) the mystery of voice becomes one with the mystery of body” [3]. For Snyder, voice is our physical commotion of our mental emotion. In “The Bodhisattvas” of Left out in the Rain [27], Snyder also reveals the nonduality of samsara (dust) and nirvana and the sustainable prevalence of Buddhahood: “And cheer and wave and levitate/ And pass out lunch on vulture peak/ Enlightening gardens parks and pools” [28]. In “Trail, not Trail” of Left out in Rain, he also advocates the validity of the true Way in the sustainable wilderness.

The reason for Snyder’s opposition to Western civilization is that for him, human desire and fear in a civilized society have become barriers to spiritual liberation [11]; thus he recommends sustainable Buddhist meditation as a way to “personal and universal liberation” [29]. In his journal entry “Japan First Time Around,” he recorded his first journey to Japan from 1957 to 1958, when he underwent a poet’s intellectual development. In Snyder’s view, the interrelationship and geological transformations of mountains and waters in the “marine limestone in Himalaya at 20,000 feet” [11] had connected Avatamsaka and Tantra and were opposite to any separatist spiritual path at present [11]. For Snyder, there must come a time when the poet must choose: either to step deep in the stream of his people, history, tradition, folding and folding himself in wealth of persons and pasts; philosophy, humanity, to become richly foundationed and great and sane and ordered. Or, to step beyond the bound onto the way out, into horrors and angels . . . possible enlightened return, possible ignominious perishing. [30]

For Snyder, the answer was the latter. His choice resulted from his comparison of Western and Eastern cultures and his conclusion that “the Judeo-Christian tradition gives moral value only to the human being. . . . Other traditions, including Hindu and Buddhist and Native American, in which all biological life is considered part of the same drama, that the world is not simply a theater for the human being” [31]. The reason why Snyder will opt “archaic values” is that (Western) “civilization is . . . to be less than a full man” [11]. Snyder even prefers the Eastern to the Western outlook of energy: “the magnificent growth-energy of modern civilization into a non-acquisitive search for deeper knowledge of self and nature. Self-nature. Mother nature” [29].

Snyder depicted the so-called “free world” of capitalism as “fire up Thunder Creek and the mountain,─troy’s burning!/ The cloud mutters” [9], and the image is similar to the Buddhist view of the world as a fiery house of five poisons such as greed, anger, attachment, arrogance and unfaithfulness. The materialism of the world is so overwhelming that humankind has lost the vision of the ultimate emptiness: “That which includes all change never changes; without change time is meaningless; without time, space is destroyed. Thus we arrive at the void” [11].

Snyder has deplored the tendency of capitalism and technology to become the God of a new religion in this world. Nevertheless, as David R. Loy has questioned, they are only one cosmology and are not natural but persuasive. The fetishism of capitalism and technology appeared in the late Middle Ages, when the religious authority gradually lost its grasp. Loy credited Max Weber as a scholar “who did the most to uncover the religious roots of market capitalism” [32]. David R. Loy further illuminated that in premodern or nonmodern societies, rituals were to mark the cyclic time, while in modern capitalistic society since the late 18th century, our concept of time has become linear and our collective unconscious is obsessed only with growth. In capitalism, land and labor have become capital, and the sustainable traditional and local community has broken down into individualistic and utilitarian society in search of what Freud has called the principle of pleasure. In Western civilization, rationality is elevated, and the relationship in modern society is alienated: “They exist in fundamental separation from one another, and from this position of separateness they relate. Their relations are external to their own identities” [33].

In order to balance Western cosmology of linear progress, Snyder has traced the origin of primitivism of sustainable and cyclic evolution, the “Great subculture which goes back as far perhaps as the late paleolithic” [11]. We can also witness Snyder’s primitivism of respect for the sustainable food-chain in the following remarks: “Paleolithic hunting magic is so important historically: the necessities of identity, intuition, stillness, that go with hunting make it seem as
though shamanism and yoga and meditation may have their roots in the requirements of the hunter—where a man learns to be motionless for a day, putting his mind in an open state so that his consciousness won’t spook creatures that he knows will soon be approaching” [11]. Snyder urges that we learn from primitive peoples, Asian cultures of China, Japan, India, Tibet, Dharma Buddhism, and great subcultures of the world to form a new and sustainable civilization. Moreover, the northern American aborigines, who came from Asian, can be viewed as a bridge to connect Western and Eastern cultures. Snyder remarked that a primitive singer resembles a healing poet or the medicine Buddha when singing the psalm suite, which is concerned with the myth of creation about the origin of a race, and modern healing poetry serving as sustainable medicine can make people wholesome again. Moreover, a poet as a healer is to identify with nature and to prevent social systems from dissociating with their surrounding and sustainable nature. A poet will serve as the medium of the other voice from the nonhuman beings in nature [26].

Gary Snyder’s eco-poetry is inspired by the sustainable native American neo-primitivism, its oral tradition and shamanism to advocate a wild culture and the concept of a poet-shaman to heal the binary opposition of Western civilization and its subsequent ecological crisis. If we can comprehend and conserve northern American aboriginal culture as it is, the goals of DESD and SDG such as good health and well-being, environmental conservation and protection, intercultural understanding (cultural diversity), reducing inequality, and sustainable cities and communities concerning northern American aboriginal culture can be realized ideologically, culturally and realistically.

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