

Ecocide, Hybrid Landscapes and Transcultural Fluidity in Gary Snyder's *Danger on Peaks**

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Abstract

When thinking about Gary Snyder's poetry, prose and essays, the central point of their intersection is unmistakably located at the writer's ruminations over the coexistence of humans and nature, which has earned the poet a stature of a prominent green author not only among the Beats but also among the most significant nature-oriented writers of the 20th century. One of the green themes addressed by Snyder which, for one thing, resonates exceptionally well with much of contemporary eco-critical thinking on the Anthropocene and, for another, challenges common perceptions of time and space, is ecocide, a notion occupying central position in the poet's 2004 book entitled *Danger on Peaks*. By looking at the ways Snyder's texts in the collection coalesce the motifs of natural catastrophes, nuclear threat, and mass extinction of life I intend to explore their correspondence to theoretical concepts devised by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Franz Broszmitter, Jessica Rapson and Ewa Domańska (geostory, history of life as the history of disasters, the fluidity of memory sites, ontology of the dead body) in order to further demonstrate the hybrid nature of the poet's post-catastrophic and transcultural landscape imagery, which is capable of traversing time and space as well as transcending the binaries of the ordinary vs. the sublime, the Eastern vs. the Western as well as the public vs. the private.

Keywords

Gary Snyder, ecocide, eco-criticism, transculturalism, the Beats

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When criticism takes in its sights Gary Snyder's poetry, prose and essays, the central point of their intersection is unmistakably located at the writer's ruminations over the imbrications of humans and nature. These have earned the poet the status of a prominent green Beat author and in fact led to Snyder being considered one of the most significant nature-oriented writers of the twentieth century. In the eyes of Peter O'Leary, his unique poetic voice, which was already established in his early collection *Myths and Texts* (1960), "should be regarded as one of the most influential voices on American poetry written since its publication, both mainstream and experimental" (675). With the advent of Anthropocenic critical awareness, Snyder's output could not have remained outside the focus of ecocritical reflection and has been the subject of a host of books and papers welding literature and environmental consciousness. One way to expand on some of the preexisting ecocritical readings of the poet's works would be to investigate the theme of ecocide, which the present essay will seek to achieve. Discernible in Snyder's collections such as *The Back Country* (1967), *Axe Handles* (1983), *This Present Moment* (2015), the above-mentioned theme sees its fullest exploration in *Danger on Peaks* (2004), which is the main text for analysis. By looking at the ways Snyder's texts coalesce the motifs of natural catastrophes, nuclear threat and mass extinction of life, I wish to examine their correspondence to eco-critical concepts devised by scholars such as Bruno Latour, Franz Broswimmer, Jessica Rapson and Ewa Domańska in order to further demonstrate the hybrid nature of the poet's post-catastrophic and transcultural landscape imagery, which is capable of traversing time and space as well as transcending the binaries of the ordinary vs. the sublime, the Eastern vs. the Western as well as the public vs. the private.¹ It could certainly not be left unnoticed and unattended that the discussed eco-critical tools dialogize with what has been a staple of Snyder's poetic practice and what has been instrumental in developing his environmental sensitivity, namely his fascination with Buddhism, Far Eastern philosophies and aesthetics.

¹ As pointed out by Timothy Gray, "[o]ver the years, Snyder's environmental advocacy has become increasingly pronounced and intellectually complex" (271)—a process of development, one might add, that has made the totality of his textual and extra-textual work all the more inviting to reflection and analysis involving contemporary eco-critical tools.

I.

Hailed as one of Snyder's most personal, autobiographical literary statements, *Danger on Peaks* (2004) makes one of its focal points the poet's excursions to Mount St. Helens/Loowit, a volcano in Skamania County, Washington, the first of such trips having taken place in the summer of 1945 when the poet was aged 15.² As the reader learns from a piece entitled "Atomic Dawn," having come down the mountain on 13 August, Snyder found out about the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that had occurred seven and four days, respectively, prior to his descent. The shocking news left a lasting impact on the young poet, who, as this later prose piece recalls, swore the following vow, or "something like" it, to himself: "[b]y the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life" (9). The bombed Japanese cities keep recurring throughout the book as do other spaces of man-made and natural disasters, creating a literary mindscape which arouses a feeling of the (un)acceptability of fate in the face of the sudden loss of human and natural life.

This very aspect of Snyder's vision—putting obliteration of nature on a par with a genocidal act³—makes his diction truly unique and highly compatible with modern-day ecocritical thought, which I am going to return to shortly. In "Atomic Dawn," "the photos of a blasted city from the air [and] the estimate of 150,000 dead in Hiroshima alone" are no less shocking for the young Snyder than the fact that "nothing will grow there again for seventy years" (9), which would be reiterated by the poet in a collection of essays released three years after *Danger on Peaks*: "the statement [in the paper] . . . saying that nature would be blighted for decades to come astounded me almost as much as the enormity of the loss of innocent human life" (*Back on the Fire* 66). The volcano and Hiroshima intersect again in "1980: Letting Go," where a line of disparate length and density "[f]ive hundred Hiroshima bombs" intrudes upon Snyder's poetic rendition of the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens, adding up to an overall image of annihilated life manifested in the text by "a heavenly host of tall trees [going] flat down" as well as a catalog of immobilized figures—"ex-navy radioman," "three fallers and their trucks," "two horses swept off struggling in hot mud," and "a motionless child laid back in a stranded ash /

² Hereafter this volume will be referred to as "*Danger*."

³ Among other scholars, John W. Dower refers to Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings as acts of "nuclear genocide" (275).

pickup” (*Danger* 11-12). Further into the collection, Snyder’s way of equating the loss of human life and that of non-human life reaches toward a climax in “Pearly Everlasting,” where the imagery of once-alive and now-dead trees is given a substantial anthropomorphic touch. On his walk to Ghost Lake the speaker encounters “red / old-growth log bodies” lying “prone” and “limbless” (19). The poet’s non-anthropocentric focus on the non-human as an entity making its way into the history of mankind, either as an agent or a victim, resonates strongly with recent ecocritical reflection on the historiosophical implications of nature. Snyder’s reluctance to see the human and the natural separately against the backdrop of events which shape historical narratives lends itself to being read through Bruno Latour’s geostory—which is to say through a vision of history in which “all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity” (Latour 15). Such a perception, in Latour’s eyes, is hardly about accepting a modernist duality of nature and society to further reconcile the two; its goal would rather be to “distribute agency as far and in as differentiated a way as possible—until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject that are no longer of any interest any more except in a patrimonial sense” (15). In this way, as Latour suggests, “volcano, Mississippi River, plate tectonics, microbes, or CRF receptor . . . [are no less instrumental] than generals, engineers, novelists, ethicists, or politicians” (15).

What may also be relevant to Snyder’s perspective on natural and man-made disasters and what comports with Latour’s theory is Frank Broswimmer’s take on the concept of ecocide. Commonly understood as referring to massive criminalized man-made damage done to the environment, the term is used expansively by Broswimmer to connote all (albeit, unsurprisingly, predominantly human-caused) instances of mass extinction of life on Earth and to serve as a basic point of reference in discussing the entire history of the planet. As observed by the scholar,

[h]uman beings occupy neither a central nor a trivial place in the universe. . . . Less than 2 per cent of our genes have enabled us, for better and worse, to found civilizations and religions, to develop intricate languages, create art, develop scientific principles. The same potential, however, has also afforded us the capacity to destroy all of our achievements overnight. The social evolution of the modern human species has progressed by unprecedented, fantastic, leaps and bounds. Even so, we have barely begun to understand that humans

evolved in an evolutionary context of extraordinary biodiversity. . . . We have barely begun to acknowledge the historical implications of the fact that our species has socially evolved into a colonizing, polarized, class-divided, and conflict-ridden assembly of walking ecological disasters. (104)

Thus, the history of life, as Broswimmer wishes to see it, is the history of conflicts, disasters and catastrophes, which necessitates recalibrating human perception of history.⁴ Perhaps by doing so, we could eventually overcome “the lack of democratic participation in the economic sphere [which] lies at the root of the global crisis . . . [and which] has fueled the process of mass extinctions of species” (105). In a peculiar fashion, Broswimmer’s critique of deepening social polarization and divisions echo Snyder’s call for a social change to be effected by awakening oneself to Buddhist wisdom. In “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution,” a text from an early collection of essays and journals, *Earth House Hold* (1969), the poet illuminates Avatamsaka (Kegon) Buddhist philosophy, a tradition which “sees the world as a vast interrelated network in which all objects and creatures are necessary and illuminated . . . [and where] governments, wars, or all that we consider ‘evil’ are uncompromisingly contained in this totalistic realm” (*Earth House Hold* 91-92). In Snyder’s eyes, out of Buddhist wisdom and meditation comes morality, a “personal example” accompanied by “responsible action,” which, among other things, translates into “affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior . . . and respecting intelligence and leaning, but not as greed or means to personal power” (92) and may eventually lead to the emergence of “a free, international, classless world” (92).

It is also in *Danger on Peaks* that Snyder’s literary sensitivity and the special sense of gratitude he offers to the non-human in the context of catastrophes harrowing the genus *Homo* attest to a wider understanding of historical progress of

⁴ Snyder perceives the extinction of natural life within a similar framework of warfare and ecocide as he claims: “I realized that there is also a war against nature. The biosphere itself is subject to a huger explosion by far than anything nuclear—the half-million-year-long slow explosion of human impact.” (Martin and Snyder 56). Broswimmer’s and Snyder’s viewpoint resonates further with Jean-Luc Nancy’s demand for “the equivalence of catastrophes,” that is the need to realize that “natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussions” given the modern-day “symbiosis of technologies exchanges, movements, which makes it so that a flood—for instance— . . . must necessarily involve relationships with any number of technical, social, economic, political intricacies that keep us from regarding it as simply a misadventure or a misfortune” (4).

life on Earth, one which both Broswimmer and Latour propound. Moreover, the 2004 collection invites one to see his poetry (and poetry in general) as a unique laboratorial space to test and expand the possible valence of apparently incoherent categories and linguistic units by juxtaposing and combining them into a new literary quality, and by doing so, realizing the Latourian wish to erase the line dividing culture from nature as well as subject from object. “1980: Letting Go” attests to Snyder seeing the categories collapsing: in the aftermath of the volcano eruption, “ash falls like snow on wheatfields and orchards” and Yakima witnesses “darkness at noon” (*Danger* 12). As the oxymoronic language of the poem may suggest, the eruption is the very moment of truth, an intrusion of the Lacanian Real into everyday reality, which turns fixed epistemic categories upside down and poses a major challenge to the hierarchies of alleged human superiority over nature. It may thus be little surprising to see listed among the victims a photographer with his “burnt camera / full of half melted pictures” (12); in a seemingly self-referential manner Snyder appears to remain skeptical about our human epistemic and artistic capability to imagine and properly comprehend circumstances when binaries like subject/object and culture/nature collapse into one another.

II.

In her 2015 book *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice*, a study of three sites of extermination by the Nazis informed by memory studies and cultural geography, Jessica Rapson stresses the necessity of recalibrating theoretical frameworks related to places of genocidal activity. Rather than to hold on to the idea of a memorial and a memory site as a static space embodying ossified memory, she prefers to see them as dynamic and constantly morphing landscapes. Contextualizing it further in the processual character of memory as discussed by scholars such as W.J.T. Mitchell, John Wylie, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Rapson points out that “landscape circulates as a medium of exchange . . . [and] travels: [it is] not just literally transported, but the values, beliefs, and attitudes that work through and emerge from specific landscape practices and ‘ways of seeing’ can be seen to migrate through spaces and times” (9). Such an approach invites mapping “historical events in nexuses, rather than [as] marked points on a chronological line” (10) and endorses a view of “language and places of encounter . . . [as having] become deterritorialized and remapped according to new constellations, figures and sites of contact” (qtd. in Rapson 10). This may be further anchored within a more general theory of space understood by Neil Campbell as going “beyond its function

as a national unifier” and best characterized as “unfinished multiple” which is ready to “trace divergent, entangled lines of composition that both interconnect and split apart constantly” (qtd. in Rapson 10).

The echoes of catastrophes resurfacing in *Danger on Peaks* appear to move along the lines of such understandings of landscape, memory and space inviting one to incorporate not only genocidal but also ecocidal and natural-disaster legacies into the aforementioned framework. In Snyder’s collection, Mount St. Helens and Hiroshima intersect on and off in a peculiar fashion as they are both literally and metaphorically returned to by the poet. In “Some Fate,” Snyder’s speaker declares that he returned to the volcano three more times throughout late 1940s (*Danger* 10). The bombing site emerges in the already mentioned “Atomic Dawn” to later reappear in “To Ghost Lake,” where, dwelling on his years spent in Japan, Snyder’s speaker reveals that he “went twice through Hiroshima” (18). Interestingly enough, in a fragment that immediately precedes that line the speaker and a hiking partner named Fred presumably compare the effects of replanting destroyed lands in the Loowit area to the benefits of wild restoration while clarifying “distinctions such as ‘original’ and ‘restored.’ [and inquiring] What’s old? What’s new? What’s ‘renew’?” (17). What seems to emerge from conversations on Loowit and the reminisces of Japan is the idea of a fluid and hybrid landscape which ultimately turns into a mindscape marked by disasters and capable of traversing time and space. Thus, the posed queries, one might assume, connect not only to the restoring surface of the burned woods, but also to the recurring torments of genocidal and ecocidal trauma which the speaker once experienced. Those questions may thus well be: Is the ecocidal trauma one has been through over now? Is there no way to separate oneself from the ‘original’ trauma for it can ‘renew’? The “blast” zone, as Snyder seems to suggest, is not only Loowit or Hiroshima, but—perhaps principally—the space of one’s memory.

III.

Snyder’s take on the sceneries of Mount St. Helens is also expansive, inclusive and dynamic in other ways. The poet’s hiking and climbing excursions are not confined exclusively to exploring the past and its consequences for the present and the future but are also fruitful nexuses where the public meets the private, where the western and the eastern hemispheres overlap, and where the ordinary comes into contact with the sublime, all attesting to Loowit as space in the sense of Campbellian transcultural multiples. Much as it seems to be low-key and

unimposing, Snyder's literary vision of space is a total one with the volcano as the central sphere expanding extensively along vertical and horizontal lines. Given Snyder's multidimensional perspective on life, the verticality and horizontality along which I will see the poet's vision stretched should be read less as fixed axes of poetic imagination and more as a part of a holistic and multidirectional spectrum of flow of thought and energy.

Apart from the all-surrounding tree stand of the described forest area, what evokes verticality in the poems is the constant upward and downward circulation of animate and inanimate matter (be it climbers' bodies, a lava droplet hail, or falling ash) as well as of the poet's gaze. In "The Climb" ascending the mountain is equated with entering an unearthly and unfathomable realm:

West Coast snowpeaks are too much! They are too far above the surrounding lands. There is a break between. They are in a different world. . . . [T]he big snowpeaks pierce the realm of clouds and cranes, rest in the zone of five-colored banners and writhing crackling dragons in veils of ragged mist and frost-crystals, into a pure transparency of blue. (*Danger* 7)

While the peaks themselves do not necessarily engage Snyder's speaker with arresting fear, they confront him with a sense of Burkean sublime. Their being forever situated beyond the reach of the human eye and capacity of human mind, and thus remaining obscure and unfathomable, strikes one with awe, for, as Burke would have it, "in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a great power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are clear and determinate" (82). The sketched mystery of the sublime also carries clear undertones of the philosophies of the Far East; the referenced cranes and dragons, highly symbolic in Japanese aesthetics, as well as the colors of Tibetan prayer flags all evoke a sense of mysticism and the eternal. Accompanying the feeling of being overwhelmed by the grandiosity of the mountain is the impression of its infinitude. Even when on the very top, Snyder's speaker discloses a longing for something more and beyond; while "St. Helens' summit is . . . a place to nod, to sit and write," it also prompts one "to watch what's higher in the sky" (*Danger* 8). Such imagery of the peak, with its encrypted voracity for yet a greater mystery, once again resonates with Burke's ideas of infinity and eternity, the sublime qualities being "among the most affective we have" and unparalleled in terms of our "understand[ing] so little" of them (Burke 81). In this way, encountering and

responding to the sublime of the unknown becomes one of the major themes of Snyder's book (resurfacing as early as in its very title), making Loowit an embodiment of a node connecting two worlds: the lowlands, which are synonymous with the ordinariness of human life governed by purposefulness of activities and attuned to a regular sense of time, and the sublime peaks, where none of the aforementioned categories matter or work any longer. Having tried "to look over and down to the world below," as we further learn in "The Climb," Snyder's speaker reckons that "*there was nothing there*" (*Danger* 8). Consequently, descending precedes a new beginning and equals becoming gradually enmeshed in the earthly order anew.⁵ The shift from being engulfed with the purposeless and the timeless to being again capable of discerning the parameters governing life is perhaps best explored in "Some Fate." Being atop Loowit with a friend named Robin, Snyder's speaker feels blissed to be "at a still place" and "right at home at / the gateway to nothing," before "prepar[ing] to descend / on down to some fate in the world" (10). What the poet's view is undoubtedly informed by is a centuries-long East Asian tradition of perceiving the low- and highlands as two opposing realms. As pointed by Snyder, in the Eastern perspective "[t]he lowlands, with their villages, markets, cities, palaces, and wineshops, are thought of as the place of greed, lust, competition, commerce, and intoxication—the 'dusty world'" (*The Practice of the Wild* 100). Conversely, mountains have fostered spirituality, offering a retreat to those who "would flee such a world and seek purity" (100).⁶ In a practical sense, "mountains are not only spiritually deepening but also . . . independent of the control of the central government" and in this way they "have served as a haven of spiritual and political freedom all over" (101).

Likewise stretched along the vertical axis of the volcano come the destruction and creation of life, which instigate a constant motion of animate and inanimate matter. Snyder's vision of erupting Loowit in "1980: Letting Go," witnessing "white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a / burning sky-river wind of / searing lava droplet hail" (*Danger* 11) reverberates in the pendular impact of Hiroshima

⁵ An interesting reading of the line is offered by Paige Tovey. The scholar observes that Snyder's hesitation to use conjunctions invites one to think that "in actuality, there is something there—"nothing," or *sunyata*—and Snyder beholds a vision of it on the mountain's peak" (178). In unison with my own interpretation of the fragment and my understanding of the entire book, it could be inferred that the "nothing" seen by Snyder equals the impermanence of all matter and life.

⁶ Snyder is also resorting to a Buddhist idea of "leaving the world" and becoming "homeless," that is, respectively, "getting away from the imperfections of human behavior" and "being at home in the whole universe" (104).

and Nagasaki bombs, falling to the ground to instantly form and draw up a mass of a mushroom cloud. The gravitas of “roiling earth-gut-trash cloud tephra twelve miles / high” (*Danger* 11) seems to channel once more the Burkean sublime, yet this time its source as previously located in the awe of nature is replaced by the terror of mass destruction of nature. The poems and vignettes following “1980: Letting Go” report on the aftermaths of the disaster, hinting at the permanence of its traumatic effects on the landscape and people (in “Blast Zone” we learn that “further mud and gravel might be coming down” [14]), but also seeing hope in the time-consuming healing of the land either accelerated by forest regrowth or effected by “natural succession go[ing] to work and take its time” (14). As Snyder observes in “To Ghost Lake,” the unaided renewal of nature “takes time, and allows for the odd and unexpected. We still know far too little about it. This natural regeneration project has special values of its own, aesthetic, spiritual, scientific” (17). The poet expresses his astonishment with the perseverance of natural forms in the very same vignette, which brings the most comprehensive descriptions of the blast zone in the entire book. Beside the areas of swath with “nothing left standing,” Snyder’s speaker recounts his surprise on entering “a zone called ‘ashed trees’ blighted by a fall of ash, but somehow alive” and he is pleased to see “new patterns march[ing] in from the edges, while within the zone occasional little islands of undamaged vegetation survive” (16). Additionally, of particular texts detailing the poet’s hikes to Loowit, “To Ghost Lake” and “Enjoy the Day” feature short, aphoristic forms on the theme of restoration, which seem to go beyond the mere descriptions of its processes to rather reflect on the already-mentioned aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific. As far as the former piece goes, Snyder embellishes the main body of text with a following couplet: “Baby plantlife, spiky, firm and tender, / stiffly shaking in the same old breeze (17). In the latter, resting “on a ridgetop east of Loowit” and searching for an agency he terms “my old advisors,” Snyder’s speaker hears them saying: “New friends and dear sweet old tree ghosts / here we are again. Enjoy the day” (21). Both fragments embrace the perception of the dramatized landscape of Mt. St. Helens’ formerly destroyed forests and obliterated wildlife as an area of spectral continuum, where new life forms coexist with the remnants of the traumatic past in a startling entanglement of the living, the non-living, and the no-longer-living.⁷ Expanding on what Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway term

⁷ Also, as aptly observed by Tovey, Snyder’s vision of volcanoes as bearing both destructive and replenishing powers has a Romantic provenance and is perhaps most notably indebted to Shelley, who “gives much emphasis to volcanoes and their both literal and symbolic power for revolutionary cleansing destruction and subsequent rebirth and renewal” (178). No doubt it is also

“deathscapes,” which, among many other ways of understanding, may be perceived as a wide array of “spaces creating . . . emotional geographies for the bereaved” which “are transformed from mere physical areas into *places* . . . through being endowed with *meaning* and *significance*” as well as “through . . . engagement with, or being engaged by [them]” (2, 3), Ewa Domańska seeks to see in the sites of human extinction a collective non-anthropocentric agency, an instrumental space of a radically “utopian, multi-species ecumene” (186) that she labels *humus*.⁸ As the scholar elucidates its emergence:

The decaying flesh, the remains, bones as well as ashes are a type of a persona, frequently a collective one, and as such can be considered an agent. It can be therefore postulated that burying the remains in the ground (be it body or ashes) ‘humanizes’ it, but instead I propose that by humanization we understand the process in which the decomposing remains merge with other organic and non-organic material. This, for instance, takes place in in the processes of humification and mineralization (such as decaying and rotting), in which a specific form of existence . . . is created – humus (or necrobiont), which I consider a kind of a material ur-formula, the matrix, or the foundation. (66-67)

Extending Domańska’s focus on the extinction of the genus *Homo* to the extinction of all organic life, the post-catastrophic mind-/landscapes portrayed in *Danger on Peaks* remain much in tune with the scholar’s non-anthropocentric, posthuman ontology (and could thus be described as “necrobionic”) for Snyder’s texts, while investing some interest in human agents, remain very attentive to the new forms of wildlife as being brought about by the communal coexistence and circulation of organic and degraded matter.⁹ Such perceived fluidity of detritus

an enduring facet of Snyder’s transcultural mind, which has for long demonstrated a fascination with the Japanese theme of the impermanence of life as well as with the forms of intensification of power, centers of the so-called *kami*. The cyclical nature of catastrophe is also remarked on by Jean-Luc Nancy, who, following the Greek origin of the word, perceives it as a force connoting “purification, expulsion, conjuration, abreaction, liberation, release” (7).

⁸ Here and henceforth, all translations from Polish are the author’s.

⁹ In light of Snyder’s holistic and non-anthropocentric attentiveness to the extinction of life, it might be also interesting to bring up Domańska’s reflections on Eric Katz’s visits to the Nazi concentration camps, which feeds into a larger trend of looking at the intersections of Holocaust studies and environmentalism, which has been witnessed in the humanities in the recent years. As

enters Snyder’s poetic imagination as early as his awareness of the moment of ecocidal eruption, with Loowit distributing and covering the vast part of area in “earth-gut-trash cloud tephra” (*Danger* 11). Another necrobionic category which repeatedly resurfaces in *Danger on Peaks* is ash and dust. Snyder notices “the dam, the riverbanks, the roads” of the Loowit area to be “volcano-ash-grey” (14), just as the slopes of the volcano come as “all ash and rock” (16). The pulverized and sedimented matter adding new layers to the geological record comes into poet’s sight in “Pearly Everlasting”:

Walk a trail down to the lake
 mountain ash and elderberries red
 old-growth log bodies blown about,
 whacked down, tumbled in the new ash *wadis*. (19)

“Section Three” of *Danger on Peaks* (entitled *Daily Life*), which steers away from the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, features “Ankle-deep in Ashes,” a poem recollecting Snyder’s field trip to the place of the human-caused 2001 Star Fire, which devastated vast areas of Eldorado National Forest and the Duncan Canyon in the Sierra Nevada mountain range. In the final part of the poem, on examining a sugar pine,

[t]he District Ranger chips four little notches
 round the trunkbase, just above the ashy dust:
 . . .
 He says, ‘Likely die in three more years
 but we will let it stand.’
 I circumambulate it and invoke, ‘Good luck—long
 life—
Sarvamangalam—I hope you prove him wrong’

Domańska points out, Katz “detects an analogy between genocide and ecocide. . . . In his view, both the interhuman relations as well as man’s attitude towards the environment are driven by domination, appropriation and imposition. As he believes, neutralizing the anthropocentric drive towards ruling over nature will bring the change in people’s behavior towards one another” (190n14). In a similar manner to that of Domańska and Snyder, Katz remains alert to the specificity of post-catastrophic natural areas: “[t]he natural vegetation that covers the mass grave in the Warsaw cemetery is not the same as the vegetation that would have grown there if the mass grave had never been dug. The grass and trees in the cemetery have a different cause, a different history, which is inextricably linked to the history of the Holocaust” (qtd. in Domańska, 190n14).

pacing charred twigs crisscrossed on the ground. (52)

All of the above-quoted fragments render ash and dust as the pre-/post-catastrophic continuum, a sort of a limbo, where the energies of the dead and the alive are protractedly negotiated (just as in the test of strength between the ranger and the speaker as well as the title of the poem) before they become, as Domańska would perhaps have it, a foundation for the new (or newly reincarnated) forms to take shape.¹⁰ Additionally, for Snyder's speaker, what is to ensure healing or a favorable rebirth is the Buddhist practice of circumambulating an object, which is accompanied by invoking *Sarvamangalam*, a Sanskrit expression meant to spread compassion and lessen the suffering. The unmistakably Buddhist underpinnings of Snyder's perception of ash and dust are all the more discernible in "After Bamiyan" from the final section of the same name, whose tripartite structure welds together the 2001 destruction of the monumental statues of Buddhas of Bamiyan, contained in the cliffs of the Bamyan valley of central Afghanistan, and the 9/11 attacks, both acts perpetrated "not just by the Taliban, but by woman-and-nature-denying authoritarian worldviews that go back much farther than Abraham" (*Danger* 101). The piece closes with the following stanza:

The men and women who
died at the World Trade Center
together with the
Buddhas of Bamiyan,
Take Refuge in the dust. (102)

As explained by John Daido Looi, "Taking Refuge," an expression of willingness to follow the Buddhist path and make commitments that such an act entails, comes with following the Buddhist Precepts, "a teaching on how to live our lives in harmony" (177). Among these, the first three are the Three Treasures: "we take refuge in the Three Treasures—the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Saṅgha*" (177-78). These, as Looi continues, may be perceived in three different

¹⁰ What is also significant is that Snyder perceives these processes of decomposition in terms of ecopoetics and, respectively, it is also ecopoetic narratives that are equally subject to decay. Suggesting that it be labelled "decomposition criticism," the poet claims that "narratives are one sort of trace that we leave in the world. All our literatures are leavings . . . Other orders of beings have their own literatures. . . . A literature of blood-stains, a bit of piss, a whiff of estrus, a hit of rut, a scrape on a sapling, and long gone" (*The Practice of the Wild* 112).

perspectives so that one can see their various virtues. Illuminating these, while resorting to Dōgen (1200-53), one of Snyder's beloved Zen masters, Looi brings up dust as the matter which is one with the *Dharma* Treasure: "[b]eing pure, genuine, apart from the dust is the *Dharma* Treasure.' The reason it is apart from the dust is that it *is* the dust. That is what the virtue of purity is about. There is nothing outside of it" (178). Thus, yet again Snyder's poetry appears to exude a sense of serenity, musing, on the one hand, over the impermanence of all forms and, on the other, pointing to wisdom and purity as emerging from non-objectification and one's sense of being one with everything else. Looi's words further dialogize with the poet's words as when he concludes on the practice of Taking Refuge: "This is what we take refuge in. These Three Treasures are the universe itself. They are the totality of the environment and oneself" (178). This offers a smooth segue into the Hua-yen Buddhist metaphor of the Indra's Net, a system of interconnection of all elements of the ecosystem, which is essential in understanding Snyder's Buddhist perspective on the interdependence of all phenomena. The poet follows David Barnhill's observation that

the universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see nothing but the reflections of other jewels, which themselves are reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net. (qtd. in Snyder, *A Place in Space* 67)

It might be surmised that dust, similarly to the multi-reflexivity of jewels from the above-mentioned metaphor, lends itself as a metaphor of the most elemental component of the universe, the one into which everything eventually turns and the one through which anything can be perceived as equal to everything else. Resorting to another term that well characterizes Snyder's Buddhist-oriented sensitivity, every single phenomenon (*dharma*) comes under the Law of Dependent Origination, which posits that "all phenomena are relative and dependent upon other phenomena for their Being" (Kerber 17n19). Being such, as added by Su-chun Huang, they are empty in the sense that they are "without a self-essence" and their "existence is composed of elements which disintegrate" (qtd. in Kerber 17n19). Dust, then, can be seen again as a reflection of cyclical, impermanence and dependence of all forms, via which, as Kreber aptly suggests, "*dharmas* express the *Dharma*" (17n19).

Going back to Domańska's framework, likewise in many other Snyder's poems, the pulverized matter of ash(es) and dust also forms a material reservoir with a spectral valence and agency. Additionally and much in tune with "Ankle-deep in Ashes," unwilling to ignore the pain and sorrow accompanying annihilation, Snyder goes beyond a Buddhist perspective that would in a calm manner merely ascertain the impermanence of all beings around. The poet's refusal to "pass off the sufferings of others" refines detritus ("honor the dust"), thus adding agency to the intermedial (*Danger* 101).

Finally, if the vertical range of Snyder's perception of Mt. St. Helens, as I argue above, encompasses the confrontation of the everyday with the sublime as well as the cycle of death and rebirth, then the horizontal reach of his poetic vision embraces the notion of the volcano as a transcultural nexus between the Western and the Eastern hemisphere. In a wider perspective, Loowit epitomizes and is inscribed in what Timothy Gray identifies as Snyder's "Pacific Rim consciousness" (49), a geographical paradigm intended to perpetuate the view of the Pacific Rim as a space marked by perpetual movement, that is by "arrivals and retreats of human populations, migrations of animals, introductions of plant species, [which all] affect . . . [one's] sense of place" (46). Such an angle, as Gray reiterates after James Clifford, aids us in "making room for other stories, other discoveries and origins, for a United States with roots and routes in the Asian Pacific" (qtd. in Gray 46). With his imagination in line with the definition, Snyder has been always identified as a leading literary proponent of the Pacific Rim as a culture- and border-bending mindscape for he "has regarded [it] as a migratory space, the configuration of which can be determined simply by observing the interactive movements of its many forms of wildlife (humans included)" (Gray 46).

Interestingly enough for my purposes here, Gray seems to stress the significance of the mountaineering as a practice which enhances re-imagining and a wider understanding of the Pacific Rim and, by extension, the world (48).¹¹ With regard to the vicinities of Portland and the Puget Sound,

[f]rom his mountain perches, Snyder came to understand that . . .
[they] are not fixed places, but rather nodal points constructed by
movements, exchanges, and traversals. Weather patterns, animal
migrations, and tectonic rumblings, when taken together or combined

¹¹ This remains much in tune with Tovey's point that for Snyder "the tallest mountains cross the border between the earth and the heavens and are a location for visionary experience" (177).

with other kinetic variables, create a spatial vortex lending each place on earth its unique character. A place that appears to be local actually has far-flung origins, which in turn have far-reaching consequences for other places around the world. (Gray 48-49)

As the poet expounds on the roots of such a perspective in conversation with Gray:

The geographical significance of East Asia to the west coast was palpable, as I was growing up. . . . Seattle had a Chinatown, the Seattle Art Museum had a big East Asian collection, one of my playmates was a Japanese boy whose father was a farmer, we all knew that the Indians were racially related to the East Asians and that they had got there via Alaska, & there were freighters from China and Japan in Puget Sound, a constant sense of exchange. (qtd. in Gray 49)

Mountaineering acquires an additional dimension when perceived through Snyder's fascination with traditions of the Far East—in "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking," the poet stresses the significance ascribed to walking as a means of learning how to measure the space against our bodies in an unmediated way and how to work out the state of "being fully ourselves, in home at our bodies, in their fundamental modes" (*The Practice of the Wild* 98-99). Only when this is achieved, as Snyder asserts, will one be able to "see the world: in our own bodies" (99).

A hybrid and multiperspectival practice of looking at the Pacific Rim is certainly not unfamiliar to the poetic voice in *Danger on Peaks*. The poet's sense of cross-cultural interbreeding of the East-Asian, Native-American and Western mindsets materializes in his multilinguistic approach to toponyms, as in the case of the volcano and its English referent, Mt. St. Helens, being used interchangeably with "Loowit, lawilayt-lá, *Smoky Mā*" throughout the entire book (20). Likewise, the logs of trees swept by blast to form the already-mentioned ash "*wadis*" ("Pearly Everlasting"), a term that, in the singular, would typically denote "the bed or valley of a stream in regions of southwestern Asia and northern Africa that is usually dry except during the rainy season and that often forms an oasis" ("Wadi") and which nevertheless infuses the poet's perception of the land located within the geographic perimeters of North America. Such an inflection of the Pacific Rim area invites one to embrace "the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an

assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Jenkins, qtd. in Campbell 9), a vision undoubtedly dear to Snyder’s countercultural mindset and synonymous with the metaphor of the Indra’s Net, which perhaps does not enable us to transform reality, but can help to “transform ourselves” (*A Place in Space* 70) and make us “acknowledge . . . [the complexity of the] interrelated world,” not least in cultural terms (70).

No less significant is the poet’s sensitivity and role of the chronicler: ecocide and catastrophes eradicate not only the landscapes of the Pacific region, but also the language and names comprising the Pacific Rim paradigm. In “Pearly Everlasting” the speaker’s account of monikers of the elements of topography that were wiped out by the volcanic eruption (“the creek here once was ‘Harmony Falls’” / . . . / the lake was shady *yin*”) (*Danger* 19) invites the reader to look at it as an invocation of lost lexis that once marked the land and simultaneously as a bold attempt to save it from obliteration from the Pacific Rim consciousness.

IV.

Remarkably wide in its poetic scope in ruminating over the aftermaths of the mass destruction of life and its destabilizing impacts, *Danger on Peaks* is also a subtle reflection on a tragedy experienced in the most private sense. The book is dedicated to Caroline Koda, Snyder’s long-time partner who was battling cancer at the time of conceptualizing the work and eventually passed away in 2006, two years after its publication. Consequently, when Julia Martin calls *Danger on Peaks* Snyder’s “toughest and most tender response to the suffering of sentient beings” (6), one cannot help bearing in mind not only the ecocidal overtones of the book, but also the personal predicament in which the poet and his partner found themselves.¹² Coping with suffering arising from both public and private tragedies is explored in the fourth section of the book, where the penultimate poem, a tribute for the poet’s partner titled “For Carole,” is followed by “Steady, They Say,” a meditation on the moment of “despair at how the human world goes down” that is promptly overcome by resorting to “old advisers” guiding the speaker to go “steady . . . / today” (*Danger* 75). In “One Thousand Cranes,” from the next section, the reader confronts a similar tension between taking every human effort, however unscientific it may be, to control the uncontrollable (putting one’s trust in cranes as a symbol of good fortune and health with the intention of helping Carole to recover) and the

¹² Another relative of the poet who is eulogized in the book is his sister, Anthea Corinne Snyder Lowry, who died in 2002 having been hit by a car (*Danger* 96).

unyielding force of fate as driven by unpredictability and effecting impermanence. In a poem which concludes the piece, imperceptible and flying in “the bright / nothing in sight,” the cranes are “just odd far calls / echoing, faint, / *grus canadensis*” (95). Accordingly, they translate as an unreachable and unaffected element of nature turning one’s attention to the contingency of the poet’s and his beloved ones’ lives. Thus, in a dialectic fashion, by externalizing the private into sea-, land-, and mountainscapes and, in reverse, internalizing either the mass extinction of wildlife or the brute force of nature as a frame for empathizing with a partner struggling with cancer, Snyder finds way a powerful way to coalesce the personal with the public.

In conclusion, all of the above-explored themes of Snyder’s book converge on a central question of the possibility of recovery and restoration following pain and loss, which is corroborated by Julia Martin observing that “in *Danger on Peaks* there is clearly so much awareness of suffering and destruction at many levels, yet the collection is also deeply concerned with healing” (54). In an interview which Martin held with the poet soon after publication of the book, Snyder comes back to the vow to fight against the destruction of life he made in his teenage years in the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With hindsight and in a calm manner, he seems to perceive the attempt as futile and ill-fated: “I could say, ‘Well I tried. And it didn’t work, did it? I’ve been living my life by this and I guess it didn’t come to anything. In fact it’s worse than ever!’” (Martin and Snyder 56). Bowing to cruel twists of fate and the impermanence of all things, while not being resigned to the suffering of living beings or indifferent to those who inflict it on the other, Snyder teaches an important lesson in acceptance of whatever comes into one’s life. Accordingly, the possibility and significance of therapeutic healing appears to be subsumed to that notion and as such remains an open question for the poet. Snyder’s perception of the areas devastated by the eruption of the volcano (as well as by the atomic bomb) and his undecidability on whether one should intervene to reconstruct the ecosystem or allow nature to take over implicitly focalizes his doubts about the human insistence on augmenting the processes of healing. Interestingly enough, this again brings Snyder close to the current eco-critical perspective. Consider once again Eric Katz’s take on the intersections of extinction of life, restoration and healing:

After human restoration and modification, what emerges is a Nature with a different character than the original. . . . A Nature healed by human action is thus not Nature. As an artifact, it is designed to meet

human purposes and needs—perhaps even the need for areas that look like a pristine, untouched Nature. In using our scientific and technological knowledge to restore natural areas, we actually practice another form of domination. . . . This conclusion has serious implications for the idea that Nature can repair human destruction, that Nature can somehow heal the evil that humans perpetuate on the earth. (316-17)

Thus, if Katz wishes us to remain alert to “[h]ealing . . . [which] can be an expression of domination” (320), Snyder seems likewise to advocate drawing away from the significance of healing, a notion which is disguised as innocent while being anthropocentric at heart. In the final stanzas of “Pearly Everlasting,” after recounting the words of Dogen (“Do not be tricked by human-centered views”), Snyder’s speaker concludes: “If you ask for help it comes / But not in any way you’d ever know” (*Danger* 20). If there is thus any idea of healing worth affirming, as Snyder would perhaps have it, it comes with healing as a metaphysical category, a sort of mystic and inexplicable wisdom that might well enrich us in the aftermaths of a traumatic event.

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