# LANDSCAPE AND RHETORIC: THE MARRIAGE OF NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONS AND ZEN BUDDHISM IN SELECTED POEMS BY GARY SNYDER[1]

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## Abstract

*This paper examines certain similarities between Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhist teachings and demonstrates how Gary Snyder fuses these two traditions in his poetry. Through the analysis it has been found that the Native American wisdom of the interrelatedness of humans and nature has an affinity with the fundamental Buddhist principle of the interpenetration and interdependence of all existence or as Thich Nhat Han calls it "the inter being nature of things." Gary Snyder has developed his love of nature concurrently with his respect for Native American traditions and his interest in Zen Buddhism. Snyder draws on the primitive oral traditions of chants, incantations and songs to communicate his experiences. Like the shaman-poet of primitive cultures and in imitation of Buddhist teachings, Snyder seeks to restore reverence for nature and reestablish a harmonious relationship with the universe. Apart from emulating certain Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhist principles, Gary Snyder makes use of Zen Buddhist poetic techniques which bear some resemblance to the oral poetic tradition of the Native Americans that precedes the influence of the white man. The precision of tersely worded images reminiscent of imagistic poetry, conciseness, concreteness, simple and ordinary language, as well as an abundant use of nature and animal imagery, which are common characteristics of both poetic traditions, find their way into the poetry of Gary Snyder.*

Ho! Ye Sun, Moon, Stars, all ye
that move in the heavens.
I bid you hear me!
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent ye, I implore!
Make its path smooth, that it may reach
the brow of the first hill!

(from an Omaha ritual)

When the European explorers and settlers arrived on the North American continent they encountered numerous tribes of indigenous people, each with its own traditions and mode of existence. With the

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differences in their languages, social and political structures as well as their religious beliefs, these Native Americans could not be grouped together as one people. As such, there never was an Indian religion or a set of shared religious beliefs. Moreover, the question has been raised as to the appropriateness of using the term "religion" to refer to the usually all-encompassing spiritual beliefs that shaped distinctive native cosmologies, cultures and social practices.

Though great diversity marked the spiritual beliefs and practices of North America's inhabitants, Kevin Sweeney notes in "Early American Religious Traditions: Native Visions and Christian Providence" that *"most Native American creation stories in their original forms tell of the creation of specific peoples and particular places; they are not universalistic and do not recount the creation of all peoples, all animals, or all lands*" (Sweeney 2008: 9). Furthermore, most indigenous tribes including the Iroquois, the Navajo, the Algonquian and the Pueblo peoples believed that animals were active participants in the process of creation which was ongoing and that no single event resulted from the action of a single all-powerful creator. For Native Americans, *"spiritual power*" which was immanent throughout the universe could be *"used for good or ill by deities, animals, and humans"* alike (Sweeney 2008: 10). One significant practice most indigenous peoples shared was the constant struggle for cosmological and environmental balance and this balance could be achieved only when their lives were in harmony with nature.

Given such beliefs and practices, Native Americans had a great love and reverence for nature. From birth to death their lives were bound with nature. Their beliefs, their ceremonies and almost every activity of their daily lives were either directly or indirectly associated with Mother Earth who, they believed, created lives and nurtured their spirits. In "Twelfth Song of the Thunder," a mountain chant of a Navajo ceremony, the Navajo tribe expressed their great appreciation for natural beauty:

> The voice that beautifies the land!
> The voice above
> The voice of the thunder
> Within the dark cloud
> Again and again it sounds
> The voice that beautifies the land.
>
> The voice that beautifies the land!
> The voice below.
> The voice of the grasshopper
> Among the plants
> Again and again it sounds
> The voice that beautifies the land.

Native Americans had no sense of terror for "*the thunder*" and "*the dark cloud."* On the contrary, they perceived beauty in all natural things. For them "*the voice of the thunder*" as well as that of "*the grasshopper" "beautifies the land"* in its own way. Native Americans could connect with the sounds of nature—be they the voices of animals, plants or natural phenomena—because they considered themselves part of the natural whole.

The land as an integral part of Nature constituted the essence of their living. Native Americans were closely related and profoundly attached to their land. Each Native American tribe lived in a particular homeland known as their own since their beginning. They held that the land has been given to them as their center and the land, which they referred to as Mother

Earth, nurtured their lives and their souls and played a vital role in their physical, mental, and spiritual existence.

Native Americans did not believe in a single supreme being who created the world and established the conditions under which all beings must exist. Many Native American tales describe a universe and human beings simultaneously moving from chaos and disorder to balance and harmony. Thus, humans were neither different from nor did they possess superior traits to other beings and things on earth and, therefore, "*the proper relation between humans and the earth should be one of familial and personal respect, a relation honorable because of a kinship derived from a common beginning*." (Lauter 1994: 23). Given such beliefs, Native American wisdom acknowledges the interdependence and interconnection of all things on earth, values a harmonious coexistence between humans and all other beings and treats nature with reverence.

"Song of the Sky Loom," a chant of the Tewa, delineates their great respect for Nature; "*the Earth*" was revered as their "*Mother*" and "*the Sky*" their "*Father*" while they called themselves "children" of the Earth and the Sky:

> O our Mother the Earth, O our Father the Sky,
> Your children are we …
> ……
> Thus weave for us a garment of brightness,
> That we may walk fittingly where birds sing,
> That we may walk fittingly where grass is green,
> O our Mother the Earth, O our Father the Sky.

In the same manner, "This Newly Created World," a song of the Winnebago Indians, accentuates an affectionate and respectful familial relationship between themselves and their land. The Winnebago Indians thought of themselves as being children of nature and regarded nature as their *"grandmother"* who gave them love, care and kindness:

> Pleasant it looked
> this newly created world.
> Along the entire length and breath
> of the earth, our grandmother extended
> the green reflection
> of her covering
> and the escaping odors
> were pleasant to inhale.

The belief that humans are not superior to other beings and that all things on earth are interconnected and interdependent are reflected in "They Tell Me I Am Lost," a song of the Mohawk tribe. In this song, not only are humans physically as well as spiritually related to plants, animals and all things in nature but they are also completely merged with nature. Nature and humans, thus, become part of each other, inseparable, feeding and fulfilling each other:

> my feet are elms, roots in the earth
> my heart is the hawk
> ……..
> my spirits eats with eagles on the
> mountain crag
> and clashes with the thunder
> my grass is the breath of my flesh
> and the deer is the bone of my child.
>
> my chant is the wind
> my chant is the muskrat
> my chant is the field that turns with
> the sun
> and feeds the mice
> and the bear's red berries and
> honey
> my chant is the river
> that quenches the thirst of the sun
> …….

Native Americans, furthermore, believe in the healing quality of nature and they practiced the art of healing by combining spiritual beliefs, spiritual rituals, and herbal medicine. In an article "Developing Spirituality Competency with Native Americans: Promoting Wellness through Balance and Harmony" by Gordon F. Limb and David R. Hodge, it is asserted that for most Native American tribal communities, spirituality is interconnected with health and well-being, and balance and harmony with nature plays a major role in fostering health and well-being in many tribal cultures ( Limb and Hodge 2008: 615-622). Thus, in caring for the sick, both the body and the soul must be treated.

According to the article "Native American Healing," traditional Native American healing is based on the belief that everyone and everything on earth is interconnected, and every person, every animal, and every plant has a spirit or essence. Even inanimate objects such as rivers, rocks, mountains, and creeks have a spirit which humans must recognize and respect (2008: 2). There is no discrimination between humans, animate, and inanimate things, and the equality of all things is accentuated. Traditional healers, thus, aimed to "*make whole*" by reestablishing harmonious relationships with the community and the spirit of nature, which was sometimes called God or the Great Mystery. Once balance and harmony were restored in the ailing person, good health would subsequently follow and would revive the sick. Throughout the ages Native Americans looked to nature as the balm for what ailed them.

In a healing incantation of the Navajo Indians, nature is evoked in the form of the gods of the mountains in order to heal and restore good health to them. The healing which is directed at both the body and the mind effectively illustrates their emphasis on the soul and their belief in the necessity to simultaneously cure the physical as well as the spiritual:

> Chief of all mountains…
> You will make me well today.
> My soul you will restore today.
> My legs you will restore today.
> My knee joints you will restore today.
> My body you will restore today.
> My mind you will restore today.
> This day you will make me well.
> This day you will give me power.
> That which is making me sick will be taken away from me.

Similar to Native American belief, the concept of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all things existing in the universe is a fundamental Zen Buddhist concept. This doctrine which Thich Nhat Hanh calls *"the interbeing nature of things"* (Nhat Hanh 1995: 41) views all sentient beings and inanimate things in the universe as inseparably connected and interdependent in the great web of interrelatedness. Drawing on the analogy of Indra's net, a vast cosmic lattice that contains precious jewels wherever the threads cross and where one can see all the other jewels when looking at any facet of any one jewel, Thich Nhat Hanh in *Understanding Our Mind* urges us to see things in the nature of "*interbeing*" and to live a life being aware of the one in the many and the many in the one:

> We can see the nature of interbeing and interpenetration in every seed and formation. Interpenetration means that the all is in one. The flower cannot exist by itself alone. It has to inter-be

> with everything else. All phenomena are like that…Everything enters into and is entered into by everything else. The sunshine penetrates the vegetation, the vegetation penetrates animals, and we interpenetrate each other. In the one, we see the all. In the all we see the one…(Nhat Hanh 2006: 82)

This principle of interdependence is in agreement with other key Buddhist teachings: the doctrine of "no-self" or the lack of inherent identity of all things; the doctrine of non-duality which explains that contradiction does not exist and there are no such binary oppositions as mind and matter, subject and object; and the Buddhist belief in impermanence. Thich Nhat Hanh in *Understanding Our Mind* exhorts us to change our view by eliminating the false ideas of self, permanence and duality and suggests that meditating on the nature of interdependence can transform delusion into enlightenment:

> If we continue to look at things based on ideas of self, permanence, and duality, we will continue to water the seeds of delusion within us and continue to suffer in the cycle of *samsara*. That is why it is essential to change our way of looking. This new way of looking is *paratantra svabhava*—the nature of interdependence. Changing our way of looking, learning to see the interdependent nature of reality is the basic practice. (Nhat Hanh 2006: 195–6)

Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhist teachings have been fused in the works of Gary Snyder (1930–), a contemporary American poet laureate and leading influential prose writer. Snyder has developed his love of nature simultaneously with his respect for the Native American traditions and his interest in Zen Buddhism. Born, raised, growing up and working in the West where mountains and forests constitute most of the landscape, Snyder has lived close to nature from his early childhood. Distressed by the wanton destruction of the natural environment, Snyder has pursued his study of the Indian cultures and read about Indian lore. He respects the Indian way of life which to him seems to have some sense of how a life harmonious with nature should be lived.

Viewing the poet as a shaman who acts as a medium for songs and chants springing from the Earth or Mother Goddess, Snyder draws on the oral Native American traditions of chants, incantations and songs to communicate his experience and seeks to recover poetry that can sing and relate humans to nature—be it magpies, beavers, bears, mountain ranges or creeks. The human race is not essential to the existence of nature but nature is indispensable to the survival and advancement of the human race. In his poetry Snyder always conveys a sense of the awesome immensity of space, time and energy at work in nature, that power which is beyond the reach and understanding of humans. Following Native American belief, Snyder contends that nature, with its land and creatures, will always be speaking its truth and all we need to do is to learn to listen to the spirits of nature in the same manner that Native American tribes did in bygone days:

> I'm not really worried about what white people are going to do on this continent. If anybody lives here long enough, the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land…That's what taught us, and it would teach everybody, if they'd just stay here. The old spirits and the old powers aren't lost.
>
> (qtd. in Woods and Schoonmaker 1985: 116)

Bron Taylor comments what distinguishes Snyder from other poets is his "*deep sensitivity to nature, a perception of its sacredness and 'intrinsic value'* " (Taylor 2005: 1562). While studying for degrees at universities, Snyder worked at different times as a forest ranger, a logger, a seaman, a trail maker, and a firewatcher. His work is a balance between physical labor, intellectual pursuit and spiritual fulfillment. Snyder's anthropological studies drew him even closer to both Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhism. In *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*, Snyder strongly claims that Native American beliefs and East Asian religions constitute *"one teaching:"*

> …Oh, it's all one teaching. There is an ancient teaching, which we have American Indian expressions of, and Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Indian Buddhist expressions of. And other expressions in the world…Native American people have many paths, many varieties in their paths, so you can't speak of all that as one. But they have, throughout Turtle Island, an ancient and clarified sense of what a right path is. And some of those societies, not all of them maybe, were actually living like a Zen monastery. (Snyder 1980: 67–68)

Gary Snyder's interest in Eastern religions grew and deepened concurrently with his study of the oral tradition of Native Americans particularly their respectful relationship with nature. At Reed College Snyder wrote poetry, majored in literature and anthropology, read Chinese and Indian Buddhist philosophy, and wrote a thesis on the Native American myths of the Northwest coast. It was during this period that Buddhism was introduced to him through his readings. While furthering his studies in linguistics and anthropology for only one semester at Indiana University, Snyder also practiced self-taught Zen meditation. At the University of California, Berkeley, Snyder studied Oriental languages and immersed himself in Zen Buddhism. The ancient Chinese poetry and the American Western tradition converged in his translations of the *Cold Mountains* by the Chinese Zen hermit, Han Shan. For twelve years Snyder lived in Japan where he learned Japanese and took a formal education in Zen Buddhism under Zen masters and devoted himself to strenuous Zen study and meditation. Finally, he decided not to become a Buddhist monk and then returned to the American West Coast.

In Zen Buddhism Snyder *"found a metaphysics of interdependence and kinship ethics with the nonhuman world that resonated with his own animalistic perceptions"* (Taylor 2005: 1563). Snyder firmly believes in the sustainability of the universe through "*mutual interdependence*" which leads to "*wisdom, love, and compassion*." In "Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture" he expressed this view of interrelatedness in connection with the Buddhist doctrine of

emptiness or "no-self" which describes the essential nature of all things as empty of a separate, independent self or lacking the inherent identity:

> Buddhism holds that the universe and all creatures in it are intrinsically in a state of complete wisdom, love, and compassion, acting in natural response and mutual interdependence. The personal realization of this from the beginning state cannot be had for and by one "self"—because it is not fully realized unless one has given the self up and away. (Snyder 1988: 82)

Snyder considers his poetry to be the work of recovery and healing. Like the shaman-poet of primitive cultures and in imitation of Buddhist teachings, Snyder seeks to restore respectful relationships with the universe in which all things are interrelated and interdependent. In *Turtle Island*, his 1975 Pulitzer Prize winning book and probably his best-known poetic work, the title of which is derived from a Native American term for the continent of North America, Snyder reclaims the organic and holistic environmental harmony that once was prevalent in this land inhabited by indigenous peoples. The Indian myths of the land and their relationship with their homeland in *Turtle Island* are linked with Zen Buddhist teachings that Snyder has personally experienced.

Snyder's poetry well reflects a convergence of Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhist teachings. The Native American and Zen Buddhist concept of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all existence constitutes an integral part of his literary vision. Many of his poems illustrate how Snyder blends precise observation of nature with his inner insight gained through his study of Native American tradition and his practice of Zen Buddhism.

"For All" is a poetic dedication to all things in the intricate web of the cosmos. The poem celebrates the belief in the interrelatedness and interdependence of all existence. In this poem, Snyder pledges loyalty to the land and all beings on earth:

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell

Though all things and beings are diverse and unique in their physical appearance and particle formation, they all share the same universe and they are interconnected and interdependent in one whole ecological system:

one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

The poem also records a great love of nature and underscores the affectionate bond between humans and nature. The speaker's delight in the colorful vibrant autumnal world "*Ah to be alive/ on a mid-September morn"* and his fond and intimate touch with the stream "*fording a stream/ barefoot"* are vividly articulated.

Ah to be alive
on a mid-September morn
fording a stream
barefoot, pants rolled up
…….
Stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes

In the same manner as the Navaho chant "Twelfth Song of the Thunder," the speaker's inner spirit connects with the

sounds of nature creating one harmonious orchestral melody. The *"creek music,"* the natural song of the "*Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters"* corresponds with the inner song of his *"heart music."*

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
……
cold nose dripping
singing inside
creek music, heart music

The wonder and dynamism of nature are vividly depicted in "Ripples on the Surface."

Ripples on the surface of the water –
were silver salmon passing under– different
from the ripples caused by the breezes

Nature is no "*book"* for scholars to study and decipher all her secrets but a dynamic and exuberant *"performance:"*

--Nature not a book, but a performance, a
high old culture
Ever-fresh events
scraped out, rubbed out, and used, used,
again–

This concept is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson who writes "*Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never becomes a toy to a wise spirit."* (Emerson 1950: 5)

Snyder in his non-dualistic worldview makes no distinction between nature and culture. Nature is seen as part of ancient civilization *"a high old culture;"* both nature and humans have together played vital roles in the creation and development of the world culture. The end of the poem suggests "*the notion of interpenetration of nature and culture"* and the Buddhist principle of emptiness (Pradittatsanee 2007: 163-4), emptiness which is the essential nature of all things. Both "*The little house*" and *"the wild"* are "forgotten." There is "*No nature"* and no civilization; there is only emptiness "*one big empty house."*

The vast wild
the house, alone
The little house in the wild,
the wild in the house.
Both forgotten.

No nature
Both together, one big empty house.

Jamelah Earle viewing the poem from a bioregional perspective suggests in "Gary Snyder and Environmental Activism" that the "*house"* represents human civilization (1) which is portrayed as a tiny part of *"the vast wild."* The human house standing isolated from all other beings and things while *"silver salmon," "a humpback whale," "breezes," "ripples on the surface of the water," "braided channels of the rivers"* and *"fields of grasses,"* represent the diversity of nature, gleefully share the inherent interrelatedness and interdependence of all existence in the universe. Earle further remarks that without the recognition of and respect for the connection between humans and nature, the ecosystem is *"empty"* because it lacks the harmonious coexistence necessary for wholesomeness of all (Earle 2010: 5).

With the progress and development of science and technology, humans have long overlooked the wonder and significance of the natural world and have neglected the sacred bond with Mother Earth. "Ripples on the Surface" calls for a healthy and

harmonious interaction, the affectionate kindred relationship that is reflected in "This Newly Created World" of the Winnebago Indians. In response to this call, "River in the Valley" depicts a human appreciation of natural wonder reminiscent of "Twelfth Song of the Thunder," a mountain chant of the Navajo tribe. Snyder and his two sons, Gen and Kai, notice and cherish the movements of nature *"thousands of swallows nesting."* Their joyful participation in the natural world also suggests their intimacy with nature.

> We cross the Sacramento River at Colusa
> follow the road on the levee south and east
> find thousands of swallows nesting
> ……..
> Gen runs in little circles looking up
> at swoops of swallows – laughing –

The dialogue between father and son and the father's reply to his son's question at the end of the poem "*where do rivers start?"* reveals the "*transmission*" of the father's belief in the intricate web of interrelationships to the younger generation (Pradittatsanee 2007: 149-150): "*hills*" "*river*s" and *"all*" are interconnected and merge in "*one place."*

> From north of Sutter Buttes
> we see snow on Mt. Lassen
> and the clear arc of the Sierra
> south to the Desolation peaks.
> One boy asks, "where do rivers start?"
>
> in threads in hills, and gather down to here--
> but the river
> is all of it everywhere,
> all flowing at once,
> all one place.

The close tie between nature and humans is clearly shown in "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout." Nick Selby keenly remarks that the poem is "*an exploration of the relationship between land(scape) and self that is established through work"* (Selby 2010: 3). Derived from Snyder's own experience as a fire-watcher at Sourdough Mountain, the poem emphasizes not only the skill of attentive looking but also the significance of the relationship between the watcher and nature:

> Down valley a smoke haze
> Three days heat, after five days rain
> Pitch glows on the fir-cones
> Across rocks and meadows
> Swarms of new flies.

The work of the lookout is the gaze and the reading of the landscape. The smoke haze and the heat haze look like alarming signs of fire. However, upon thorough and meticulous looking, the smoke and heat-like images turn out to be swarming flies. The work of attentive gazing continues as the speaker, after a drink of cold water, projects his vision into the far distance amidst the silence and stillness of the landscape:

> I cannot remember things I once read
> A few friends, but they are in cities.
> Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
> Looking down for miles
> Through high still air.

In the poem, the speaker in his concentration and his act of landscape reading establishes a physical link as well as a spiritual bond with the land and, in so doing, the self utterly merges with the natural world in which he lives and works.

"For the Children" describes what will happen in the *"next century"* and *"the one beyond that."* Sustainable peace can be

achieved and a happy life can be made possible only through friendly coexistence between the human and non-human worlds.

> In the next century
> or the one beyond that,
> they say,
> are valleys, pastures,
> we can meet there in peace
> if we make it.

The stern and sound advice to this generation and future generations is to live a harmonious life with all things in the intricate web of interrelationships, to learn to listen to the spirits of nature which will always be speaking the truth, and to minimize material needs in order to focus on the spiritual life, leading to meditation, and the paving of the path from temporal life to enlightenment, a great understanding of the true nature of all things. In its final line, the poem strongly encourages a life of simplicity and self-relinquishment.

> To climb these coming crests
> one word to you, to
> you and your children:
>
> **stay together**
> **learn the flowers**
> **go light**

"Piute Creek" interweaves the wonder of nature, the interrelation and interdependence of all things, the healing power of nature and an awareness of self leading to a moment of Zen enlightenment.

> One granite ridge
> A tree, would be enough
> Or even a rock, a small creek,
> A bark shred in a pool.
> Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted
> Tough trees crammed
> In thin stone fractures
> A huge moon on it all, is too much.
> The mind wanders. A million
> Summers, night air still and the rocks
> Warm. Sky over endless mountains.

The Chinese painting-like natural landscape is vividly portrayed with each element "*One granite ridge," "a tree," "a rock," "a small creek," "A bark," "Hill beyond hill," and "A huge moon"* merging with the others into a panoramic view of beauty and harmony, supporting the concept of the interrelation and interdependence of all things. The use of the indefinite pronoun *"a"* suggests the impermanence of all things reflecting a fundamental Buddhist teaching. The beauty of the simplicity of nature fills the mind with wonder and invigorates the link between the self and the landscape (Chatraporn 2009: 68).

Similar to the healing incantation of the Navajo Indians, the poem depicts the healing power of nature. Nature has the power to eliminate *"All the junk,"* the dirtiness in the human mind which causes worry and unhappiness. With the cleansing power of nature, the mind is rendered free from egotism and delusion:

> All the junk that goes with being human
> Drops away, hard rock wavers
> Even the heavy present seems to fail
> This bubble of a heart.

With all the "*junk*" being discarded, the mind becomes clear and purified. Nature helps uplift the mind and provokes a change in the self. The mind then achieves a state of emptiness and attains a flash of Zen enlightenment.

> A clear, attentive mind
> Has no meaning but that

Which sees is truly seen.

This self-effacement is an inexplicable experience involving a mystification of the relationship between the human and the natural. Nick Selby expostulates *"the poem presents this relationship as part of a mutual and visionary system of exchange whereby the self and the land read each other"* (Selby 2010: 4). The speaker's identity has now merged with the landscape and he has become part of the natural whole. This flash of enlightenment is followed by a trail of ascent "*Watch me rise and go,"* suggesting the spiritual uplifting of the mind. Even the wild animal in the wood realizes this unison, "*Cold proud eyes/ Of Cougar or Coyote."* The verb *"rise"* signifies the elevation of the mind and *"go"* implies a sense of progression. The two verbs vividly delineate the change triggered by natural purification and the speaker's "*clear, attentive mind*" being lifted into a higher position.

Back there unseen
Cold proud eyes
Of Cougar or Coyote
Watch me rise and go.

Even though the Native American tradition of the awareness of self and self-effacement possibly reminds one of the awareness of self in Zen Buddhism, the awareness of self in these two traditions is dissimilar. This is because the Native American awareness of self and self-effacement is only conducive to the belief in the interrelatedness and interdependence of all things on earth, seeing all as akin to one another while an awareness of self or the concept of no-self in Zen Buddhism, which holds that all phenomena are empty of a separate, independent self and that the reality of all phenomena emerges from interrelation and interdependence, leads to a process of meditation, a spiritual exercise, clearing the path from temporal life to enlightenment and a greater understanding of the essential nature of all things. The Native Americans, who were polytheistic tribes and worshiped a multitude of nature spirits, animal spirits, and the spirits of departed ancestors, neither had nor developed such concepts of "no-self" and enlightenment.

Apart from drawing on certain Native American beliefs and Zen Buddhist principles to communicate his experience, Gary Snyder makes use of Zen Buddhist poetic techniques which bear some resemblance to the poetic tradition of Native American oral poetry. Before exploring the similarities between the poetic tradition of Native American oral poetry and that of Zen Buddhism, a brief overview of Native American languages and poetics followed by a briefing on the poetic practice of Zen Buddhism must be given for clearer analysis.

Though thousands of languages were spoken in North and South America prior to their first contact with the whites, the indigenous people had not develop written languages and had almost no written records. Native Americans relied heavily upon tribal traditions and tribal memory. Perkins explains that each tribe produced a body of oral tradition treasured and handed down from generation to generation through the minds and mouths of those individuals most gifted with a clear memory and the power to sing or to recite the lore of the past (Perkins 1985: 251). Brian Swann asserts in his "Introduction" that "*the oral tradition was vital to Native American songs and poetry"* (Swann 1988: xxvi). David Guss

extends the scope of the two critics noting "*words are not simply uttered or sung but infused with the actual spirit of the chanter"* (Guss 1986: 423). And quite often chanters reflected a spiritual commitment to their tribe and their land.

As there were thousands of indigenous languages, there were notable differences in poetic style among these numerous tribes. However, Nellie Barnes in *American Indian Verse: Characteristics of Style* has found certain common characteristics of early Native American poetics. Most songs and poems use repetition and a parallel structure, contain concrete natural imagery, lack the intellectualizing of most poetry written by whites, and are marked by conciseness, concreteness, and sincerity (Barnes 1921: 56). Moreover, their poetry reflects their keen observational skills and their "*observation was true to nature, true to (their) own essential relationship to the natural world, and true to primal human experiences"* (Barnes 1921: 14).

The earlier discussed Native American chants, songs, poems, and incantations demonstrate all these qualities. Repetitions of words, phrases and sentences as well as parallel structure are strikingly notable. For instance, in "Twelfth Song of the Thunder," the word "*voice*" is repeated eight times, the sentence *"The voice that beautifies the land"* four times and "*again and again it sounds*" twice. Parallel structure is apparent in "*the voice of the thunder*" and "*the voice of the grasshopper*" as well as "*the voice above*" and "*the voice below*." In "They Tell Me I'm Lost" the parallel structure of "*my chant is…"* is applied throughout the song. In "Song of the Sky Loom" the first line "*O our Mother the Earth, O our Father the Sky*" is identical with the last line and the parallel structure "*That we may walk fittingly where…*" also appears in many lines. In the healing incantation by the Navajo, the parallel structure of "*My … you will restore today*" is applied all through the incantation in order to command nature to work in the way the Native Americans want and to evoke the desired action, that is to heal and restore good health to the sick.

Concrete nature images such as the sun, the earth, the sky, the wind, clouds, elms, grass, hawks, eagles, mountains, thunder, grasshoppers, deer, green fields, muskrats, rivers, roots, crags, mice, bears and red berries are vividly described through the observational skills of the primitive composers who showed much open sincerity in the rendering of their poetic pieces. There is conciseness resulting from an economy of words; each poem is short and each line consists of a few words ranging from only three words to twelve. Furthermore, the application of simple diction such as *"Mother," "Father," "grandmother," "children," "chant," "feed," "honey," "leg," "knee," "body," "mind," "sick"* and *"today"* reflects the pure mind and sincerity of the "natural philosophers" who were true to their sacred relationship with nature and lacked Western intellectualization.

The poetic practice of Zen Buddhism dates back to the fifth century in China, where it was known as Ch'an, the Chinese version of Zen and "*the ancestor of the Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and the various evolving Western versions*" (Hamill and Seaton 2004:11). Zen Buddhist poetics flourished in Japan in the thirteenth century and reached its zenith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the works of such Zen masters as Basho, Buson, Ryokan, and Issa. According to

Chatraporn, Zen poetry in Chinese and Japanese may roughly be divided into two distinctive types: overtly religious poems and enigmatic imagistic poems, especially the haiku (Chatraporn 2009: 58). Thomas Hoover in *Zen Culture* strongly supports the connection of the haiku with Zen Buddhism contending that *"haiku is regarded by many as the supreme achievement of Zen culture"* (Hoover 1977: 199).

The characteristics of the haiku are compactness with a strict poetic form of three lines of 5-7-5 syllables, concreteness, the use of nature images, the application of simple ordinary language, and the avoidance of abstraction and conceptualization. Moreover, the haiku always reflects the poet's mindfulness and the attention to what is going on around him particularly in the natural surroundings. More often than not the concrete images of nature assume a significance beyond themselves. These natural images will stimulate an emotional and intellectual response and reveal profound truth. In other words, the juxtaposition of concrete natural images and the capturing of a spontaneous moment triggers a temporary Zen enlightenment. The following haiku by Basho serves as a vivid illustration of all these qualities:

> On a leafless branch
> A crow comes to rest –
> Autumn nightfall.

It is interesting to note that there are certain resemblances between early Native American poetics and the haiku. Bruce A. Goebel in *Reading Native American Literature* explores the similarities and differences between the characteristics of early Native American songs and those of the haiku and finds that "*haiku tend to parallel early songs in their conciseness, their attention to image, their sincerity and their avoidance of intellectualizing"* (Goebel 2004: 34). The following spring song of the Chippewa could probably pass as a haiku.

> As my eyes
> search
> the prairie
> I feel the summer
> in the spring.

This song resembles haiku in almost all aspects; the main difference is that the Chippewa song, though characterized by concreteness and brevity in consisting of only five lines with merely one to four words in each line, it does not have the strict poetic form of three lines of 5-7-5 syllables required of traditional haiku. More importantly, the nature imagery in the Native American song does not assume a significance beyond itself and the song is not meant to reveal any profound truth. Neither has the Native Americans a sense of enlightenment.

The precision of tersely worded images reminiscent of imagistic poetry, conciseness, concreteness, simple and ordinary language, as well as the abundant use of nature imagery, all of which are common characteristics of both Native American and Zen Buddhist poetic traditions, find their ways into the poetry of Gary Snyder. Snyder uses mainly common speech as the basis for his poetry. He harvests his imagery from the natural world in which flora, fauna, humans and inanimate things are connected in an intricate web of constantly changing interrelationships. Snyder prefers to present "things" rather than "thoughts" and he lets his concrete images stimulate

the emotional and intellectual response of the reader. His poetry always reflects the his mindful living reminiscent of Zen masters and demonstrates an intimacy with the landscape redolent of the Native American oral traditions. His poetic lines are short and compact making most of his short poems haiku-like and contemplative. All these qualities can be seen in the earlier discussed poems of Gary Snyder. For a more vivid illustration of Snyder's poetic technique, another of his poems, "Pine Tree Tops" will be examined in detail:

in the blue night
frost haze, the sky glows
with the moon
pine tree tops
bend snow-blue, fade
into sky, frost, starlight.
the creak of boots.
rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
what do we know.

"Pine Tree Tops" is a condensed poem consisting of nine lines with the words in each line ranging from three to five words only. The diction is simple and colloquial. The poem is remarkable for its pictorial portrayal of the natural world at night in wintertime demonstrating the poet's keen and minute observation of nature as well as his affectionate bond with it. The concrete images of "*the blue night,"* "*frost haze,"* and "*the sky glows/with the moon"* provide a backdrop for the pine tree tops which is the title and stands at the center of the poem. The color of the yellow moon and the twinkling starlight are contrasted with the darkness of the night and the haziness of the frost. There is movement in the bending of the pine tree tops loaded with snow and fading into the sky. The image of sound is distinctive in "*the creak of boots."* The creaky sound of the boots is juxtaposed with the visual images of *"rabbit tracks, deer tracks."* This poem can probably be read as three haiku with the third and the sixth line as the division lines. "Pine Tree Tops" also reminds one of the spirit and the oral tradition of the Native Americans.

Snyder's sensibilities have been largely shaped by his respect for Native American traditions coupled with his study and practice of Zen Buddhism. The rediscovery of the wilderness, the belief in the interpenetration and interdependence of all things in the universe and the exhortation of harmonious coexistence reverberate in his poetry. His poems though characterized by a remarkable simplicity of style and diction, render a complexity of effect and carry a larger and deeper import beyond the explicit words. His poetry, flowing with the sounds of the mountain streams and roaming with the wind in the trees, does allow nature to "speak." Snyder advises if we are to hear Mother Earth, we must first and above all else learn to "listen."

listen

This flowing land
is all there is, forever

We are it
it sings through us –

from "By Frazier Creek Falls"

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