

PAGAN UNIT

Spiritual Intelligence: Embodied Energy and the End of Consumer-Waste Culture

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Paintings by Micaela Amateau Amato from
Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle,
A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ...Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

— Abraham Joshua Heschel

In *The Reader*, Bernard Schlink's novel about love and dignity in the face of the Holocaust, there is a scene during which the main character confronts the idea of indifference as motivation for murder: human beings considered useless objects can be methodically disposed of. I am a child of a Holocaust survivor. Industrial civilization has harnessed apathy towards, and of course contempt of, difference. My ancestral memory, my cellular memory tells me we must reconsider intimacy in terms of waste. A pencil, a rubber band, a square of toilet paper—let alone an apple tree, a family pet, a human friend—or a stranger in a distant land.



I had met Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Arun Gandhi, at Peaceweavers while my then six-year-old son and I were living at EcoVillage Ithaca. Arun's book, *Be The Change: A Grandfather Gandhi's Story*, tells how Gandhi taught him as a young boy the connection between nonviolence and not wasting—even a worn-away pencil stub. His story is about recognizing and nurturing the sacred in everyday objects. This awareness—so beautiful and simple—had been the foundation of how I had lived since leaving home as a teenager to live on communes and organic farms throughout Europe and North Africa. Now, as an adult, I attempt to live, in every aspect of my daily life, Gandhi's philosophy of not wasting as a commitment to nonviolence.



Everyday I ask myself: How can citizen-activists embody symbiotic traditional wisdoms as we transition from our hyper-industrialized petroleum-pharmaceutical-addicted techno-euphoric culture to an economics-of-solidarity? How can we mobilize collective eco-action among decolonized peoples? How can we—individually and collectively—teach and embody the intricacies of the social scientific concepts of true cost, life-cycle analysis, cradle-to-grave, and embodied energy (designating both the local and global cycles of extraction > transportation > manufacture > assembly > production > installation > representation > distribution > consumption > disassembly/deconstruction > disposal/decomposition/containment > saturation)?

Animating our embodied energy allows us to shift our relationship to consumer-waste culture's everyday violence—creating a bridge between infrastructural change and individual-collective accountability. For example, how we build our home, how we animate the embodied energy¹ of each object and the space we create by combining them, is a deliberate commitment to local and global nonviolence. I am happy to be in dialogue with others about this intimacy that deeply shifts our relationship to objects and people as disposable.



For the past three years, my family and I have lived in a biocentric art installation. Using only repurposed materials and equipment, we converted a school bus into our performance-based tiny home.

¹ “Reusing embodied energy” (Hawken 90) not only saves both energy and capital costs, it is also spiritually intelligent.



Our LoveBus is a spiritual commitment. It is rooted in the ancient Hebraic philosophy of *gilgulim*, to reanimate or reincarnate; a process of bringing new life to that which was considered dead—or landfill. “Trash,” an object no longer valued thus deemed as waste, is rooted in Western concepts of Progress and Development. When we rethink taken-for-granted assumptions that perpetuate the fact that over “40 percent of the content of American landfills is construction waste” (Hawken, 100), we can shift the underlying concept of development from neocolonialism to, as Paul Hawken urges, “reimagine development as a tool for restoring nature and communities” (109). In contrast, continual renewal implied in *gilgulim* echoes the First Law of Thermodynamics: the total amount of heat energy can never be altered; energy can never be created nor destroyed, instead it is transformed. Learning from cross-cultural and cross-species’ wisdoms, we choose to embody this Law in how we live our home.



We have found that home is a dynamic and diverse *practice*, an ongoing unfolding to be reanimated each moment in relation to our needs, desires, values. Home is an action, a reflection of a constellation of our belief systems. Home is a living organism with a metabolism that continually transforms energy. Ours, like the focus of Native American Pueblo architecture is, as Barbara Kingsolver writes, “to build a structure the earth could embrace” (211). Compelled by biophilic, earth-loving motivations we seek an exchange, a reciprocal relationship with the environments around us—local and beyond. From this visceral commitment, we can cultivate regenerative economic tools for biocultural transformation; integrating, rather than competing with our natural environment or isolating ourselves from it.

I am reminded of *buen vivir* (good life), the Spanish translation of the Quechua *Sumak Kausay*²—Indigenous cultures' biocentric ethics. Normative standard-of-living in the U.S., the American Dream, presumes that the “good life” implies having more than we need. This Western idea of prosperity is rooted in “enforced consumption” (Ivan Illich)—a technocratic model of property ownership. “Private property” attempts to fix home as a static unity, stripped of relationality and only available to those who are deemed entitled to it.

At its root, our economic crisis is a crisis in consciousness because we see ourselves as separate from our *environment*, when in reality, we're inextricably connected to all this is. As a result, we've deluded ourselves into thinking that land should be owned and then profited from by

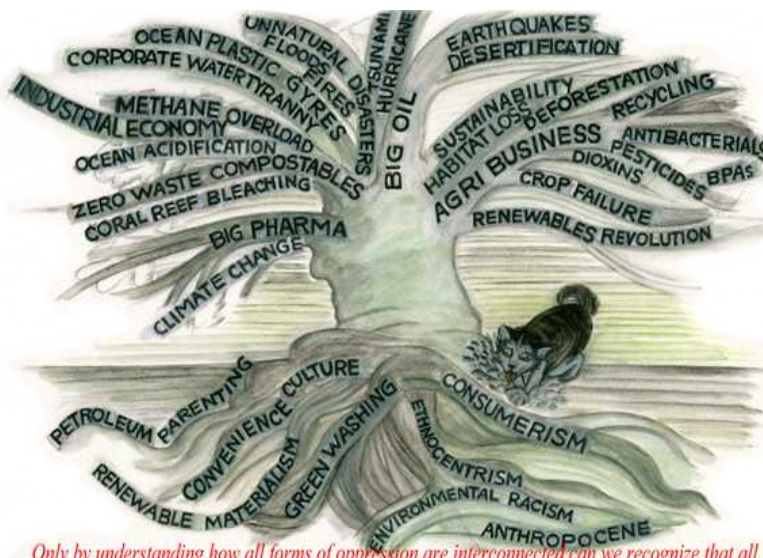
² <https://www.pachamama.org/sumak-kawsay>

some at the expense of others. ...Even the word *environment* points to this disconnection: It stems from the Old French *environer*, 'to surround, enclose, encircle,' implying a subject that is separate from the objects it is surrounded by. ...[Aldo Leopold warned us:] 'We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect' (Adams 152, 43).



Unlike land privatization / ownership and property for individual profit, First Nations and Indigenous peoples who may have fought over territory—fought over “the right of land *use*, never ownership, which is a concept foreign to most indigenous cultures” (Adams 44-45). As Eric Cheyfitz asserts in his *Disinformation Age*: “*Buen Vivir* is not geared toward 'having more' and does not see accumulation and growth, but rather a state of equilibrium as its goal” (412).

Paul Hawken echoes these sentiments: “Too few designers ask, as poet and farmer Wendell Berry has, ‘What does this place require us to do? What will it allow us to do? What will it help us to do?’” Berry



Only by understanding how all forms of oppression are interconnected can we recognize that all forms of emancipation are equally interconnected.

also said, ‘What I stand for is what I stand on’—reminding us that land must be measured not just in acres and dollars but in love and respect” (Hawken, 86). Similarly, how we reanimate the land with which we live and how we inhabit the buildings in which we live must be measured in love and respect. Within the framework of neoliberal globalization, that which cultivates and harvests apathy, free market is a euphemism for economic terrorism (Cheyfitz). Within the Anthropocene (human-induced ecological destruction due to advanced capitalism, rampant consumerism, international development, environmental racism), the litany of our collusion with corporate forms of domination is infinite. Simultaneously, we institutionalize collective spiritual numbness as our industrial-waste consumer culture engineers our own demise.³ Navigating our own extinction along with the collapse of the known world, we witness not only our fears and failures, but also the exhilarating potential to radically transform our Anthropogenic status quo that defines our species’ hubris. Transitioning from our biocidal Anthropocene Era into a creative-waste biophilia requires embodied interdependency.

This intimacy-based movement is rooted in spiritual practices and everyday-life choices. It resonates with geologist, Thomas Berry’s concept of the Ecozoic—in which humans share mutually beneficial relationships with the world around them. Intellectually, structurally, and spiritually, we integrate with our natural environment, rather than compete with it. Renouncing the Anthropocene as we shift into the Ecozoic Era means that we honor the sentient abilities (electromagnetic cellular consciousness) of animals, plants, trees and the organic intelligence of these non-humans, our kin. *We all* are by nature electrical beings—animated by our electromagnetic fields.⁴

³ “Dominant civilizations are characterized by people who don’t recognize that their own well-being depends upon the well-being of the communities in which they live. As a result of their sense of alienation, people within those civilizations seek to control and dominate others, usually through social structures that wield power from top to bottom” (Adams 77).

⁴ “In this big community of farmers, blacksmiths, traders, beavers, elephants, pine trees, rainforests, volcanoes, and all other earthly beings, *qi* is the common source of vitality. Members of this community are brought together by *qi*. ...The ethics of *qi* [includes] the recognition of *qi* as cosmic energy that governs social, political, biological, geological, and ecological worlds alike. ...[*Q*]i entails a universal sense of care. The same *qi* that empowers humans lies in mountains, rivers, landfills, and even parking lots. The notion of *qi* establishes a complex web of relationships that traverse boundaries, scales, species. It is indiscriminate” (Yifei Li, “*Qi*,” Matthew Schneide-Mayerson, Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Kim Stanley Robinson, *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, Introduction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019: 217, 222, 223).

If we embrace *how* our non-human kin learn, we can develop a healthier, more equitable world through co-relational infrastructures; we can remember that we are bioelectrical systems that use electrochemical activity and electrochemical signals to move through time and space.⁵ This is the foundation for co-beneficial interrelationships. Non-hierarchical electrical communication patterns in nature can be used as models for human interactions as we evolve toward ecological justice.⁶ For example, since we now know that plants' *nervous systems* are totally decentralized, that the plant functions as a total brain, then we can reconceptualize industrialized economics sustained by our Western-imperialist Cartesian view of mind / body hierarchy—a false dichotomy that reifies body-phobia and ethnocentric destructive ecological choices.



For example, *Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era*, my cross-cultural climate justice book, challenges cultural habits deeply embedded in our calamitous trajectory toward global ecological and cultural, ethnic collapse. It explores how we can rethink relationality; how we can, as Eduardo Kohn declares in his *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, “decoloniz[e] our thinking” (224) in order to embody intersubjectivity. Unlearning ideologies of entitlement and waste can generate a cultural paradigm shift rooted in socio-spiritual economics. Because disinformation campaigns spread by fossil fuel interests, Agribusiness, and Big Pharma deeply root us in assimilationist consumer-bred entitlement, we must be attentive to the ways in which we unconsciously embody the very hegemonies we seek to dislodge. We must be aware of the ecological and social costs of replacing one dominator culture with another. For example, the characters in *Zazu Dreams* witness social and environmental costs of subjugating others

⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer explains these intimacies throughout forests: “These fungal networks...weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking.”

⁶ See further examples of interbiology and sensory partnerships: how to “make space for cross-species connections, communications, modes of animacy” in Charis Boke's “Plant Time,” *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, 204-214.

“Building intimate, sensory relationship with plants enables [us] to understand [our] own animacy—[our] own lives—as inextricably bound up with the plant-others of the world. ...Agency is not a property of a bounded individual but an active process, [as Karen Barad tells us: 'agency always emerges in relationship'], produced in collaboration between multiple sorts of beings. ...Action is always intra-action and agency is always intra-agency. Action and agency cannot happen without mutual relationships among different kinds of materials and actors” (204, 206).

through fossil-fuel-addictions *and* their ostensible “green” replacements. Both carbon-intensive economies are dependent on people and objects-reduced-to-“resources”-as-disposable.



When we are clearly attuned with the space and objects around us, we witness what is already here, how it can be used in surprising ways. Like the physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking’s idea, everything we need to know is already within us just waiting to be realized, Leah Sha’rabi, the Mizrahi mystic, declared that “Everything you see has a spark of holiness in it that is waiting to rise up. It wants to be free, like a person in prison who longs to be rescued” (Firestone, 180). Rescuing an everyday object means that we release its inherent dignity. Although not directly identifying with Animism, Hinduism or even the Kabbalah, Sha’rabi believed that everything has a soul, every object is sacred, the most menial tasks are sacred. When we embrace the sacred possibilities of mutual accountability we can begin to uproot our materialist society, eventually rebuilding in its place a “Living Democracy” (Frances Moore Lappé) that aligns our values with the natural world.

Through creative, collaborative daily choices, we can disentangle the intertwined roots of our climate



crisis. As all forms of climate crisis / climate chaos are interconnected, all forms of environmental justice are equally interconnected.

From this psycho-spiritual commitment, we can engage collaborative economic tools for biocultural transformation—a resistance to colonialist legacies of systemic economic oppression and extractive industries. A joyful, cross-cultural, interspecies approach to climate-crisis mitigation weaves simultaneous individual, community, and infrastructural accountability. This collective spiritual intelligence, this deep mindfulness, is a devotion to nonviolence—recognizing and nurturing the sacred in everyday objects. A devotion to repurposing objects, to constructing co-beneficial, regenerative infrastructural support systems is an antidote to industrialized convenience-culture.

Although I am haunted by the horrors of our insidious and explicit techno-utopic race into a robotic-5G future, I cling tenaciously to the possibility that we can shift our self-destructive complicity that sustains ravaging anthropogenic environmental racism. I maintain my staunch devotion to collective action that could generate the reciprocity of Ecozoic infrastructures. And, I would love to be in conversation with others who also find themselves ignited by such devotion.

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