

EDITED BY
Bill McKibben

FOREWORD BY
Al Gore


**AMERICAN
EARTH**

***Environmental Writing
Since Thoreau***

CARL ANTHONY & RENÉE SOULE

Ecologists have often concluded that boundaries between different landscapes offer the richest niches. Carl Anthony (b. 1939) has inhabited similar borderlands since the start of his work. The publisher of *Race, Poverty and Environment Journal*, he was an early voice addressing issues of environmental justice. Although his work has focused on cities (particularly the Bay Area of northern California where he founded the Urban Habitat program), he also served as president of the Earth Island Institute, an organization whose intellectual lineage stretches straight back to John Muir and the birth of the wilderness movement. As demonstrated in this essay, co-written with Renée Soule—who has advocated an ecological approach to psychology for two decades and taught nonviolent communication skills at San Quentin prison—Anthony has always worked to bridge division instead of sharpen it. As he says, “In the inner cities, the problem is that people have tended to see jobs and economic development as a social, political, and economic issue, and not as an environmental issue. And environmentalists tend to see their issues as being separate from the social and racial justice issues. But actually, they are operating in the same universe; in fact, they are two sides of the same coin.” In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, his words are especially prophetic.

A Multicultural Approach to Ecopsychology

 Our commitment to a multicultural approach to ecopsychology arose out of a collaborative research project called “Race, Ecopsychology and the City.” Over the course of six months, we discovered that the blending of these three seemingly disparate themes (race, ecopsychology, the city) gave them a coherency that doesn’t exist if each stands alone. Racism is overwhelming, but viewing it from an

ecopsychological perspective gives rise to new information and new possibilities of healing. We also found that the city, and not only the wilderness, is an appropriate place to apply ecopsychology. For where else in nature does the human psyche and the whole of nature come together to create a truly eco-psychological environment? In the bustle of a constructed urban setting, we see human psychology and values manifest in created physical forms. This is where deep ecopsychological work can be practically applied. Cities must be made whole and aesthetic if wild habitats are to survive with integrity.

Most importantly, if ecopsychology can't address real problems within human communities (like racism and urban desolation), then for those interested in deep social and ecological healing, the field wouldn't be big enough to warrant one's lifetime dedication. This project tested limits and promise of ecopsychology, and we're happy to say that we discovered both room to grow and a lot of promise.

During a recent celebration of Black history month, organized by a group of environmentalists anxious to get people of color more interested in the natural world, a young African American man told the following story. Many years ago as teenagers living in Stockton, California, he and his brother decided that, to make a little extra money, they would hire themselves out as farm workers for the day. They got up at 4:30 in the morning and dressed in time to be down at the local intersection where the truck comes by for day workers. They hopped on the truck, which made its way to the fields of Central Valley.

The journey took more than an hour. When they arrived, with the sun rising higher in the sky, they were put to work in the fields picking onions. The ground had been loosened by a tractor, and the smell of the onions, mixed with the odor of the thick rich soil, was pleasant. But it was a back breaking task to spend hours bent over, pulling up and loading the onions into sacks, to be picked up by the tractor which followed them. It was hot. They worked hard, taking an occasional break throughout the long day. With money borrowed from the owner of the farm they could buy soft drinks and food. At sun down, when they got

paid, they realized they had spent as much on food and drink as they had made, and somehow, in the confusion, they had missed the truck going back to Stockton. They didn't have enough money to take the bus back. So they walked.

It took them from 8:30 at night, until 2:00 in the morning to get back, and they laughed all the way. Finally, at two in the morning, hot, sweaty and tired, they arrived at home, and made a vow to each other: they would never, ever set foot on a farm again.

This story can be seen as a metaphor for the historical experience of African Americans whose cultural experience of the land is quite different than many people of European heritage. African Americans worked the land in the South for many generations, first as slaves, then as sharecroppers without the opportunity to own the land, and without pay. Given the public invisibility and harshness of these rural experiences, it is not surprising that African Americans may have a different feeling about the land than privileged people of European heritage. The depth of humiliation, the feeling of outrage has totally colored the young men's perception of that experience of the land, leading to a feeling of detachment and avoidance of emotional engagement with rural life.

We offer this as one striking example of the psychological perspective that needs to be included in both an enduring conservation ethic and any form of ecological healing.

Ecopsychology is not only about our relationship to nature in wild places, for our response to urban realities is not divorced from our ancient fear of wild territories. In his remarkably candid book of stories *Race*, Studs Terkel (1992) recounts an episode of a young European American woman, a politically liberal college professor from a suburban community, who found herself driving through a desolate inner city neighborhood as the sun was going down. As her car approached a deserted intersection, she saw three young, African American men running toward her, frantically waving their hands in the air.

In a moment of panic she found the buttons on the panel beside her. She electronically rolled up the windows, locked all four doors of the car,

and stepped on the gas so forcefully you could hear the tires screech. She drove four blocks, faster than it was safe before she realized she was going the wrong way on a one way street.

Although this young woman had in her life and work done everything she could to promote social justice, when confronted in an unfamiliar environment with the threat of survival, she faced a moment of truth. The men approaching the car were, apparently, signaling that she was going the wrong way. But in fright she had misread what they were trying to tell her. For her, the inner city was a wilderness, a place for shadowy fears to appear as terrifying reality. Down deep, she was afraid of black people, and her fear had caused her to recklessly endanger her life.

One could argue that this little anecdote about a frightened middle class woman at sundown in an inner city neighborhood has nothing to do with society's relationship to the natural world. But consider first that the episode is taking place as nightfall approaches. How much of her fear comes from the gut gripping combination of being caught in darkness in an unfamiliar world? We are taught that it is childish to be afraid of the dark. In darkness, however, we can no longer rely on our eyesight, and from a physiological point of view we must rely on other untrained and unreliable senses for information, including our imagination.

Consider too that the episode described above takes place in an abandoned and desolate part of the city, with burned-out buildings, vacant, garbage-filled lots now inhabited by only a third of the population for which it was designed, devoid of signs of life, paved over and forgotten. How much of her emotional reaction is an unconscious fear of retribution and guilt for being implicated in the prodigious waste of abandoned sections of the city? There is also the painful reminder that these are displaced people. They do not own their land, nor are they flourishing in this desolate urban habitat. In many ways, the young men remind us of the terrible fact that cities the world over are filled with refugees. Glitter, glitz and steel-enforced concrete structures cannot refute the fact that urban populations by definition are peoples who cannot feed themselves. In an urban environment, the prey-predator relationship exists between human beings.

The lessons of both social justice and ecopsychology are simple and the same. They involve living in connection, feeling the connection, honoring and then acting from that place of being connected. In many ways it is cities that clearly teach us about interdependence. Every person one sees is in some way part of one's own existence. What keeps one alive in the city are the people who drive the trucks, who work in offices, wheeling and dealing and making connections to the life-giving countryside whence come food, water, building materials. With every move, a city is stretching beyond its boundaries to sustain its heat, energy and life. Signs and lessons of interdependence are everywhere, providing we do not hide behind the glass and steel structures feeling separate, independent and perhaps smugly superior. We are all in this together, redwoods, mountain lions, the little kid down the street, the Mexican immigrant who picked radishes this morning.

Both social justice advocates and ecopsychologists look directly at how issues of racism and responsibility to the more-than-human world affect each of us on a very personal level. As the world grows smaller and human population increases, escaping these issues will be increasingly unavoidable.

Denial is a glaring challenge facing both advocates of social justice and ecopsychologists. Clear-cuts hide behind tree-lined highways. Economic and racial segregation still divide cities, creating taboo areas in urban habitats. Invisibility is one of the main symptoms of denial. Environmental and social justice issues are often "simply not on the agenda." Breaking through denial to a place of compassionate, creative responsibility is not easy. Ecopsychologists recognize the limited effectiveness of pounding people with horrific facts and statistics about poverty in America did not stop the welfare bill from passing.

Certainly we all need to "own our history" and acknowledge that much of our wealth rests upon exploitation of people and natural landscapes, but direct blame is not an effective way to motivate change. Both social justice advocates and environmentalists need to find ways of presenting facts that invite participation rather fear-based apathy. Both need to help people find the strength and courage it takes to face

the truth, and look each other in the eye. This shared challenge is itself common ground.

Ecology can be seen as a way of life in the sense that its range of relationships and scope of healing includes everyone. In a sense, it is a “family psychology” where one’s family includes all of life, including past and future generations. Monoculture is not only dull, but deadly to natural systems, including human society AND psychology. Complexity rests upon diversity, as does resourceful intelligence and love. Maintaining a stance of inclusivity is risky, but in an exciting way. Complexity and diversity constantly challenge cherished assumptions. But learning is inevitable if one is open to the risk of making mistakes. In fact, making mistakes is advisable. Fear is par for the course, and therefore so are confidence and courage.

One surprising benefit of diversity is that of feeling more firmly rooted in one’s sense of self: a personal identity flexible enough to listen to, understand, and honor the experiences and values of another without erosion of one’s own integrity. This core integrity comes from holding an ongoing intention to “stand corrected” without being subsumed by the perspectives of others. Everybody’s story is vital to the integrity of the whole, including one’s own.

Ecologists and social justice advocates both promote respect for diversity. That respect depends upon a mature capacity to embrace and even celebrate apparent contradictions. This internal stance of inclusivity is the key to ecopsychology, where a healthy multicultural, multi-biotic, multiregional and multifaceted psyche merges and blends gracefully with Earth’s ecology.