



**CALIBAN SPEAKS:
ESSAYS, RANTS, AND RIFFS**

CALIBAN SPEAKS: ESSAYS, RANTS, AND RIFFS

Cover art by Gary R. Smith

Typeset in Baskerville by Daniel Estrada Del Cid,
HS Marketing Solutions, Santa Ana, California

These essays appeared previously in various issues
of *Caliban* (1986-1996)

Copyright © Lawrence R. Smith, 2017

Caliban Refuses to Collect His Thoughts (1#, 1986)

Let beasts be invented that are worthy of the footprints
in the mud.

* * *

People keep talking about poetry that is well-crafted.
BMW's are well-crafted too, but they make me feel like
throwing up. What does all this talk about craft have to do
with anything? I'm sick of yuppie poetry.

* * *

Breton saw that revolution—political, cultural, sexual, or
whatever—is permanent and *ad hoc*. As soon as people try
to organize it or institutionalize it, it becomes the enemy in
disguise.

* * *

Maybe a lot of the new and largely boring poetry reflects
the right sort of sentiments about saving the earth and so on,
but it still doesn't do much for me. I recall the same feeling
in the thirties and forties when the *Partisan Review* attempted
to represent what it thought of as the most radical ideology,
but the poetry it published was aesthetically reactionary. I'm
not interested in anything that doesn't liberate the flesh, the
spirit, and desire of every kind.

* * *

Anyone who was even marginally connected with the
rumbling of the sixties counterculture knows that what was
happening then was infinitely more exciting than anything
that has happened since. Poetry was alive, too. I'm not talking

about the failure or success of the revolution. That's another story. I'm just talking about the excitement. Now I'm reading a lot of poetry that tells me how heroic accommodation can be, a kind of poignant and ironic resignation to live in the suburbs. Accommodation used to be called "selling out." But now I look around and wonder if those people who sold out did themselves much of a favor. They sure sold out cheap. But then spies and traitors always do. When you hear that a guy is going to serve fifty consecutive life sentences and he only got \$35,000 over five years, you suspect that integrity and keeping the faith make better business sense.

* * *

Then there's the "death of the avant-garde" noise that *has always been around*. Even in Egyptian hieroglyphics. But the avant-garde lives in spite of the theoretical impossibility of that being so. It reminds me of reading, as a kid, a treatise in *The Treasury of Science* that conclusively proved that it was impossible for airplanes to break the sound barrier.

* * *

Edward Said says that the impotent irony of some modernists, their suggestion of the futility of struggle, is simply an extension of the 18th and 19th century imperialist tradition. We all know that in recent history "invulnerable" dictators have fallen with amazing ease when a large number of people have recognized each other's presence and have begun to move in the same direction. Who says nothing can be done? The world disproves that every day. Of course, the folks who replace the Fascists are not always much of an improvement, but that's another story.

* * *

Just when people started cutting their hair, throwing away their undyed cottons and black light posters, poets started getting nervous about the word “surrealism.” And the recantations and denials began. It’s an amazing coincidence. I guess they thought the term was old and worn-out. The truth is that surrealism, or whatever other thing you want to call that magnificent obsessive journey the people who are really alive in this century have been taking, has barely started.

* * *

Do you trust history books? Then why do you trust anthologies? (Even though you say you don’t, you still read them and use them.) Helen Vendler has just proved that you can produce a big, impressive anthology that has virtually nothing to do with the vital tradition of American poetry.

* * *

Don Byrd, in *Sulfur 16*, says there is “a peculiar invention of the Reagan era, which might be called the tyranny of manners.” There is an enormous amount of writing now going on that needs to be attacked and rejected, if only to keep our minds from going to mush. Time for less kissing and more biting. Or maybe the two together, which would make it all a lot more interesting.

* * *

Maybe Caliban can’t give power to the voiceless, but it can give a voice to the powerless. Let’s see where that takes us.

* * *

Caliban is not eclectic, but he feels that it is his obligation to try to make poets and writers who are in serious pursuit of something worthwhile aware of each other. So they can unite with one another or attack one another, as may seem appropriate at the time. But we must deny ourselves the comfort of ignorance, reinventing the wheel.

* * *

Caliban is calling the tribes together. Those who consider themselves avant-garde or progressive (and even those who don't, but who are serious) need to come together to help pull the culture out of the sink it's slipped into. That doesn't mean a club or a coalition, but they have to collaborate or fight with each other on a common ground. They need to struggle to move toward an authentic position and at the same time to attack and reject the fraudulent. Caliban does not suggest eclecticism; on the contrary, he suggests an attack on it. Eclecticism in its most pernicious form continues to flourish in the current polite literary political situation. If confrontational politics turn out to be the uniting factor we need, as it was in the Vietnam era, then so be it.

* * *

Important poetry (as opposed to trivial) is at worst a liberating construction and at its best prophecy or revelation.

* * *

This is a haunted country. We should not feel at all good about ourselves. The poets least of all. Blood is on our hands and ghosts crowd our streets, but the voices of cultural anger over this continuing betrayal of who we are and who we might become have turned into the purr of acquiescence.

* * *

The open road is still open, but only if we insist on it.

* * *

Liberation cannot be partial or incremental; it must be total, whether political, economic, social, cultural, or sexual. It is not earned; it is a right we are born with, but that we have to fight for continually. There are always realtors and used car salesmen who claim to own our birthrights, and they can draw up a million phony deeds to prove it if we let them.

* * *

These endless ironies about the loss of paradise, and the necessity of accommodation, are pure and simple collaborations with the forces of oppression. They are even worse than surrender. And they must never be confused with “black humor,” or “objective humor” in the Bretonian definition, which has been characterized as a kamikaze attack on the universe.

* * *

There have been surges in avant-garde activity and exploration in the U. S. from the teens to the present day. Maybe the surge in the late fifties up through the early seventies was the biggest, but it wasn’t unique. In spite of the fact that this impulse has been around for such a long time, it is *not* worn out. In fact, this line of pursuit has barely begun to be explored seriously.

* * *

Caliban wants to liberate all islands everywhere from the rational Prosperos, those fraudulent magicians, who think they own and understand art, but who only suffocate it.

* * *

The avant-garde is not the exclusive domain of white, middle class males, bohemian or otherwise.

* * *

Give me the brilliant obsessive writers, who are not to be confused with witty, manipulative trivialists, the writers of occasional poetry.

* * *

Gertrude Stein is as much a founder of the American avant-garde as Pound or Williams.

* * *

“There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery. I’ll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it’ll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it.” Prologue, *Kora in Hell*.

* * *

All of them contributed equally, and deserved equal thanks. All, that is, except the evangelical who endured the heat because he had to and because he was about to die.

* * *

A human being is at his or her highest point of existence in a just act of resistance. That is the closest we will ever come to

utopia, not some imagined aftermath. The balance between injustice and justice varies with different cultures, different ratios in one and another, but there is no absolute. There is no millennium, not in this world.

* * *

Most of us would agree that the media in the U. S. constitute a network of evasions, distortions, and downright lies. That's why the underground press of the sixties flourished; it served as a truth network. It certainly isn't that anymore, that is, if it even still exists. In the eighties the media are even worse than they were twenty years ago. Where is the "alternative press?" Writers had better figure out a way to communicate the truth, and to re-establish the network. It is not now a capital offense to do so, but who knows about the future? And writers need to do more than simply criticize a system whose leaders are in love with death. There needs to be a counter-assertion of who we are, the kind of assertion William Carlos Williams makes in *In the American Grain*: not propaganda, just setting the record straight.

* * *

If you get tired of resisting easily, and you just can't sustain the struggle, start a "buddy system." When you get tired, let the buddy resist. When he or she gets tired again, you can take over. If you and your buddy get tired too easily, then form a network of buddies. There are no excuses for anyone. No one on earth has paid all of his or her dues. And the more a person claims that he or she has paid all the dues, the less this is true.

* * *

Let beasts be invented that are worthy of the footprints in the mud.

Afterthoughts (#2, 1987)

A vocabulary of objects and occurrences, properly arranged, induces illumination.

The fish was wrapped in burlap, then buried, in anticipation of the birds.

Archeological layers of time exist simultaneously, but the traveler has to listen carefully for the past, and fall into a shamanic trance to hear the primal monotone, the music of the spheres.

You stand in a center, throwing seeds of arrogant hope in a circle around you.

It is our duty to disgorge the whole intellect of the world, which is a story that is told and forgotten, told and forgotten, of the mythic cities where we live, and the nomadic journeys we undertake to travel from one to another.

Teeth are magic.

Out, out Holy Mother Baby, from your empty darkness and empty bones.

A conglomerated cluster of oxidized pennies makes a beautiful sculpture, powerful in its emanations, but frustrating, unless it can magically produce all the coin of the realm you need—or make it all disappear, like the coins you pick up from the street in your dreams.

People are ultimately responsible for the acts their governments commit. People are also responsible for the art, writing, movies, etc. produced around them. No easy excuses about the death grip of the Establishment in New York, Hollywood, or Washington, D. C. In recent months

passionate, obsessive independents have trashed the Establishment. Spike Lee and Oliver Stone have destroyed all of our excuses.

What a day to rent Paradise! bury the pianos, ring gongs and crash cymbals at the senior research pavilion!

Rock 'n' Roll as Subversion, and the New Modern (#3, 1987)

American kids cruising down the road in a baby blue '55 Buick Roadmaster convertible, listening to Little Richard, Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, and Fats Domino on the radio. They believed so much in the open road that they insisted on having it—and sharing it with everybody they met along the way. This was the same joyfully subversive road that carried Freedom Riders to the South.

* * *

The lyrics of the blues and black rock 'n' roll are based on irony, but it is subversive of the official culture, unlike the reactionary irony of New Criticism and classical High Modernism. Hip humor is black humor in more ways than one. The erotic in rock 'n' roll is subversive too: forbidden, exotic, down and dirty sex. That's why the white covers always had bowdlerized lyrics. But most white kids listened to both black and white versions. Rock 'n' roll shattered the color barrier; Little Richard and Chuck Berry triumphed over Bill Haley and Pat Boone. Elvis Presley wasn't called the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" until he stopped performing it. To punish him for singing and dancing black and dirty, they drafted him into the Army, publicly sheared his duck's ass hairdo, and sent him off to Germany. When he returned he slid quietly into acceptable pop.

* * *

If all the innovations of the historical avant-gardes of the 20th century are acceptable and co-opted, why haven't we changed our lives? Where are the new cities? Where are the new people? Dada paintings hanging in Trump Towers apartments don't mean a damned thing. Nixon used a similar ploy in an attempt to neutralize the anti-war movement in the early seventies: rather than indulging himself in mass arrests,

he merely said he agreed with everyone. Since he said he was “against the war” too, there would be nothing to push against. But this kind of bare-faced lie is as outrageous a provocation as shooting people in the streets, and should be met with the same reaction. If we do nothing but lament the co-opting and commercialization of the avant-garde, what are we doing but collaborating with the reactionaries themselves?

* * *

In the American Grain, by William Carlos Williams, points out that the brutally slaughtered never disappear. We incorporate the dead into the living body of the culture, no matter what official propaganda may declare to the contrary. We have all become Indians. And black music—jazz, blues, rock ‘n’ roll—the means by which our enslaved and slaughtered black ancestors continue to speak, burns in the heart of America. That’s why it terrorizes the guilty bigots, the self-righteous hypocrites. It makes them see the blood on their hands. It reminds them that they are in love with death, and that they hate the living and vital. That’s why black music attracts the sons and daughters of the land who are not totally lost, because in that music they recognize home and family.

* * *

The new modern, or the return to the modernist project, is even more important to us as Americans than it is to the Europeans. We certainly aren’t going to succeed by imitating them. We have to find our own version of the project (or projects) that will fit our own complex cultural identity. Not only will this allow us to modernize the American avant-garde, it will also give us the opportunity to confront our cultural heritage with full honesty for the first time in our history. We’ve got to develop in our own way, and be part of this dialogue on the new modern as equals, not as students.

But that means doing some homework, and not relying on the lazy and moronic notions of regional inspiration and native intuition that have crippled American culture for too long now. Williams is often presented as the model for such a stance. Do not forget that he translated a surrealist novel by Philippe Soupault, that he associated with the most radical artists of New York Dada, and that he knew more about the Continental avant-garde than all of the expatriates in Europe put together. Let's take William Carlos Williams as a model. We couldn't go far wrong doing that. But let's take him for what he was: a voracious, omnivorous reader and writer, a man of incredible energy and curiosity, whose life will never justify lazy provincialism.

* * *

Oratory, music, poetry, and dance are a series of created tensions and releases, like bebop improvisational solos. This nothing new. Just listen to Walt Whitman on the sax. But we need to play this American music ourselves. We need to learn the kinesthesiology of the modern, how to riff with our own language, as Michael Harper says. The dance and the music dance together, and as long as they dance, there's a poem.

* * *

Rather than trying to ascertain what Breton, Lorca, or Gertrude Stein meant at one time or another (although such inquiries are useful), we must define the pursuit of the modern for our own times. No one can predict what forms it will take, so we must be open to a multiplicity of paths of pursuit, whether we deem any particular one of them adequate or not. Otherwise the necessary research cannot continue. This stance is NOT eclectic. It is NOT a suspension of critical judgment. We are obligated to identify, attack, and reject the derivative or mannerist work that offers itself as a

substitute for the difficult and authentic struggle to develop a new vision. If we do not, we will disappear into the quagmire of workshopism that strangled the American avant-garde in the seventies.

* * *

When the rock ‘n’ roll of the sixties maintained and developed the black sound of its ancestry, it was subversive. This had little or nothing to do with protest lyrics. But much rock ‘n’ roll, when commercialized, degenerates into pop. This split persists in the music: the easy road and the true road. It’s too bad so many choose the former. Even the Beats, and later the hippies, who understood the dialectic, didn’t hold out for the true. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise walks through the Denver ghetto wishing he were black. Then he watches the multicultural sandlot baseball game with an intense longing for the unofficial America he knows exists. But later he walks away from his Latina girlfriend Terry (certainly the best woman he is ever likely to meet), betrays the gift of his vision, retreats to bourgeois comfort in New York City, and watches the Great Mother from across the Hudson.

* * *

Caliban recognizes the necessity of reintegrating art, music, and literature in America—both in terms of race and discipline. Only an idiot would believe that anything significant could be accomplished without being conversant in these three fields, at the least. This doesn’t mean that we will become dilettantes. It means doing more homework, and it means ceasing this insane justification of laziness in the name of depth and specialization.

* * *

Recognizing and embracing our culturally diverse heritage—our greatest asset, not a liability as Prime Minister Nakasone said and many American whites believe—does not mean eating soul food, egg rolls, and tacos at ethnic festivals. It also does not mean Burt Lancaster as an Apache, Sidney Toller or David Carradine (in a role written for Bruce Lee) with Scotch tape on their eyes being inscrutable Orientals, Tarzan in his various incarnations demonstrating that he is a better African than the Africans, or even “singing black” and the cover phenomenon in American music. Why is it that some American whites are convinced—like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—that they should play all the roles at once? It is time for a little humility and respect. It is time to end the lie of the official Anglo culture in the USA. What does that fabrication have to do with who we really are? “Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from the jambs!” Let’s work together to find out who we are, not only because it is just and right, but because we will always be crippled as a society and a culture until we can get it straight. This search is more than looking for and archiving buried and lost history. It means going on from here in a collective effort. We do not yet know what we will discover together, but that is what makes the affair most exciting.

* * *

The Trail of Tears, the Nisei concentration camps, the freed slaves chased through the Southwest and dragged back to the South to pick cotton, the Driving Out of the Chinese in the West—these are and were your brothers and sisters. If we can welcome home Vietnam Vets, isn’t it time we welcomed home these kin, and their children, as well? That is what the only authentically new music in American history has been telling us, but we haven’t been listening well. Rock ‘n’ roll is certainly not the proper theme music for television commercials exalting an “exclusive” vision of America based

on greed and injustice. May the words and chords of these travestied songs burn and consume the mouths and intestines of the Madison Avenue collaborators!

* * *

We are building toward an asyntactical synthesis, like Stewart Brand's "America Needs Indians." We need to use and adapt ideas, forms, dances, music from anywhere and everywhere. We are not a new culture. That European cliché must be decisively rejected. American culture is as old as any culture in the world. This is true not only in Gertrude Stein's sense, that we were the first into the 20th century, but also in the sense that our native cultures go back as far into time as any cultures in the world. Our history did not begin with the invasion of the Europeans. The Native American cultures form the matrix into which the African, Asian, and European cultures fit. They are and always will be the foundation on which everything else is built. This not romanticism, or a dream of noble savages—it is simple historical fact.

* * *

The postmodern fear of "totalitarian modernism" has led to a disastrously archival mentality. Too many people seem to be happy living in a museum, rather than continuing on with history. Let serious art stop being a valuable eccentricity like an airmail stamp accidentally printed with an inverted airplane. No more talk of the *transavanguardia*, the return to the neoclassical, and so on. We've got to quit collecting history and start to challenge it as equals. Let there be offshore parking in Southern California, with cars flying from rooftop to rooftop. "Life depends on sperm and not on history," says Henri Chopin.

* * *

The idea that postmodernism is the final wall is the result of a wonderful job of selling. One poet, after hearing talk of the death of postmodernism, said “Nothing can come after postmodernism, can it? Isn’t that by definition the last thing?” Of course, the postmodern is only one phase in a much larger progression. Art and literature have the task of changing human perception, releasing new visions, helping to engineer new worlds. That this has never been completely achieved in previous efforts means little, other than the fact that we need to continue our explorations and our work on humanity’s greatest project.

* * *

Ellington, Monk, Mingus, and countless jazz masters have come and gone in our land like ghosts. They too need to have their spirits welcomed back.

* * *

Liberals seem to be destined like Lord Jim to be beat by sons-of-bitches like Brown, because they keep insisting on giving them a “fair chance,” instead of doing what they can to make sure they never harm anyone again. From this the liberal gets the deserved contempt of the Browns of the world and of the people betrayed by giving the Browns the freedom to prey on the innocent and helpless. “Fair play” in this case is nothing more than cowardice, lack of commitment, and unsureness of purpose. How will we be able to explain to future generations, and adequately apologize for, our unwillingness or inability to combat the current incarnation of Brown—Reagan and his “revolution”—and for the shambles he has left our country in?

* * *

All American poets should be put on a regimen of cafeteria food for a year. Occasional festivals featuring proletarian beer might be allowed. This will give the poets a chance to sort things out without being distracted by exotic fumes in their brains. Maybe they will realize that *haute cuisine*, fine wines, and the good life are not the subjects of serious literature. A gourmand has no more chance of “making it new” than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. That doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate good food and wine. It’s just that in recent years the importance of all this has gotten completely out of whack, both within the text and in life itself. Food and wine poetry is the ultimate surrender of the power of literature to change life; it is the embrace of self-limitation and despair.

* * *

One way to ensure that speculators don’t co-opt and market the avant-garde is to decommercialize it radically. Create artifacts that are public, and not saleable, as many of the artists at Kasel Documenta did. Make art too large to sell. The commercialization of art (which has never been free in any age) in the past twenty years has turned into a massive cocaine habit. Like cocaine, this commercialization is a drug of greed and arrogance, not of insight and expanded perception. Breaking the habit will cause some pain, but the results will be worth it. Art might return from the world of zombies to the land of the living.

* * *

The most important single task in our return to the project of modernism is the rebuilding of our cities. That we have abandoned them is a sign that our civilization is in decay; it is a phenomenon unique in the world. Elsewhere the centers of cities are the most prized places to live, not the most shunned. This is an opportunity to build the country that was

always there in potential: a modern, integrated, multicultural society. It must be geared to openness, the gathering of people together, not the moated medieval towers of the elite that stand like boils in the midst of urban poverty, and not the Yuppie enclaves of gentrification that have displaced people who have lived in the cities for generations. Let cities be for people who live there now, and for people who want to join them on an equal basis. No speculation, the employment of the city dwellers in the reconstruction of their cities, and equal and open access to the products of their labor. Let us invent totally new ways to create the environments in which we live. This is the true art of transformation, the modernist dream. This is where rock 'n' roll has been leading us. Now we must listen, and then get to work.

The Worm in the Apple (#5, 1988)

Being a poet is not a full-time job; there are other kinds of medicine to make.

* * *

We have adapted American society to the computer, rather than adapting computers to American society. In fact, we have made American society into a large and complex computer, or system of computers. This system facilitates the pursuit of greed. It has also resulted in the instantaneous processing and disposal of all information, of everything, indiscriminately, from truth to garbage. History has been destroyed. This grand computer uses fear to enforce obedience; it overwhelms us in every possible way. We need a computer virus to insert into this system. I'm not suggesting a virus like the one the Cornell student fed into the national system that incapacitated it. We need one that, spreading every time it is used, will replace the system of greed and fear with love and communality. We need a systematic destroyer of the profit system, a destroyer that is inextricable from that system itself. The best and most just scenario would be if the worm in the apple were financed by the apple farmer. Let the system pay, without realizing what it is doing, for its own transformation. I have been told that there are computer vaccines to counteract the viruses, but I have been told that some vaccines have their own viruses attached.

* * *

It's kind of tough indulging in nasty talk about "liberals" after seeing what the far Right has done with that word in this recent presidential campaign. However, the truth is the truth. A fundamental belief of the liberal, whatever his or her ethnic background, is the superiority of the Anglo culture and rationalist, empiricist logic, both of which have demonstrated

stunning inadequacies in representing or dealing with the world we inhabit. In unguarded moments, the typical liberal talks just like William J. Bennett. In rejecting liberalism, the people at large—consciously or instinctively—are doing something right. Unfortunately, instead of finding a workable authentic, alternative, they fall victim to the demagoguery of the far Right, which is Fascism, pure and simple, in spite of their attempt to make it sound respectable with terms like “Conservative” and “New Right.” The one thing liberals offer, however, that makes their governments infinitely preferable to those controlled by the Right is the liberal concern for social justice, one man one vote, and justice before the law. That gives us all more space and time to discover and establish a better alternative. If the American Right had its way, that kind of research would land us in prison.

* * *

Build a monument for the men who refused to shoot old people and children in the hamlet of My Lai, even though they had been threatened by Lt. Calley with death or court martial. These men are the real heroes of the Vietnam era. They demonstrated that not everyone is forced to massacre Indians, even under direct orders, not one hundred years ago at Wounded Knee and not now, in our current cultural genocide of indifference. It's time to wake up. It could happen—and has happened—here. We've got to stop taking credit for not exterminating the Japanese-American citizens we put in prison camps in World War II. The way we behaved as a nation during the round-up has startling similarities to the way the Germans dealt with Jews. If we had had our own Eichmann, I wonder how many people would have stepped forward and asked about the smoke coming from the camps in California, Utah, Colorado, and across the West. Wouldn't it have been the same old “We didn't know

what was happening”?

* * *

The 20th century avant-garde has had a colonial mentality. It's as if “primitive” art didn't exist until it was discovered by Picasso and Breton, just as “America” didn't exist until Columbus saw it and his first “Indian.” This Euro-centric vision still dominates, not just in William J. Bennett, but in people who consider themselves the hippest of the hip, politically and culturally. As Ishmael Reed says, Western Civilization texts in the U. S. that start out with ancient Egypt would make you think Cairo was in the suburbs of Berlin. The Native American cultures understood and *lived* Breton's “supreme point,” the fusion of the rational and irrational faculties, long before Breton and Freud theorized about the possibility. Why is this vision more sophisticated when it comes from a Picasso or Aragon than it is when it comes from an Oglala Sioux? Europeans and Euro-Americans have always considered the lack of archives (museums, books, etc.) as the sign of a primitive culture, but when the indifference is manifested by avant-garde artists—for instance, with self-destructive works of art—it is sophisticated. A sand painting that is made and later destroyed is called primitive or, even worse, inconsequential. If the difference between the primitive and the sophisticated is the layer of irony added by our Western analytical faculty, then we can easily do without sophistication.

* * *

Not only are native cultures the matrix into which the African, Asian, and European cultures fit, there is also an historical and ongoing relationship between native cultures and the American avant-garde. Rather than being ignored, it should be celebrated.

* * *

Native American cultures may not be the foundation of what is called the “dominant culture” in the United States, even though much has been incorporated without acknowledgement, but they are surely the foundation of the so-called subculture that has existed from the beginning and continues to re-emerge into prominence at regular intervals. That subculture is, in fact, the true, natural American culture. The one that is supposed to be the dominant culture, our legacy from the Puritans, is a perversion and subversion of the real and original one.

* * *

Getting trapped in a dream, trying to find your way back to the other side, whatever that may be, you try to find a road, a path, the familiar clue. Or a “back door,” as computer hackers say. That is the key to penetration.

* * *

“If the inventive imagination must look, as I think, to the field of art for its richest discoveries today it will make its way by compass and follow no path.”

William Carlos Williams

* * *

There is only one odyssey, one quest: the spreading out and mixing of all human beings, which goes back even before the birth of man. This natural restlessness keeps making it new—making us new and everything we undertake. It is like the attraction of the sea and its irresistible power, and it is as inevitable as continental drift, although we can’t seem to keep up with our nomadic instincts, either intellectually or spiritually.

* * *

After losing a battle, you can't pack up and go home.

* * *

The structuralists and deconstructionists see language's transcendental leanings as dangerous. Dangerous they may be, but they are also necessary and exhilarating. We must invent linguistic utopias. They will help us to reinvent ourselves.

* * *

What we need, as Leonardo Mancino put it, is "the opening of a real aesthetic, philosophical, ideological and political debate, with absolutely no preconditions."

* * *

People are either in love with life or in love with death. It's hard to be a fence-sitter on this issue. When you cut through chrome and concrete, propaganda and sludge, and touch your feet on the earth, you remember the truth. That doesn't mean that death can be ignored, but it sure doesn't have to be worshipped. With nomadic people, death is just part of the continuum. They live in peace with their ancestors for eternity. They never lose touch with the earth and all of its permutations, from dirt to animal blood.

* * *

Caliban is missing. Caliban is in his cave. Caliban is putting his ear to the ground.

* * *

People will sell their souls *in the hope* of ingratiating themselves

with powerful people. That's why the whole spectacle can be so disgusting; it isn't even defensible by realistic self-interest. Consider Adorno's description of Jews in Nazi concentration camps rooting for the blitzkrieg. A less extreme, but still very dangerous, example is the sight of so many American voters gleefully voting against their own interest as they congratulate themselves on their values, toughness and patriotism. Having received no actual payment, and in fact even being punished by those they put in power, is no proof of not having sold out. There are those who try to comfort themselves with the notion that a phrase like "selling out" is sophomoric, immature, just not chic. They seem to have forgotten some of the most notable lessons of the 20th century. Those were not lessons in chic, but they were nonetheless very real.

* * *

The people Europeans and Anglo-Americans have been fond of calling "primitive" didn't necessarily *worship* the spiritual presence that surrounded them, but they respected it, and knew it had to be acknowledged as a part of their daily lives.

* * *

The invention of money and the deification of greed allowed enslavements of various sorts, including those that enabled the building of various kinds of monstrous monuments to death (not to immortality, as their builders supposed). When nomads are engulfed by an organized property culture, they seem to disappear, but in fact they and their culture simply go underground. This is the case with the American Plains Indians. That powerful underground stream is still flowing in the veins of this country.

* * *

The need for collage novels; a rip in the throat of consumption; crossing the moon bridge over a river of cream, naked beneath the underwear; teeth, still sharp and still there; thunder in the closets of affection; playing dance and misery all day, every day, for the rest of our lives; the love that flows from a childhood passion cries out like a rising bird; a farmer's almanac and a directory of the newly dead, so the dirt will open for the falling seed.

* * *

For centuries Europe colonized the Third World; now the Third World is colonizing Europe. Compared to the atrocities of the colonial era, with millions of human casualties, and entire cultures wiped out, the current scattered terrorism doesn't seem like much. This is by no means a justification of terrorism of any sort, for any cause. Terrorism is cowardly, whether it is committed by individuals, groups, or heads of state. This is just a call for a little historical perspective.

* * *

Sound poetry started when people began speaking in tongues.

* * *

A wildfire of love and communitas will someday sweep across our land, and all the weapons of hatred, racial and otherwise, will be burnt to ash, along with the weapons of greed and fear. We will stand naked before our destiny. We will discover our hands. Nothing will be able to stop this wildfire once it is underway. And the ashes of hate, greed, and fear will fertilize the land, will transform it into the place the spirit fathers and mothers have always wanted it to be.

* * *

Money is never yours. It's put into your hands to use. Someday there will be an accounting of how you've used it. You will be served as you have served others. Never do charity or love your neighbor by proxy. You either do it directly or you're not doing it at all. Forget the United Way and the "thousand points of light."

* * *

American neo-surrealism has been more elegiac than revolutionary. We have never been quite successful in combining the legacy of energy and vision from Whitman with insights from our own times, as Neruda did in Spanish. Although American poets have flirted with surrealism, we have not fulfilled its promise, not even as much as the French and Spanish poets have.

* * *

One morning you're working along in the sunlight and suddenly you realize you're in a prison cell. You don't know how you got there, but it's sure as hell no dream. The prison cell is beneath ground level. You find a passage and crawl up to some wooden cross-pieces. You are on top of a cement foundation with a freshly rolled joist and new flooring. Now you've got to build your house.

* * *

Amelia Rosselli says she composes her poems while walking in the street. She intentionally destroys meditation. Unlike Wordsworth, she has no interest in "recollection in tranquility."

* * *

What if someone in the system, some glorious hacker, shunted off enormous amounts of money to finance a parallel or sub-system that destroyed profit. It would require a virus that would spread and eventually disable the whole system. The money could be used to create stores, restaurants, banks, and so on, that ran without profit. They would just sell at cost, with a small amount added on to give the few employees reasonable livings. Everything without middlemen and profiteers. One of the most dangerous insights in the history of revolutionary thought was offered by Jesus; bypassing the controlling economic system by destroying greed and fear in the people ultimately causes the system to collapse on itself. Many have understood this since, from St. Francis of Assisi to Gandhi. When these people made their presence known, and changed the world around them for a time, the only way for the status quo to be returned was to neutralize them and their influence, which was otherwise irresistible. Long live liberation theology and practical utopias.

**Caliban Dream-Sweats Equity on a Practical Utopia in Detroit
(#6, 1989)**

“Tell me another city,” he insisted.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

In *Caliban #6* we are telling you a city, through poems, stories, essays, drawings, photographs, and dreams. As each detail becomes necessary, it will appear, provided by us, by you, by persons yet unknown, or by objective chance. We will keep you informed as the work progresses. We will be building and unbuilding the city in future issues.

A “utopia” is a vision of what a city can be, but it can *never* be an accomplished fact. The “practical utopia” we envision is kinetic, not static, a convergence of a multiplicity of voices and visions, not the totalitarian enforcement of one. H. G. Wells spoke of a “kinetic utopia,” to replace the static versions of utopia that had been presented before his time, but he did not really fulfill that kinetic vision himself.

Some of things Americans admire in foreign cities and come home to find missing in the U. S. are complex, fascinating areas of interaction (not malls!), many layers of history that can be seen and experienced simultaneously, festival calendars that both unify the population and celebrate that unity. Why can't we have those things here? The business about us being a “young culture” is nonsense. Our Native American ancestors were here long before the dawn of civilization in Europe. And after all, as Gertrude Stein pointed out, we are the world's oldest culture, because we invented the 20th century and we were the first ones to inhabit it.

“Indian peoples held the ritual power to *renew their cosmos through rebuilding, remodeling, or reconsecrating their architecture*” (Nabokov, *Native American Architecture*). If not the entire cosmos, at the very least we should be able to change the way we live by changing our dwellings and the general systems of our cities. This can and should be undertaken immediately, not in some distant millennium. If we wait for people to

become enlightened, to change into better, more congenial creatures, we'll wait forever. Great cities can challenge people to be creative, productive, and actually enjoy life. That may sound like a modest definition of "utopia," but it suits Caliban just fine. We'll leave perfection to the gods, if they want it. We are not talking about daydreams; rebuilding the cities of the United States is a project worthy of the truly ambitious. It is not overgrown child's play, with a cartoon Monopoly set vision of life, like the ridiculous world of Donald Trump.

Detroit might very well be the most devastated city in the United States. It is also situated in one of the most beautiful, culturally and historically rich locations in the United States. There is nothing environmentally inevitable about the blight of Detroit. And there is nothing blighted about the people of Detroit, who have produced miracles, especially in the various arts, in spite of the physical city as it stands, not because of it. Such heroism deserves a better environment to manifest itself. This is the perfect place to start using our hearts and imaginations again, to engage in truly ambitious projects: that is, to change and fulfill our lives and dreams.

There are no finished plans, no final answers, but Caliban declares the necessity of making a beginning, and this is our beginning, the planting of the seed, the release of the good virus that will grow and spread through the coming months and years.

* * *

Our project derives from two related beliefs: 1) that American cities, based almost entirely on European models, tend to be static, not conducive to living in and experiencing life as process and 2) that the rebuilding of American cities, with all the implied social repercussions, is the most important task facing the country. We envision a city that is an anti-monument, one that emphasizes process, mystery, and the sacred more than cement, steel, glass, and right angles. We want a city so complex and stimulating that it could never be

taken for granted by its inhabitants, a city so complex that each inhabitant could build his or her own city in his or her own mind: an ecstatic labyrinth, where curves, vectors, multiple levels and planes, mountains and canyons, would abolish the easy scheme of Euclidian order. Here a person could find a place to live in a flux that more closely resembles the universe as we have come to know it in this century. It would provide the daily wonder and stimulation Breton and Aragon found in Paris, illustrated in *Nadja* and *Paysan de Paris*. Consider the description of Esmeralda in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, where there is an almost infinite complex of canals and street, water and land: "The most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda are spent without any repetition."

We are also paying close attention to the Native American prehistory of the Detroit area, as well as the African, Asian, Hispanic, and European cultural energy that makes up the unique American dynamic. We want a city where the inhabitants will be aware of the myth in which they live, and which they will continue to create, whether consciously or unconsciously. We believe that only in the total rethinking of the city, as a new and more complex gathering of the tribes, will we be able to begin to achieve our cultural potential, and begin to live out our American dreams and ideals. The suburbs are dead by definition, and the chemically poisoned countryside has been abandoned to agribusiness conglomerates. The "back to the land" illusion must not paralyze us again, as it did in the sixties, our last period of massive re-evaluation.

This project will be a testing place for the New Modern and other philosophical and ideological positions. It will also explore practical issues, such as tax structure, the prevention of speculation and the gentrification syndrome, and sweat equity as a viable approach to urban construction. We want the people of the inner city to have the first shot at the jobs and dwellings that will be produced, and we want the final community of the city to represent the whole multi-cultural sweep of American society. This utopia will become the

computer virus that could spread through the entire system, corrupting the body politic with ecstasy and enlightenment.

* * *

One of the greatest problems will be that of convincing the inhabitants of the area to be transformed that they are not being ripped off again. This is not “urban renewal,” or what has too often turned out to be “urban betrayal. For starters, I would insist that the people who live in the area to be rebuilt get jobs on the project, and down payments on the dwellings that are built (through sweat equity), and that they can never be removed or displaced from the area. Decent temporary housing can be built and then rotated as the various areas are demolished and then put under construction. We are talking about a livable city for all of the people, not medieval moated castles for the elite, like the Renaissance Center in Detroit, and all of the ugly condominium towers that are sprouting along the riverfront, spores from a large poisonous toadstool. They must go. These must be demolished, as well as the run-down residential housing of the inner city.

Some will argue that there is a lack of capital and a permanent economic base for such a project. If fifty percent of the state and federal money spent on social services for the area in question were diverted for this purpose, a project that would make most of those expenditures obsolete, there would be more than enough money to undertake the project. As far as a permanent economic base, we know that attractive cities attract capital and economic activity, as sure as bees are attracted to nectar. And let the temporary tax deferments be offered to the residents, not potential businesses. How many times have state and city governments agreed to outrageous tax breaks to entice businesses into urban areas only to be betrayed by those very businesses? Invest in the people; they're far more trustworthy. And the financial return of a newly invigorated city will more than pay for the investment.

In the best of all worlds, anarchy would be the best

government. But even if such a wonderful congenial collection of people could be assembled (and this is unlikely), there would still need to be some protection from predators on the periphery, to keep the happy thriving practical utopia from becoming “Donald Trumpland” or some similar obscenity. There is far too much unfair financial leverage in the world to let economic forces “take their natural course,” as our distinguished ex-president Ronald Reagan has argued. Neighborhoods could have legal co-op powers that would allow them to stave off takeover attempts. That seemed, at one time, to work fairly well in New York City. It kept Richard Nixon from buying into one building after another.

* * *

Why is it that pre-industrial societies are much better fields for sowing radical solutions than industrialized or post-industrial societies? Marx totally missed the boat on this. Maybe it’s because the foundation that makes the communal vision work is *not* rational, as Marx thought. Maybe it is based on the group or tribal solidarity that already exists in “primitive” or archaic societies and is lost through industrialization and its resulting alienation. For instance, tribal affairs in most Native American societies were not run by “chiefs” but by consensus through the deliberation of councils. How do we rekindle this and yet maintain the self-critical function that is always necessary to prevent the society from slipping into some kind of mythologized totalitarianism? Take Hitler or Stalin as examples, or dozens of others on a smaller scale.

* * *

Why are foreign cities so attractive? Because they are ancient enough to have roots in tribal societies. They have spiritual centers around which architecture and daily life are organized. They have festival calendars around which the year is organized. American cities are based on 17th

and 18th century European cities, products of the Age of Enlightenment that worshipped reason and geometry, and so they are effectively cut off from that enriching past. Even European visitors of the 18th century were startled by the uniform grids that were popping up in the American wilderness. Our lack of imagination appalled them.

Rome and Venice are very close to practical utopias as they stand. Their random accretions, their fantastically complex textures allow life to be continuous discovery and rediscovery. The two U. S. cities most visited for the sheer fun of it, I would guess, are Disneyland and Disney World. This is because, in spite of their gross distortions, they are the only two “cities” that have successfully compressed time and cultural diversity into one location. Umberto Eco says these “cities” are examples of “hyper-reality.” They do artificially what many cities abroad do naturally. There is a lesson to be learned here. A great city must be culturally, spatially and historically *simultaneous* (a Modernist concept that is by no means obsolete). Thus, the city we envision would have mesa-like buildings as well as canals, mounds created out of city rubble with glass and steel crystalline structures growing out of them, streets arranged like amphitheaters, and subways that are as exciting as amusement park rides.

* * *

Some might protest that going into a city and changing it will necessarily be a violation of certain people’s rights. Such talk is classically “politically correct” doublespeak: middle class comfort caring terribly about whales and street people as long as it does not have to do anything about them. This kind of politically correct liberalism is the new politics of reaction, much more insidious than Reaganism, which after all can be immediately perceived as open thievery, for anyone who has not lost his or her senses. This new style of liberalism is more insidious because it parades as activism. By the way, being afraid or unwilling to change anything, getting angry and

sentimental about the demolition of mediocre 19th century buildings just because they are old, but refusing to think about planning cities, is reactionary by its very definition. Leaving inevitable change to “developers,” and hating them for it, is pure hypocrisy. If you don’t the exploitation practiced by developers, then you’ve got to come up with a plan of your own. “Don’t change anything” isn’t a plan. The people who employ this rhetoric, in the classic fashion of academicized static postmodernism, want the world to be a huge museum, an endless archive. If we had always had this attitude, human civilization wouldn’t have developed in the first place. And if we continue with this attitude, it won’t last a lot longer. The postmodern fear of totalitarian regimes is also completely beside the point here. The rebuilding of the cities can only occur from the bottom up, with all elements of the society in full participation.

As Gertrude Stein says in “Composition as Explanation,” this kind of predictable resistance to change is based on “natural indolence.” But we certainly cannot let indolence prevent us from undertaking what needs to be done.

* * *

Jonathan Sinagub, a New York architect, has designed a “Jazz Village” for an area near the falls in Paterson, New Jersey. Sinagub uses jazz as a new paradigm for urban organization. This Afro-American music was generated by a “minority,” yet it is universal, appreciated throughout the world. It is the harmonious and dynamic resolution of tension between the individual and the group. Group improvisation, the foundation of jazz, is an idea that defies logic, but it works, Jesse Stone (see *Caliban #3*) says that the word “jazz” comes from the French word for “fuck.” When the French heard the Black American Army troops of World War I collectively improvising ragtime on their instruments, they thought it was “fucked up music.” But the world now knows that this new thing, as shocking as it then appeared

to be, has produced some of the most stunningly beautiful and transcendent works of our century. Let our cities be jazz cities. Detroit, with its rich jazz, blues, and soul history, is the perfect place to start.

Caliban, Jesse Helms, and Lil' Red Riding Hood Meet in the Big Easy to arrange for a Menage à Trois (#7, 1989)

Caliban: Can I put a little Kickapoo Joy Juice in your bourbon and branch, Senator?

Jesse: What's that? That's not one of those hallucinatory substances, is it? You do look a bit like a long-haired hippy to me.

Caliban: No such thing, Senator. But they say it has aphrodisiac and fortifying powers....

Jesse: Well, then, gimme a little hit of it.

Caliban: By the way, speaking of sacred juices, Senator, you'll remember that Plains Indian visionaries kind of had to put up or shut up. For instance, participating in the sun dance with wooden pegs penetrating the skin on the breast or back.... The tribe needed them to step forward and accept those visions for the collective whole. And I was thinking, Jesse.... Can I call you Jesse? You're one of the leading visionaries of our national tribe. Do you think you might to swing around the sacred tree a few times?

Jesse: Trees? Are you one of those Green-type Communists? Anyway, why don't you introduce me to the young lady?

Caliban: Senator Helms, I'd like you to meet Lil' Red Riding Hood. Red, this is Senator Jesse Helms. You can call her Red, Senator. All her friends do.

Jesse: Red? You mean that hair is natural? Listen, Sweetie, what would y'all like to drink tonight?

Red: A beer and a shot, Jesse. And what you doin' down here in N'Olins, Cher?

Jesse: Oh, just a little work and a little fun, Sweetheart. But let's not ask too many questions now. You know, Sugar, security....

Red: Why, Senator, you're not doin' another one of them Central America capers, are ya?

Jesse: Well, I can't comment on that.... Say, you know I saw a little cutie wearing red mesh stockings like these—mmmmmm—down in El Salvador once. You ever work down there, Sugar?

Red: Why, Senator! I'm a stay-at-home girl. What would I be doin' down there? We got enough soldier boys and government people 'round here to keep us real busy.

Jesse: Hoooooeeeeee! What's in that Joy Juice, Boy? I feel kind of buzzy.... and different.

Caliban: Lots of visions in there, Jesse. We figured you wouldn't have come all the way down here to us if you didn't want a vision.

Jesse: Of what, Boy? A vision of what?

Caliban: How about your life? Our lives.

Jesse: Hoooooeeeeee! I'm feeling buzzy, but kind of clear too. Those are awful sweet lil' shoes you got there, Lil' Hood. Let me take those off for you.

Red: Now what would you be wantin' to with my shoes, Jesse?

Jesse: I sure would like to play "This Little Piggy" with those toes, Sweetcakes. How many of them do you got? Hoooooeeeeee!

Red: Oh, just a few, and they're all yours tonight, Jesse.

Jesse: It's just that the American people, and the taxpayers, and let's see.... Pornography! The scourge.... "Suck on your toes and blow my nose...." Oh lordy, Red, you seem to be getting' farther away, somewhere across the room....

Caliban: What do you think about a special arts grant for New Orleans, Jesse? We could make you your own special "Helms in New Orleans" flag, celebrating your adventures here—a collage of hotel bedroom shots—and we will ceremoniously burn it every day. That would save a lot of wear and tear on Old Glory.

Jesse: Flag burning scoundrels! Mmmmm. Gimme some more of those toes, Lil' Hood. And my finger's just itchin' to tickle.

Caliban: We could sew a big flag on the rear of your jeans, Jesse....and a few more, as smaller patches, on your leather jacket. You'd be just dazzling.

Jesse: Dazzle, dazzle.... The scoundrels of true patriotic grants, which I must monitor.... oversee.... Say, Boy, why you got such long hair? And why is it all twisted and funny like that?

Caliban: You mean my dreadlocks, Jesse? We could try it with your hair too, but you're kind of short of material on the topside....

Jesse: You know, you got kind of a sweet face yourself, Boy.... if your teeth weren't so big and sharp. Course, they're nice teeth....

Red: I'd just love to braid all the hair you still got, Jesse, all over your body....

Jesse: Mercy, you are a sweet child! What you want me to do for you, Darlin'? Just name it.

Red: Well, Jesse, Caliban and me had just a little ol' idea we wanted to run by you. Kinda run it up the flagpole, ya know what I mean, Cher?

Jesse: Mmmmmmm? "Love dem little mousies, love dey feet and toes...." 'Scuse me?

Caliban: You know, Jesse, you might be kind of surprised by this, but we agree with you about grants to artists and writers. The institutionalization of the process, and the widespread belief that nothing could go on without those government grants, even though they've only existed for a couple of decades, has led to a homogenization of work, a stolid mediocrity, and an enormous amount of self-censorship practiced in the hope of staying on the government tit. We think this needs to be changed.

Jesse: You don't like all those grants either? But you look like some kind of hippy artist.... Mmmmmmmmm. I want those, Lil' Hood, right in here. Yeah. Oh my, that's nice. You want to help her, Boy? We need a little help here....

Red: So we got this plan, Jesse, to change the way you give out all that grant money. We want you to take the entire grants budget and distribute it evenly to all the massage parlors in the country, from Bangor to San Diego, from Key West to Seattle, and don't forget Anchorage and Honolulu, too. I got some good friends in Honolulu over on Hotel Street.

Caliban: That's right, Jesse, that's the plan. You distribute all the money to the parlors, and they in turn act as local grant agencies, to which all artists and writers would apply. Can you see how things would change? Eros, the energy behind all great art and literature, would be released from its government-sponsored imprisonment. Boring art and writing would disappear immediately, because the ladies at the massage parlors would not award grants to those who

produced it, and the only reason it's produced is to get grants. You could kiss goodbye the childhood recollection poem and Norman Rockwell abstract expressionism.

Red: And you know what they say, Jesse, writin' and makin' art is like makin' love.... the very worst sin is to be boring.

Jesse: Don't stop, Sugar.... We can talk later. Gimme some more of that....

Caliban: Jesse, this is your vision! You can change the course of American history, you can liberate your people. And can you imagine the kind of welcome you'd get in every massage parlor in this country? Why, they'd fly your flag right under Old Glory. Flying and snapping in the wind. A magnificent sight!

Jesse: You know, Boy, sometimes you do talk sense. I can't believe I'm saying that.... But I'm no bigot, Boy. I'm open to new ideas. Did you hear I've just hired James Meredith?

America's Colors Have Always Been the Same (#8, 1990)

So a guy named William A. Henry III writes an article for *Time* called “America’s Changing Colors: What will the U. S. be like when whites are no longer the majority?” The cover has a gestural American flag with black, brown, and yellow stripes alternating with red. Inside, Henry talks about the “browning of America.” He worries about the loss of “American” culture. You say you’ve heard this one? Yeah, I have too. The first time I heard it was when I was in a barbershop when I was a kid. Must be over forty years ago. If the thing had been published in any magazine but *Time*, I would have been sure it was a parody.

* * *

Ninety-nine percent of all Americans of whatever ethnicity, except Native Americans, are descended from slaves. Who among us does not have ancestors who were not serfs or peasants, and who were treated by their masters somewhat less generously than they treated their dogs.

* * *

The original tribal vision of welcome and cooperation in the face of the savage European invasion seems tragic and misapplied. Many Native Americans have imaginatively reconstructed the first Thanksgiving at the Plymouth Colony as the last, for the white settlers at least. But the original tribal version must return, and must be shared by *everyone* now; it is the closing of the great circle. European whites and their descendants are not innately bad. It is just that they carried with them the virus of conquest, a virus that has brought us colonialism, imperialism, over-industrialization and the worship of technology. They carried other diseases—such as influenza, small pox, and syphilis—but the deadliest disease was spread through the virus of conquest. The Europeans

believed that all peoples, and even the earth itself, had to be conquered and exploited, that a profit had to be wrung from the earth and every living thing that inhabited it or grew upon it. But Black Elk's Harney Peak vision of the unity of all people was not an ironic last gasp of the old way of thinking. When a body is attacked by a disease, it draws on its power within to fight off the disease. The body only appears weak and compromised from the outside. When antibodies have been developed, they attack the viruses, kill them, and dispose of the poisons through the body's excretory system. The Native Americans were not wiped out in the calculated genocide of the nineteenth century, nor by the reservation system of the twentieth. Like the body fighting disease, their retreat has been a strategic retreat. Now is the time, after the creation of natural defenses, to throw off the disease. Maybe this is the time Wovoka foresaw in his vision of the Ghost Dance. He just miscalculated the amount of time it would for change. But the rainbow warriors who will have to heal the sick body of America must come from all groups, not just one or two.

* * *

It is a mistake to equate civilization with the runaway monster of industrial technology, fed by rapacious greed. Civilization existed before the "industrial revolution," and it will exist after it is over, if we learn how to stop this maniacal technological and consumerist frenzy, and survive.

* * *

Landowners in the early colonial days were always amazed that African slaves and white indentured servants ran away to live with the Indians any chance they got. Not one returned to "white society" voluntarily. The choice between freedom and permanent enslavement, whether by chains, indentures, or poverty, doesn't seem to me so difficult to figure out.

* * *

Northern Europe was one of the last areas in the world to develop “high culture.” Where does all this arrogance come from? It is often expressed by the Europeans themselves, but that arrogance is magnified many times more by Americans who see American culture as a simple extension of European culture. Alan Bloom, E. D. Hirsh, and William Bennett all praise “traditional” education. They are edified by the story of how the torch of knowledge was passed from Greece and Rome to the inhabitants of Northern Europe. However, I wonder how thorough their educations have been. I would like them to explain something to me. What was the end result, culturally and otherwise, of the colonial experience? What should we do now, intellectually and spiritually, in the ruins of that adventure? Considering their emphasis on the discipline of history, there seems to be a significant lack of historical perspective among these traditionalists. Ling-Chi Wang, chairperson of the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley, said in a lecture at U. C. Santa Cruz that he had discovered the existence of ethnic studies departments at Berkeley long before the student agitation of 1968. They were called the English Department, the French Department, the German Department....

* * *

I have been around English Departments all of my adult life, first as a student, then as a professor. The fawning anglophilia that has always characterized English Departments still stuns me. What happened to American literature and American culture? These academic departments are keepers of the sacred flame of the ignorance that has blinded American culture for centuries. We can't even see ourselves. That foolishness extends all the way down the cultural ladder. Just look at the tabloids. Prince Charles and Princess Diana

get more coverage than UFOs and miraculous cancer cures. Can you imagine two more homely and uninteresting people than those two? Why should anyone care?

* * *

The anger of displaced white males that has been turned against “minorities” and “affirmative action” shows the success of the power brokers’ plan to deflect attention from their manipulation of the economy. The plantation owners of the colonial era were fully aware, and discussed it in their journals, of the necessity of keeping poor whites, blacks, and Indians at each others’ throats. They knew that if the three groups ever got together and remained together, beyond the brief uprisings where racial unity did occur, the three groups would drive the plantation owners into the sea.

* * *

The “cultural tradition” defined by people like Bloom and Hirsh is an elitist tradition. Most of our ancestors had absolutely no access to the works of art, music, drama, and literature these critics identify as masterpieces.

* * *

When did whites become the majority? At what moment in the 19th century? Since native peoples were not considered citizens until 1920, do they not count? Did blacks count only after the Emancipation Proclamation? And whose count of non-whites in the South should we trust? Maybe it was some years after the Mexican Annexation. Quite a number of years, I’d guess, since none of the people who were then gathered into the embrace of Manifest Destiny were considered white. But when you think of the long sweep of American history, going back many thousands of years, the time in which “whites” were the majority is the merest

flash in the historical pan. Furthermore, Mr. Henry, what do you mean by “whites”? Are you refusing to acknowledge the enormous amount of racial and ethnic mixing that has occurred? How many people who account themselves and are accounted by others as white, for obvious social reasons, have African, Asian, or Native American ancestors? How do these people fit into your tally? Why is it that the census and every other government document refuses to acknowledge racial mixing? If they did acknowledge it, I suspect you’d find that your “whites” are already a minority, if they haven’t always been one.

* * *

I once heard a young white woman agonizing, at a conference on “Racism and Sexism in the Classroom,” that she knew nothing about Black and Hispanic culture. What do you mean “Black and Hispanic culture”? It is American culture; it is *your* culture, not some else’s culture, and if you don’t know anything about it, you’d better start learning. That’s called education.

* * *

Maybe Earth First has a pretty good idea about “reservations” for urban industrial areas and the people who choose to live that kind of life. I am not as down on cities and their possibilities as the Earth First people are, but I don’t think they should be allowed to sprawl with suburbs and industrial parks in the destructive way they are sprawling now. Let the buffalo, wolves, and eagles return to restored prairie and forestland. A lot of it isn’t even viable farmland anymore. There were buffalo in New York and North Carolina not so many years ago. Let them come back.

* * *

So, Mr. Henry, the great population shift that you and some of your friends find so threatening, I find encouraging. Maybe we will now finally be able to see ourselves clearly. True self-knowledge, which we have successfully avoided for so many years, would allow a new period of social and cultural development. American culture, like the blood of the people who populate our land, is a rich and diverse mixture. When we realize that this fact is our greatest resource, not a liability, we will begin to fulfill the promise we have always imagined for ourselves.

Revisionist History and the New Coalition (#9, 1990)

In August I had a vision in Saugatuck, Michigan. For a long time, *Caliban* has been calling for a new multi-ethnic coalition, including Blacks, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and progressive whites. Of course, this has been tried before, as in Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition. But these coalitions usually collapse because whites and Blacks struggle for power and leadership, and for this and other reasons Hispanics often feel their goals can be better achieved by working as a separate group. Then I began to think about Italy during the eighties, when there was a five party coalition called the "pentapartito." That coalition presided over a period of general harmony and prosperity. The leadership party, instead of being one of the big ones, was the Social Democratic party. I was also mulling over the disgraceful celebrations of Columbus' invasion that are coming up in 1992. Suddenly all these elements came together, and I saw that the center of the new multi-ethnic coalition has to be the Native Americans. (As Maxine Hong Kingston has pointed out to me, Native Americans as a group also includes Inuits, Aleuts, and Polynesians.) They offer a natural leadership, since all the other groups share ethnic and cultural ties with them. Since Native Americans are related to everyone, they hold the position necessary for successful mediation, and strong mediators are vital for holding together any coalition. Furthermore, these are the original Americans. They are the only Americans who have immediate access to the earth from which they sprang through myth, ritual, and story. Who better to lead us out of the general crisis we're in right now? Then I realized the next logical step: we must elect a Native American president in 1992. The year need not be a year of anger and mourning, reliving the crimes and injustices of five hundred years. Why not let it be the beginning of a new era when a whole new vision can be acted out? The victims of the past could be remembered in no better way. I called Jerry Vizenor in Oklahoma and told him about my vision. He was

as excited as I was. Then he added that all Native Americans should run for some office in 1992, everything from city council to the U. S. Senate. Since our conversation he has formed the Before Columbus Party. He himself is planning to run for office in 1992. This will be the massive reassertion of Native Americans as a group, and as individuals with different ideas and visions. We're not talking about tokenism here; we're talking about a total rethinking of cultural and political power.

* * *

The President and the members of the cabinet are sitting around a long table, alert faces in black, brown, beige, and white. The President doesn't fall asleep; in fact, no one does. When one of these men and women holds the talking stick, the others listen. This is an urgent council of reconciliation—of people, animals, water, air and earth. Of living spirits, those within physical bodies and those moving along the paths of migration. For the first time we have an administration that believes trees, water, and animals have *legal* rights, as well as all human beings. The new Presidential vision reminds all Americans there are six directions, North, South, East, West, Up, and Down, and in this way reunites us with air and earth, and our ancestral roots in the lower worlds. From this room in the White House, pipe carriers are sent throughout the world.

* * *

I keep hearing a lot of arrogant, gloating chatter about “the failure of socialism.” What about the failure of capitalism, a system that has brought the planet to the verge of annihilation? We should never be conned into believing that we must choose between one or the other; something entirely new must be developed. Some of the euphoria in Eastern Europe has already worn off. In the morning-after hangover, people

are beginning to see that the Eastern European countries will become cheap skilled and semi-skilled labor colonies for the West and markets for the dumping of second-rate Western surplus. The same foolish Horatio Alger story the Reagan crew sold to the American people in the eighties has been sold en masse to the Eastern Europeans. What a clever way for the power elite to get people to act against their own self-interest.

* * *

Native Americans have always perceived a personal relationship with the earth, a natural concept of ecology; they have always known that in an ecosystem there is no free lunch. You have to put back what you take out. Since this is the only approach that has any chance of getting us out of the mess we're in now, it only makes sense that Native Americans should be in the political leadership that attempts to put this vision into action. The brand of "ecology" is not to be confused with the popular cult of newspaper and bottle recycling that seems to be an excuse for glossing over social injustice and economic exploitation. ("Don't bother me, I've already done a responsible thing.") After all, "free trade capitalism" is just another version of the free lunch, something for nothing, and is in fact the heedless exploitation of the earth and its people. It is plain thievery, as surely as clear-cutting done by the unscrupulous logging companies who are subsidized by American taxpayers through the U. S. Forest Service. Thievery is thievery; there is no such thing as "creating capital."

* * *

The Land Bridge Theory of Native American Indian migration from Asia, like most diffusionist theories, is basically racist. It is illogical as well. Never in my life have I seen a bridge where all the traffic traveled in one direction. There was no lack of game in Asia to drive people across the bridge.

Isn't it equally likely everyone came the other way, from the Americas to Asia? If you think that's a foolish idea, think about the historical shortsightedness of the generally-accepted theory. 30,000 years ago, when the first Asian migrations were supposed to have come over the bridge, none of the ethnic groups that now account themselves European lived in Europe. They were all in North Africa or the Middle East. Why is it that no one speaks of a land bridge from North Africa to Europe?

* * *

Now is the time for a total re-evaluation of American history, starting where we should start, with the foundation myths of the various Native cultures. Then there should be a description and analysis of the development of the advanced civilizations that were here when the first Europeans arrived. By the first Europeans I mean, of course, the Vikings. What about a version of American history that is not an *apologia* for the rape of the land, the genocide and enslavement of its indigenous and other peoples, in the name of progress? That would be interesting and refreshing. This has nothing to do with white guilt or penance; it's just setting the record straight so we can take it from here on a firmer foundation of knowledge. Howard Zinn, in *A People's History of the United States*, and Richard Drinnon, in *Facing West*, have made important efforts in this direction, but much more must be done. Of course, all history is mythology; it is the system of order by which we navigate in the present. So why not trade the Anglo myth, which is hateful, poisonous, and exclusionary, for one that is inclusive and healing?

* * *

Imagine Spider Grandmother, Pele the Hawaiian fire goddess, Coyote, and White Buffalo Woman joining Uncle Sam as the guardian spirits of our national culture. And our

new eagle, no longer a clone of the Roman war eagle, is now the embodiment of divining vision and spiritual flight.

* * *

This is an ideal time for anti-corporate activism. The limitless greed of the system is exactly what makes the corporations most vulnerable. Since they are ruled by voracious and unforgiving stockholders, who will not countenance a decision made for any reason other than profit, no matter what the human or environmental cost, and they gauge everything on market share, the companies are extremely vulnerable to economic boycott. A small loss of market share and the whole top executive echelon is out. This makes those executives more willing to listen. But we must be careful that their responses are real, like the shift of policy in the tuna industry, and not the pornographic public relation efforts that have become so commonplace, such as telling us McDonalds is a champion of the environment.

* * *

There's a saying that a medicine bag waits somewhere for every one of us. We just have to find it, or be prepared to see it when it is given to us. Can the country have a medicine bag waiting for it? If so, it certainly has to be in the year 1992. Our history has waited 500 years for this moment of redemption, for the chance to start again and do it right. All of the prayers against gross injustice have accumulated up to this moment, and now they have reached a critical mass. Something will have to happen.

* * *

There are nodes of communication, times and places when messages flow freely from the far past and the distant future. The ancients of New Mexico had a solstice watcher, someone

who was responsible for alerting the tribe to the arrival of crucial time nodes, the great moments of transition. Let the solstice watchers of our time be our writers and artists. There is no greater task for the arts than the service of the tribe, mediating between the spiritual world and the physical world. Let Jesse Helms confront a host of prophets and shamans!

* * *

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds says you don't just learn from tribal elders; you learn from the earth itself. As anthropologists and ethnologists continue to lament the loss of traditional cultures, Edgar has provided us with an answer. We should do what everyone has always done, from the beginning of time: invent our own culture as we go along. We don't live in a museum. Culture and tradition are not stagnant, not if they are effective guides to the problems of our lives. We can never be separated from the voices we need to guide us; they are there, at all times, speaking through the earth. No wisdom is ever totally lost.

* * *

Your life can't be different from what you do. *You* can't be different from what you do. You can't be a stockbroker or a real estate agent and be able to put your hand honestly on the earth. That doesn't mean tilling it, since many agribusiness farmers are the worst scoundrels, but just putting your hand on the earth as an oath or a pledge. That's the way you keep faith with the past and the future. In ancient Rome there was a disk-shaped sculpture that looked like a sun god, called by present-day Italians "la bocca della verità," or the mouth of truth. If you put your hand in the mouth and swear a false oath, it is believed the stone will bite your hand. Maybe we need to borrow it and set it up in Washington, D. C. On the other hand, since we have elected the rascals, maybe it should be the patriotic duty of every American to swear allegiance

to our best principles—freedom, equality, and justice—with a hand in the “bocca.” I could also mention the sacred and binding quality of an oath sworn with the Native American pipe in one’s hand. The tribal people who made those oaths were true to their word; the whites who held the pipe and swore were not.

* * *

Neither socialism nor the exploitative mentality of capitalism is the answer. We’ve got to get away from this binary thinking, the same kind employed by Moscow and Washington in their dealings with every other country in the world for forty years. Why should we, like those countries, be limited to only two choices? We’ve got to create a system that is responsible and responsive to people’s needs, as socialism was in theory, and one that creates a situation where people can thrive. “Thrive” is defined as living happily and comfortably; it has nothing to do with the accumulation of wealth.

* * *

I can imagine, and in fact have already heard, some skeptical reaction to the Saugatuck vision. But there are two important points to keep in mind. First, the coalition I have described would have a substantial numerical majority, and it could carry virtually any election. It would be an extraordinary political force. Second, Americans are ready for leaders with nerve and vision. In the last presidential campaign, their love affair with Jesse Jackson and their rebuff of Dukakis, the self-styled efficiency expert, should be enough to convince anyone of that. Clearly there are many people who are also dissatisfied with politicians who appeal to our basest and most miserable instincts. There is a pop song, currently number one on the charts, in which the lead singer cries out “give me something to believe in.” The time has come; let’s do it.

**Fin de Millénaire, Imagination, and Magic Revolutionaries:
or How to Take It Back (#11, 1992)**

Putting together this issue, I was amazed at how many writers are offering some version of the apocalypse. It was not my intention to do a theme issue on the end of everything, but that's just what happened. Was it an unconscious impulse on my part to choose these works, or was I part of a synchronous perceptual realignment of large numbers of people, lemmings gathering and organizing before their suicidal run? Then I wondered, if people get restless during *fin de siècle* periods, what happens at the *fin de millénaire*? At the end of the first millennium A. D. much of the European population partied as if there were no tomorrow, suspecting that in fact there might not be. A different response drove tens of thousands to suicide; they couldn't face the horrors described in Revelations. The coming of the second millennium seems to be stirring even heavier anxiety, including fear of the total annihilation of life on earth. The 20th century has been waiting for this one a long time now, at least since Yeats' "Second Coming." We just can't seem to decide whether we're looking for the Revolution, the Aquarian Age, the Rough Beast, or a combination of all three.

* * *

If so many people are willing to concede the likelihood that the whole world is going down the toilet, what do we have to lose? Why not use our imaginations and make our wildest visions into realities? The new revolution will be based on the liberation and serious employment of the human imagination in every aspect of life, just as the Surrealists proposed many years ago. We are moving toward some kind of post-industrial world, whether anyone likes that idea or not. It is up to us to determine what kind of post-industrial world it will be.

* * *

A short definition for “lack of imagination”: George H. W. Bush. Bush has shown almost as much sensitivity, insight, and courage at the Rio de Janeiro environmental summit as he did after the riots in L. A. This is a man who claims the U. S. has the best environmental record in the world, when he knows an estimated 70% of the ozone depletion was caused by the moronic and totally unnecessary Pentagon policy mandating that all military contractors clean their welds with CFCs. Has everyone forgotten this bit of headline news that appeared a few months ago? Witnessing the White House relaxing industrial emission standards, encouraging the deforestation of public lands, and attacking attempts to save endangered species, it is easy to forget that George H. W. Bush wanted to be our “Environmental President.” And our “Education President” too, if I remember correctly. The only things Bush has delivered in four years are an obscene Supreme Court justice, the Gulf War, and “family values.” Bush told the heads of state at the Rio conference “leadership sometimes requires a nation to stand alone.” That’s about the same as a divorced husband, who has skipped out of state to avoid child support payments, applying for a Profile in Courage Award. The caption on a recent political cartoon: “The clothes have no emperor.”

* * *

“Extinction is not something to contemplate, but something to rebel against. Work for world peace.” A bumper sticker, one that seems a little dated now. Many of us had been taught since childhood that nuclear war was inevitable, but it seems a little less inevitable now. The truth is we’ll probably go out with a whimper instead of a bang. Will it be the chemical holocaust, industries poisoning the environment to the point where it can no longer sustain human life? In this scenario, everyone dies of cancer, or a massive, collective collapse of the immune system. Or will it be as Antonio Porta describes in his novel, *The King of the Storeroom*? The world social order

collapses from rampant political corruption and economic looting by the rich. There is a complete and irreversible collapse of the infrastructure: no gasoline, no electricity, no food. Cannibalism, mass suicide, mass starvation. The good news in Porta's novel is that the cataclysm allows the rivers to cleans themselves and nature to find its way back into balance. As the human virus vanishes, the gods return.

* * *

The spectacle of white middle class and white wealthy people running around after the L. A. riots, asking "Can't we just live together in peace?" Simple answer: "No, not until there is a semblance of equal justice before the law, reasonable representation at the state and local level, and the end of Black and Latino people being held as economic hostages." The white folks in L. A. were lucky the riots weren't a lot worse. Southern California is as ripe for revolution, from its grotesquely oppressed non-white majority, as any place in the world. If it sounds like I'm describing South Africa, that's no coincidence.

* * *

Two noteworthy California vanity plates I've seen recently, attached to Mercedes-Benz cars: IDSRVIT and STATSQUO. And people wonder why there were riots in L. A.? Bury the rich and the wannabes in their gold-trimmed Mercedes; they look like coffins anyway.

* * *

A lot of Americans are in an ornery mood. If the Reagan Era was characterized by ridiculous glitzy prime time soap operas, modern fantasies paralleling a Horatio Alger novel, and the wishful thinking of the "Bill Cosby Show," these times are characterized by "Roseanne," "Married with Children,"

and “The Simpson,” sitcoms full of bitter, struggling, cynical and mean-spirited people, who are totally bereft of the “family values” preached by George H. W. Bush and Dan Quayle. That same ornery mood drove voters to support H. Ross Perot. They wanted to send a Tasmanian Devil to rip up the establishment in Washington, D. C., both Republican and Democrat, and cast the bureaucrats into the street. It is pretty clear that Perot’s presence would have thrown the election to the House, if he had stayed in the race. A third party determining the outcome of an American presidential election, with roughly a third of the vote—isn’t that an apocalyptic vision too?

* * *

Remember how we laughed at the spectacle of petty dictators looting their countries and flying off to luxurious exile? Usually they were American flunkies: Nguyen Cao Ky, Ferdinand Marcos, Baby Doc. Has it ever occurred to anyone that exactly the same thing is going on here at home? In anticipation of inevitable collapse, political insiders and the rich are looting every last bit of wealth before taking off and holing up until the storm blows over. Considering our recent history of suspicious assassinations and shameless political corruption, can we say this sort of thing only happens in “banana republics”?

* * *

Responses to these horrors and horrific predictions are usually inadequate. There is rage: quite justified, but in itself a useless response. There is resignation and apathy. Also useless. There’s trivialization: the reactionaries of political correctness, who believe their inane tokenism is a solution to problems that demand a fundamental change in the system. For the small percentage of the very wealthy, there’s the garrison mentality: build higher walls and more machine gun

emplacements. They should remember the French at Dien Bien Phu. Maybe they did, as they watched fires burning out of control all over L. A.—not just in the ghettos and barrios.

In the midst of these inadequate responses, there is one current response that is not only adequate, but authentically visionary. The writers I call “magic revolutionaries” are showing us how to take it back. They have been influenced by “magic realism,” but they have gone far beyond it, especially in their strong political focus. Maxine Hong Kingston and Gerald Vizenor are the leading exponents of this tendency. The “magic revolutionaries” flesh out a vision of who we are and what we need to do—culturally and politically—and thereby hope to create the reality of a transformed society and culture.

In Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing writes a play so huge, the cast includes everyone in San Francisco. Like the Chinese Monkey King, there is no limit to Wittman’s ambition; what he writes will necessarily come to life. Kingston calls her new novel-in-progress a “peace epic” as opposed to the usual epic of war. She says this novel will become one of the three legendary Books of Peace, destroyed as subversive by a Chinese emperor centuries ago. Kingston is undaunted by the fact that nothing exists as a model; she knows it is the duty of the storyteller to reimagine the world as it should be. And as Kingston says, “The powerful imagination always imagines the truth.”

Vizenor’s hero in *The Heirs of Columbus* takes the profits he has made on his reservation floating casino and declares Pt. Roberts in Puget Sound the new Republic of Assinika. There he heals the abused, chemically damaged children of the world with the gene of survivance possessed only by the heirs of Columbus. (It turns out that Columbus was descended from the Mayans.) Recombinant gene implants free of charge. Stone Columbus’ work in Assinika is so admired internationally, the U. S. government is afraid to act against him; Native American sovereignty takes another dramatic step forward. In recent weeks, as reservation

gambling has increasingly come under attack by the Feds, Vizenor has suggested an equally imaginative solution. In a magnificently subversive potlatch, let the reservations use a percentage of the casino profits to liberate and offer sanctuary to some of the refugees of the world. How then would the U. S. government dare challenge the motives or sovereignty of Native Americans? Vizenor not only believes his wild revisionist histories are models for contemporary political action; he believes they *are* political action.

Like William Burroughs, the “magic revolutionaries” know their “routines” will come to life. Unlike Burroughs, these writers are optimists, even if a bit hard-headed. They are not ready to yield to the politics of corruption and annihilation. Neither are they foolish dreamers. They understand that the coming revolution will not be guided by bankrupt ideologies, but by the liberated human imagination.

* * *

Hire Peter Ueberroth to reconstruct L. A.? Are they kidding? Do they think this is some kind of Special Olympics? Here are a few alternative suggestions.

- 1) Immediately redistrict Los Angeles, ending its outrageous gerrymandering, making sure the electorate is accurately represented. That means a city council with a majority of Hispanic, Black, and Asian-American councilpersons.
- 2) Set up a Los Angeles Development Authority, like the TVA, to create and support a cooperative network of locally-owned stores and businesses (with neighborhood investment, sweat equity and otherwise) that offer quality merchandise and services at fair prices. No more corporate colonialism of ghettos and barrios. Let Small Business Administration trainers come into the local schools to train students for jobs in these enterprises.
- 3) Immediately build a subway system that more closely

connects the people who are now isolated in various parts of the city. Set up toll stations on the freeways all around the periphery of the city, charging cars and trucks for the privilege of entering L. A., with proceeds to pay for and maintain the subway.

- 4) Create district councils that work with the police, and have deputized representatives involved in day-to-day activities. Racist behavior on the job would be a much more difficult proposition then. Don't just fire Daryl Gates; indict him and try him for gross dereliction of duty. And try him in L. A., not in Simi Valley.
- 5) Use HUD grants to convert rental properties—apartments and single family units—to occupant-owned residences. Let some of the mortgage payments be offset by sweat equity applied toward the process of rebuilding and restoration.
- 6) Break up the concrete jungle. Condemn the burnt out structures, buy the property and convert it to parks and greenspace, to be landscaped, maintained, and supervised with local labor. Bring the water inland. Build canals to catch and hold the heavy winter rains, and let those waterfront areas be attractively developed, by local entrepreneurs, as has been done in San Antonio's riverfront. Let boats cruise through East L. A. and South Central L. A. as well as Marina Del Rey.
- 7) Let the battle cries be JUSTICE and IMAGINATION. Stop exploitation. Make sure the law is upheld and executed even-handedly. Give people back the control of their lives; let their destinies be in their own hands. Let the money they spend be plowed back into their own communities, used to create more jobs, not siphoned off by corporate interests that have nothing to do with them. The theory of the crystal garrison—build a higher barbed wire fence and a better alarm system—has failed, even for the rich. Business as usual will solve absolutely nothing.

* * *

Not all people are pessimists. Some see even what we've "lost" as recoverable. For years now anthropologists have been lamenting the loss of Native American songs, crafts, rituals, and traditions through the breakdown of direct oral transmission. In response to this, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds has claimed that nothing need be lost. Necessity and sensitivity to the earth and nature created these things in the first place; the same attitudes will allow us to reinvent the rituals and stories we need, to reinvent the sacred. After all, the idea that "oral tradition" is rigid and precise is a misunderstanding derived from the white empiricists who have infested reservations for so many years. Chanters and storytellers, dancers and shamans understand that it is their prerogative to change things as they see fit. It is also their prerogative to invent as they see fit.

Douglas Miller is an artist from Laguna Beach, California. Earlier this year he began an installation on the beach entitled "The City in the Sand and the Enchanted Forest." It is made up of material, principally sticks and driftwood, that has floated in. A sign invites viewers to add to the installation, "perhaps to remember a loved one," but only material that has been cast up by the sea. I was strangely moved by this artwork as I walked by every day, but didn't know why. Finally, as I stood and contemplated the sticks decorated with seaweed strands, feathers, and pieces of plastic and paper refuse, I realized what Miller had done: he had reinvented the sacred. Whatever his initial inspiration, he had created pahos and prayer trees, just like the ones Hopis use to send messages to the other world.

There is hope. The spirit and the imagination have powers far beyond even our wildest fantasies. It's time to take it back.



Detail from THE CITY IN THE SAND AND THE ENCHANTED FOREST by Douglas Miller, 1992, installation

