

GARY SNYDER'S "ECOLOGY OF FAMILY"

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(Resumen)

Este ensayo pretende ser una reflexión sobre el concepto de familia defendido por el *eco-poeta* y ensayista Gary Snyder en su obra *Regarding Wave*. En su libro en prosa *Earth House Hold*, Snyder inicia una reflexión sobre el "bien vivir" o el "vivir correcto" en la que habla de la institución de la familia como el lugar donde el cambio social se puede llevar a la práctica. Con el paso de los años Snyder se casa y forma una familia, e inspirado por la experiencia de la vida en pareja, la concepción y la crianza de los hijos, escribe los poemas que forman *Regarding Wave*. En este libro Snyder trata aspectos de la vida en común como el deseo, la dependencia entre los cónyuges, el instinto de protección o la capacidad de asombro ante el milagro de una vida nueva. Lo que resulta del todo interesante es como su aproximación a estos hechos desde su filosofía de vida, embebida por su interés en la ecología, las culturas "primitivas" y el pensamiento oriental, le lleva a sugerir una revolución en la sociedad estadounidense de su época, los sesenta, a la que percibe herida de muerte por su materialismo. Así Snyder propone un ideal de familia que va más allá de la familia nuclear y trasciende a la vida del grupo considerado éste tanto en su dimensión humana como no-humana. Lo que Snyder defiende es la creación de una corriente de comunicación y enriquecimiento mutuo "interespecies" donde todo lo que habita en el lugar en el que vivimos adquiere sentido a través de lo que yo denomino una "ecología de la familia". Es decir, que el núcleo familiar se amplíe al grupo, que se borren las fronteras que sostienen los estereotipos de la familia tradicional (padre-madre-hijo/a) y que se dé entrada, en igualdad de condiciones, a la naturaleza que nos rodea.

The original idea behind the purpose of this paper originated in the reading of Gary Snyder's book of poems *Regarding Wave*. This work is dedicated to his Japanese wife Masa Uheara, but also contains a cycle of poetic songs for his first son Kai. The fact that Snyder belongs to a generation who fought against traditional institutions such as the family-child unit, but surprisingly chose to get married in a ceremonial manner and founded his own family, strikes the reader as unusual for a man who is considered to be a kind of "guru" for his generation. His statements on family as well as the way in which he presents his role as husband and father in his works become an interesting subject for its possible repercussions on the redefinition of family instead of its total negation. How does Snyder value family? And how does he value community?¹ Where does he place both of them in his scale of priorities? How does Snyder portray his relationship with his wife Masa? How does he see his role as father? Do nature and his ecological concerns have anything to do with the way in which he conceives his role as father? These are the type of questions that will be pondered.

1. Although I am aware of the anthropological and conceptual difficulties that the term "community" poses, in this article I will use it following Snyder's appraisal of it as I have gathered from his book *Earth House Hold*. For Snyder "community" equals "Tribe" or in other words, an alternative to mainstream Western society "within industrial nations" that is inspired by pre-industrial societies, Eastern cultures and left wing ideologies.

In order to do so, I have analyzed the two works where the idea of family seems to have more relevance: his book of essays *Earth House Hold* and his collection of poetry *Regarding Wave*. Although, some critics like Fraser and Fuller, in their reviews, dismiss the importance of *Regarding Wave* because they do not consider it to have as much quality as other works by Snyder, I will try to defend *Regarding Wave's* emotional intensity and its thematic relationship with *Earth House Hold*. This second book was conceived as a kind of handbook on "living right" and its recommendations have had its practical fulfilment first and foremost in the experience of family making as it is described in *Regarding Wave*. At the same time, I have also studied the "New Commune Movement" that took place in the United States in the 1960s as part of the "countercultural revolution." This is due to the fact that when Gary Snyder decided to go back to his country, after his first son was born in 1968, he and his family moved to a piece of land he had bought some years ago in Sierra Nevada, California, with some of the leaders of this movement: Swami Kriyananda,² Allen Ginsberg and Zen Buddhist Dick Baker. They had bought it "for personal retreats of spiritual nature" (Gardner 152). Therefore, it seems clear that he was then interested in experimenting with new ways of social organization. Indeed, he even became one of the "prophets" or promoters of the creation of communes as Hugh Gardner remarks in his study *The Children of Prosperity. Thirteen Modern American Communes* (16).

Finally, I will conclude by defining Snyder's practice of family as "ecology of family." This I consider to be the result of his ecological orientation. Snyder believes in the interconnection of all living creatures and therefore, thinks that whatever is done against any of them is against life on Earth. As a consequence, his idea of family, though in a superficial analysis could be regarded as that of the traditional nuclear family, transcends it and becomes a new kind of extended family that evolves not only through its internal connections (father-mother-child), but also through its connection with both the human community and that of all the creatures (animals, plants, rivers, mountains...) that surround it. In this way, Snyder creates a model of family that not only is more inclusive and flexible than any previous kind of American family has ever been, but also tries to be part of the answer to today's ecological crisis.

Communes are not an invention of twentieth century America; they have belonged to the American tradition since its very beginning. According to Gardner, the first known American commune was founded in Delaware in 1663 and it was Mennonite. Before the year of the Declaration of Independence (1776) there were at least twenty communes, usually Moravian or Seventh-Day Baptists (Gardner 1). The existence of this kind of communities since the very beginning of the history of the United States is probably due to the special nature of the nation which emerged from a desire to build "an ideal society" (Oved 3). Thomas Jefferson, for instance, believed that America's mission was the foundation of a perfect society that could serve as a model for other nations. His social experiment was based on a society made of small craftsmen or artisans as well as on independent farmers living in a democratic system of equality (Oved 5). This idealistic way of thinking was generally grounded on new religious, ethnic, economic or political ideas coming from Europe.

2. In 1967, Swami Kriyananda founded Ananda Cooperative Village, one of the most famous rural communes at its time that was located in Nevada County, California.

Gardner distinguishes several periods in the history of American communes (1-4). Firstly, right after the Revolution, communes were generally based on a religious creed. The Shakers became undoubtedly the most important of them. Secondly, from 1825 until the Civil War, communes experimented a major shift: almost all the new ones were founded on the political ideas defended by social reformers such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen who attacked industrial society as corrupt and negative for humankind. This is also the time when the transcendentalists founded their utopian communes: Brook Farm and Fruit Land. Thirdly, after the Civil War and until the depression of the 1870s, most of the new communes continued to be political. From this time until the mid-1890s, new groups appeared whose peculiarity was combining religion, ethnic identity, and economic necessity. From the mid-1890s until World War I, America became as much a melting pot of communes as it was of ethnic groups. Lastly, the 1920s brought the decline of the commune craze until the 1960s. Thus, they have been a constant feature of American society since the XVIIth century. As Gardner concludes:

All told, including the New Deal cooperative farm, America had played host to over six hundred communitarian societies by 1965. Although 70 percent or more did not last longer than five years, the utopian urge itself is timeless. In one wave after another it has re-emerged throughout our history in periods of crisis and rapid social change. (3)

Gardner also considers that the commune movement that was born and developed from 1965 to 1970 was far more significant both in quality and in quantity than those of any previous time. He concentrates on rural communes because they were "far more radical departures from mainstream American society than their urban counterparts" (4). He also points out the fact that these communes were formed by what he calls the "children of prosperity", that is, "the young, white, educated sons and daughters of the middle and upper classes" (3) who lived at a time when America had reached its most prosperous economic development. Yet, these youngsters decided to react against this material wealth because in their view, it was leading the United States to a moral, political, social, cultural and ecological crisis.

"Hippies" was the term³ used to refer to these groups of people. It was coined by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen. They were characterized by their critical attitudes against the conventionalities of society, "...they represented spontaneity, living in the here and now, and an indifference to work or achievement beyond minimal sustenance"

3. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary* "hippie" comes from the adjective "hipper" which means "1. Keenly aware of, knowledgeable about, or interested in the latest trends or developments. 2. Cognizant; wise: 'I am hip to what's going on.' 3. Very fashionable or stylish" and may come from Wolof *hipi, hepi*, 'to open one's eyes, be aware.'

4. I borrow the term "primitive" from Gary Snyder who uses it to refer to "those societies which have remained non-literate and non-political while necessarily exploring and developing in directions that civilized societies have tended to ignore" (Snyder *E.H.H.*, 117). In this sense, Snyder praises societies characterized by oral tradition, non-competitive patterns of behavior and sexual freedom.

(Gardner 6). They were also particularly fond of group experiences such as group LSD trips that led them to a sense of oneness and communion while high and often tried to find in other cultures—Asian, African, Native American—the solution to the problems they perceived in their country. They were radically against authority and this resulted in fierce confrontations mainly in 1969 and 1970.

As aforementioned, rural communities lasted longer than urban ones. This may have been so due to several factors. Above all, the pressure that institutions of social control exercised on these groups in the city pushed them to find a place somewhere else where being noticed by authority was more difficult. Consequently, urban communities were often transformed into rural ones. The most popular areas to go were northern California, southern Oregon, southern Colorado, northern New Mexico and rural New England. These areas were also more permissive and liberal and the land was cheaper. A rural community was Snyder's first option when he came back from his years in Japan. Although he was born in San Francisco, soon his family moved to Lake City, north of Seattle, Washington, where his parents worked on a farm. From a very early age he had contact with both agricultural work and logging, and also as an adolescent became deeply interested in primitive⁴ cultures, especially Native American ones. However, he soon realized that it was impossible for him to have a thorough appraisal of their culture and turned to Asian beliefs. His studies of anthropology were followed by an attempt to graduate in Oriental languages, Chinese and Japanese, at University of California, Berkeley, but academic life at that time palled in comparison with the emphasis his generation put on experimenting with real life. He then decided to travel to Japan and spent sometime there in order to be instructed as a Zen Buddhist monk. Snyder participated of the spirit of his time and wanted to find new ways of living away from the traditional American social values. In Japan, he studied for about ten years with Oda Sesso Roshi, Rinzai Zen master and Head Abbot of Daitoku-ji Temple in Kyoto (Murphy 9). He also took a year off to travel in an oil tanker, *Sappa Creek*, to earn some money and travel around—part of his experiences are recorded in his book *Earth House Hold*. But Snyder not only related to Zen monks during his time in Japan. He also met a group of Japanese cultural radicals that had much in common with the countercultural groups that were active at that time in his home-country. He became one of them and also guided them in the understanding of America's countercultural revolution. The name of the group was Buzoku, "tribe," and Snyder lived with them at the Banyan Ashram⁵ on Suwanose Island in the summers of 1967 and 1968: It was there where he met his future wife, Masa Uheara, who was an Okinawan graduate student in English Literature. They lived with the community for a year, then got married and after their first son, Kai, was born, moved to the United States. They went to California to build their house and form a community around them.

The reason why these events are mentioned emerges from an attempt to contextualize the analysis of Snyder's works. Gary Snyder has exercised both the roles of poet and prophet throughout his life and I believe that even though critics omit the importance of the subject of family in his production and concentrate only on his

5. "Ashram" is, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, "a secluded residence of a religious community and its guru."

6. Snyder's thesis was published unrevised in 1979 as *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village* (Murphy 5).

experiences as promoter of a community in the San Juan Ridge, California, Snyder seems to place family at the center of his philosophy of life. Family and community do not seem to be understood in an antithetical way in his works and as a matter of fact, I think that he regards family as a fundamental way to a healthy community. And what is more important, despite Oved's conclusion that two of the factors that traditionally have been considered as promoters of the longevity of communes have been the abolition of the monogamous family and the subordination of the relationships between the sexes to communal principles (411), Snyder still trusts a monogamous union and the responsible upbringing of one's children.

Before Snyder met Masa, he had already been married in the past, first to a college classmate Allison Gass and second to Joanne Kyger, a fellow poet who travelled with him to Japan (Murphy 3-4). However, his relationship with Masa has been the most significant in terms of family experience—together they had two sons, Kai and Gen. In 1987, Gary and Masa got divorced, but both found new life partners. Gary Snyder is currently married to Japanese-American Carol Koda.

Snyder's first prescription on family can be found in *Earth House Hold*, a book that was written as a kind of handbook for those who were intrigued by his proposals of learning from nature and also from primitive communities. This book contains some essays and parts of his journals. It shows Snyder's mastery of both Western and Eastern mythology as well as his political orientation and proficiency in linguistics. Snyder studied a double major in anthropology and literature at Reed College. In 1951 he wrote his undergraduate thesis⁶ on a Native American myth (Murphy 20). For a long time, Snyder had felt a deep interest in Native American culture. Likewise, his discovery of Chinese poetry in English translation had led him to his curiosity for exploring Asian cultures and Buddhism (Murphy 3). In the end, having compared both visions of the world, Native American and Asian, he concluded that Mahayana Buddhism was an easier way to attain the spiritual study he wanted because it was "open to anyone who seeks to learn its ways and follow its path" (Murphy 6). It was because of this that he undertook the study of Oriental languages, Chinese and Japanese, so that he could travel to Japan and profit from his stay at First Zen Institute of America in Kyoto.

Snyder's concept of family described in *Earth House Hold* is shaped by all the influences that have been aforementioned. The study of past cultures, both Western and Eastern mythology, Asian philosophy, ecology and left-wing ideologies contribute to his proposal for a new type of family.

In "Passage to More than India", Snyder, having in mind the group of people who gathered in San Francisco in the Be-In "A Gathering of the Tribes," traces "a schematic history of family" according to what he has learned from anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan who wrote *Ancient Society*, on the issue of Native American societies, and inspired Engels' *Origins of Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884:

Hunters and gatherers—a loose monogamy within communal clans usually reckoning descent in the female line, i.e., matrilineal.
Early agriculturalists—a tendency toward group and polyandrous marriage, continued matrilineal descent and smaller-sized clans.

Pastoral nomads—a tendency towards stricter monogamy and patrilineal descent; but premarital sexual freedom.

Iron-Age agriculturalists—property begins to accumulate and the family system changes to monogamy or polygyny with patrilineal descent. Concern with the legitimacy of heirs. (Snyder *E.H.H.*, 106)

Snyder explains that society has evolved from matrilineal communities to the patriarchal family. He also refers to how family has gone from belonging to a communal clan to a system of “separate male-oriented families” that instead of working together, compete among themselves (106). This is the product of Western culture and the modern state which he criticizes. His criticism goes as far as to accuse countries such as China and Russia, where Engel’s doctrines of communism should have been put into use, of not having been true to their ideologies. In his view, only Anarcho-Syndicalists have really strived for “experimental social organization” (106). He then defends that there is a need for a different type of family in the Western world and affirms that practicing a different type of familial relationship “will project a different love-and-property outlook through a whole culture...” (110).

Snyder criticizes the modern American family which he considers to be “the smallest and most barren family that has ever existed” (110-111). He is against the disappearance of the extended family, which he affirms was the most common family form of the pre-industrial world.⁷ As a matter of fact, he is very much interested in social organizations that go back to the Neolithic when humans lived as gatherers and hunters, in connection with nature. This positive evaluation of such societies was also one of the main features of the countercultural movement. Likewise, the influence of left wing ideologies that proclaimed the creation of a new society led Snyder to believe in a new social organization that would emerge within industrial society and would be based in communist-anarchist political ideas, ecology and the study of ancient cultures. He considers this to be necessary for the regeneration of American society where youngsters lack a sense of family. Indeed, he compares the time he spent in a communal house in Portland, Oregon and the time American families spend together and concludes that his time in the commune was more enriching than the time most American families spend together: “Because of the sheer amount of time “wasted” together (without TV) they know each other better than most Americans know their own family”(111). Snyder, therefore, considers communes as a better place for the development of a family than the standard American society.

Ecology is also one of Snyder’s main interests. In fact, the countercultural movement was to some extent a protest for the destruction of the environment. Snyder was prompt to join these groups and lead the “back to the land movement.” This meant going to

7. According to Benokraitis, an extended family consisted of “two or more generations (...) [living] together or in adjacent dwellings” (7), but she also explains that the existence of the extended family is more of a myth because of the shorter life expectancy in pre-industrial times. It was almost impossible that a member of a first generation would coincide in time with that of a third, for example. Another definition is that of the U.S. Census Bureau, which says that a child lives in an extended family “if at least one parent as well as someone beyond the nuclear family (related or unrelated to the child) also lives in the household” (Furukawa, 1994:7, quoted in Benokraitis 356).

the countryside to use one's own capacities in order to sustain oneself.⁸ As it is gathered in David and Elena French's work, this generation believed that the "fragmentation" of modern life has been provoked by the separation of work in time and space from other aspects of human experience. They also think that environmental degradation comes from social degradation. Due to the predominance of market relationships, people have lost the capacity to connect with each other, and as a consequence it is impossible for them to connect with nature (13-14). People like Snyder believed that by modifying the kind of relationships that were the product of industrialization, humankind could create a more environmental friendly society.

Throughout *Earth House Hold*, Snyder speaks as a visionary. His prose has the overtones of someone who has a message to convey, an illumination that cannot be missed by anyone. He is nourished by the development of emerging communes, "Such families already exist. Their children are different in personality structure and outlook from anybody in the history of Western culture since the destruction of Knossos" (111-112). He speaks as a messenger of his tribe which he already announces as existent. He is referring to the communes that have already been created: Drop City, Libre, LILA, Ananda Cooperative Village and so forth.

In terms of what he understands as "tribe," in his piece "Why Tribe," Snyder explains that "tribe" is the kind of alternative society that according to him is emerging within the industrial nations and which although it can be easily associated with American Indians, it has to do more with "an ancient and successful tribe, the European Gypsies" (113). I understand these "Gypsies" must refer to "gypsies", "a nomadic people that arrived in Europe in migrations from northern India around the 14th century" (*A.H.Dict.*). His appraisal of this term must probably be derived from the fact that gypsies are an ancient people whose form of life means going from place to place in search of a way to make their living. And this is the kind of "tribe" Snyder describes, one that is "based on community houses, villages and ashrams; tribe-run farms or workshops or companies; large open families; pilgrimages and wanderings from center to center" (113). When speaking of the history of the tribe, he refers to how the tribe evolved after World War I into Communism and how after World War II, when it had been proved that Communism was not a solution, it received the influence of Eastern civilizations, those from India and China. Regarding his appreciation of Eastern cultures, it is interesting that Snyder does not have an ideal opinion of them; he is critical enough to recognize that they are as responsible as other cultures for the repression of their people, "Just like the Other Great Religions" (114). Their most important contribution in his opinion is their spiritual practices: Zen, Vajray, yoga. He is also interested in the influences that a set of non-mainstream practices of other parts of the world have given to his movement. Some of these practices are peasant witchcraft in Europe or Quakers in England (115). All of them are part of what he refers to as "the Great Subculture" (115). This "Great Subculture" values the "naturalness" of human beings and consequently directs men and women to a dialogue with nature; it implies a return to living in harmony with wilderness. This is suggested by Snyder when he writes, "Men, women and children—all of whom together hope to follow the timeless path of love and wisdom,

8. Paul Sherman has compared Gary Snyder with Henry David Thoreau in his essay "From Lookout to Ashram."

in affectionate company with the sky, winds, clouds, trees, waters, animals and grasses—this is the tribe” (116).

As Murphy describes in his analysis of Snyder’s works, one of the four main areas of his poetry is his ecological interest (16). Since he was young, Snyder felt that the United States was not living in harmony with nature. His study of primitive cultures and Eastern philosophies deepened his interest in ecology to the extent that after being away from his country for fifteen years, he declared that the “ecological battle” was “the only battle that counts now, the only thing that matters to me anymore” (qtd. in Murphy 16). In order to take part in this battle, Snyder has taken a bioregionalist position. In “Coming into the Watershed,” he speaks of “bioregionalism” as that movement that supports a division of land that takes into account not political limits but environmental characteristics. He even mentions some groups of people that have already given new names to different parts of the United States according to their natural characteristics, for instance, “Ish” for the Puget Sound and lower British Columbia, “Columbiana” for the upper Columbia River, “Mesechabe” for the lower Mississippi or “Shasta” for northern California (Snyder *A Place in Space*, 228). In these groups, the relationship with nature is fundamental. Their people need to know and understand the environment. As a consequence each family that integrates the group needs to get to know its place. And in the end, a flow of energy connects nature with the community of people, the community with the family and each of its members with each other, reinforcing life on Earth.

Snyder needed a time of reflection that is expressed in *Earth House Hold* in order to transcend his individuality and start building his family and also his community. At the end of this book, Snyder describes his life at the Suwanose Island and makes a detailed description of the ceremony of his wedding to Masa. In doing so, he makes a smooth transition to his next work *Regarding Wave*, a book where his roles as husband and father become relevant. His life process can be described as moving from individuality (being a lookout, alone in the forest) to community (being in the Buzoku ashram) and from there to family after Kai is born, and then returning to community when he establishes himself in California, enriched with his family experience.

Gary Snyder published *Regarding Wave* two months after the publication of *Earth House Hold*. The first publication was made by Windhover Press of Iowa City and it comprised “Regarding Wave I”, “Regarding Wave II” and “Regarding Wave III”. In a second edition made by New Directions, he added “Long Hair” and “Target Practice” (Murphy 93). The title of the book *Regarding Wave* is meaningful in terms of its content: Snyder wanted to convey through his poems a reflection on “wave.” “Wave” can be interpreted in two levels: a superficial one which is referred to his wife Masa to whom this book is dedicated and a more elaborate level that can be understood as vital energy, the life principle. Robert Ian Scott says that “wave”, for Snyder, is a metaphor of the way the world is constituted, “as an interrelation of particles through the waves that relate them” (6). In his study of Gary Snyder, Steuding refers to Snyder’s interest in energy not only from a scientific point of view, but also from a spiritual one. As Steuding observes, in “Energy is Eternal Delight” (*Turtle Island*, 103-105), Snyder speaks of energy as “the power within” man, a power that can only be reached through the practice of “discipline and method” like Zen and also through the experience of nature (Steuding 133).

In *Regarding Wave*, the poet relates both meanings: Masa/wife/woman with energy/life/nature. Here poetry becomes the ground where this can be attained. Quetchenbach comments on Snyder’s conception of poetry as one that moving from the

New Critics mentality—poetry should be arcane—searches to have an audience as wide as possible (28). Its main objective is to convey a message. Snyder highlights the importance of oral tradition in primitive cultures and thinks that poetry is the only possible way to return to those times where common knowledge and social values were shared by means of the voice. Poetry should be read aloud. Snyder identifies poetry with voice because he thinks that orality is the best way to convey it. And as in the Indian tradition, the wife of Brahma is *v_k*, "voice", he also links "voice" with "wife" and by applying his Indo-European etymology, he concludes that "wife" also means "wave" in the sense of "vibrator" (Snyder *E.H.H.*, 124-125). As energy travels in the form of waves, it is easy to establish a connection among the different elements that Snyder mentions: energy, wave, wife, voice and poetry. For Snyder, all of them are expressions of energy. Finally, this idea illuminates the relationship between wife and husband: wife as communicator of energy becomes the source of the poet-husband's wholeness. The poet experiences this sense of wholeness through the love she inspires in him. This love becomes the generator both of his poetry and also of their two sons which are expressions of a creative energy that has its origins in their relationship.

Regarding Wave is structurally divided in five sections: "Regarding Wave I", "Regarding Wave II", "Regarding Wave III", "Long Hair" and "Target Practice." Thematically, the first three sections contain some poems where family scenes are presented. The rest are about Snyder's experience with his "Japanese tribe," his defence of natural life and his political proposal. In this paper, the poems that have to do with his family have been classified taking into consideration the evolution of Snyder's relationship to his wife Masa. First, there is a group of poems that deal with the couple's relationship before getting married—"Regarding Wave," "Wave," "Seed Pods," and "Kyoto Born in Spring Song." Here, the poet compares his own impulse to make love to his partner and nature's impulse of reproduction. The poem "Burning Island" works as a transition to a second set of poems where the main topic is Snyder's first perceptions of his new role as father. These poems are: "It was When", "The Bed in the Sky", "Kai, Today", "Not Leaving the House", "Meeting the Mountains" and "Why I Laugh When Kai Cries."

Masa Uheara married Snyder in 1967. Japanese poet and commune organizer Nanao Sakaki had introduced her to Snyder shortly after Snyder had returned from a trip to the United States to attend to the Great-Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park in early 1967. Apart from some of Snyder's friends' references to her and what Snyder tells us in his works, we do not have, as it is the case with his previous wife Joanne Kyger or his present wife Carol Koda,⁹ any direct information from her. Gary Lawless, a friend of Snyder's, describes her as "beautiful, calm and strong" (125). This description only adds to Snyder's most frequent perspective on her, that of a kind of hieratic, perfect, goddess-like figure, and only conveys a simplistic image of Masa.

For Snyder poetry is intimately connected with the feminine principle; it is the muse or inspiration, Masa is "voice." As he writes in his poem "Regarding Wave":

9. Joanne Kyger wrote *The Japan and Indian Journals, 1960-1964* where she treats her marriage to Snyder and their experiences in Japan. For the Carol Koda essay see "First Winter" in *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*. Jon Halper, Ed. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991. 321-325.

The voice
is a wife
to

him still. (35)

As Steuding argues, women, for Snyder, are “the source of a power prior to civilization” (141). Snyder seems to be influenced by his reading of Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* (Murphy 5) where the author defends that there was a time, during the Neolithic where men’s impossibility to understand female biological processes such as menstruation or childbearing, led them to render tribute to women and make them the holders of power. Due to this mysteriousness, women were identified with nature and its forces. They were seen as chaotic and powerful. When men finally gained power over women by destroying the caste of those who praised the White Goddess that represented the female force, male attempt to dominate both nature and women began. As Susan Griffin demonstrates in her book *Women and Nature*, women’s connection to nature has historically been seen as negative, so that from early Christianity to the Enlightenment, the female body and its sexuality was regarded as “a link to mortality, temptation, sin, and defilement” (Murphy 48). However, Snyder moves back to a sense of wonder towards women. He admires and praises their sexuality and their role as producers of life. They also make the poet feel complete.

But it is also true that his use of mythology in reference to women, in this case to *Masa*, renders a female character that is too passive and never seems to participate, to have a real contribution to life, apart from her bearing of a child. Although, Snyder’s philosophy of family as expressed in *Earth House Hold* goes as far as to defend that the liberation of women would be a determinant factor in the creation of a new type of family,¹⁰ his poetry does not offer an image of women that separates itself from the stereotype of muse or goddess and this disenfranchises his female characters. Murphy, for example, accuses him of objectifying women. The identification he makes between “wave” and “woman” does not allow woman to function as a distinct person in her own right. She has to be “the mirror of the poet’s own deepest self” (95).

The first poem of the book “Wave” establishes the main topic of the entire work. The poet shows his delight in his wife whom he sees everywhere he looks reflected in natural elements like a clam shell, a piece of marble, a ponderosa pine bark, dunes, or in a flow of lava:

Grooving clam shell,
 streak through marble,
sweeping down ponderosa pine bark-scale
 rip-cut tree grain
 sand-dunes, lava
 flow.

10. “In the near future, I think it likely that the freedom of women and the tribal spirit will make it possible for us to formalize our marriage relationships in any way we please—as groups, or polygynously or polyandrously, as well as monogamously” (Snyder *E.H.H.*, 112).

Wave wife.
 Woman—wyfman—
 "veiled; vibrating; vague"
 sawtooth ranges pulsing;
 veins on the back of the hand. (3)

All these elements share the same feature, they are seen by the poet as waves, swirls or curls, and finally in the case of his future wife as "veiled; vibrating; vague." This description does not help an understanding of an active, straight-forward, real woman but that of a hidden, hieratic one who is the poet's inspiration. This is well exemplified in the following verse: "catch me and fling me wide/To the dancing things/of my mind!" (3).

After this introductory poem, some references to fertility, reproduction, and the sexual act become obvious. In "Seed Pods," for instance, the lexis is easily connected with sexuality. Words like "seed" or "fluid" mixed with the images of horses "rearing, fucking" prepare the reader to hear the poet express his desire to be one with his partner, "if my seed too/float into you" (4). For Snyder, the sexual act is more than climax. It is an act of communication, not only between lovers, but also between body and land. It is the poet's connection to nature. This is perhaps why Snyder describes the body of his lover in geographical terms in "Sand": "I slept up on your body;/walkt your valleys and your hills;" (6).

He also regards the sexual act in reproductive terms. Masa is a fertile ground where children can grow and thus, images of children are recurrent in poems such as "Kyoto Born in Spring Song" of the second section. Here Snyder sees Kyoto filled with the offspring of several creatures:

lizard baby by the fern
 centipede baby scrambling toward the wall
 cat baby left to mew for milk alone
 mouse baby too afraid to run (18)

The poet acknowledges that only through women can he achieve a satisfying life, because it is through them that he can communicate with nature and have children. He also praises her anatomy:

O! cunt
 that which you suck in-
 to yourself, that you
 hold
 there,
 hover over,
 excellent emptiness your
 whole flesh is wrapt around,
 the
 hollow you bear
 to

bear,
 shows its power and place
 in the grace of your glance (16)

Here Snyder does not use the term “cunt” in a pejorative way but as a way to sound provocative and recuperate a normalized use of the term. Still, what is relevant is how he experiences a sense of awe for female reproductive capacities which he considers to be the expression of female power. Snyder shows a great interest in women’s biology and regards it as divine. He praises women in the same manner he praises nature. And although this can be a positive way to defend both, it is also a polemic stance because in the end it portrays both as passive instances of a supernatural power which cannot be explained.

Gary and Masa married in Suwanose Island. Their marriage was a turning point in Snyder’s life. It was the beginning of his family life, a life that before Kai’s birth evolved in his Japanese commune. Snyder describes his marriage to Masa in *Earth House Hold*. Their community got up very early in the morning to walk the trail up to the island’s main crater where everything was arranged for the wedding:

Standing on the edge of the crater, blowing the conch horn and chanting a mantra; offering sochu to the gods of the volcano, the ocean, and the sky; then Masa and I exchanged the traditional three sips—Pon and Nanao said a few words; Masa and I spoke; we recited the Four Vows together, and ended with three blasts on the conch. (141-142)

After this they descended and went into the sea. What they tried to do was to participate of the four natural elements: the earth by walking all the way to the crater, the fire of the volcano and the wind that blows at its summit and the sea water, also a sign of purification. As David Robbins explains, for Snyder his marriage to Masa represents a cosmogonic event, signifying creation’s renewal (Murphy 97), and also communion with nature because Masa equals women who are identified with nature.

“Burning Island” is a wedding poem where Snyder invokes some of these elements to bless his union. He calls on water, more specifically on the “wave” “who broke through me today.” Wave is water and energy provoking him. Fire is also present in the form of a flow of lava from the volcano that reaches the poet and his wife with sprinkles of ash. Summing up, waves take humans over and make them participate of nature’s energy:

O All
 Gods tides capes currents
 Flows and spirals of
 pool and powers (23)

The poem ends with a religious overtone and Snyder officiating as its priest: “Bless Masa and me as we marry/at new moon on the crater/This summer” (23).

After their marriage, Masa and Gary lived in the Banyan Ashram. In 1968, when Snyder was 38 years old, Kai was born. The birth of his first child and the changes that brought to his life filled the poet with new sensations, impressions and ideas that he

develops in several poems. I will refer not only to the poems that critics like Bob Steuding have traditionally singled out from the third section of this book, that is, "It Was When," "The Bed in the Sky," "Kai, Today," and "Not Leaving the House." This critic in his analysis of *Regarding Wave*, chooses to focus on the importance of energy for Snyder. He says that Snyder considers family to be "an energy network" (135). Thus, Steuding bases his selection of poems on Snyder's treatment of his son's birth as a manifestation of energy. However, in this paper all the poems that have Kai as inspiration are included because I think that they are also relevant for the analysis of Snyder's role as father. That is the reason why "Meeting the Mountains" and "Why I Laugh When Kai Cries" have been added to Steuding's selection.

Thematically speaking, there are several topics that can be considered when reading this group of poems. First, the poet's sense of rebirth through his child. Second, the poet's awareness of all the changes, especially, the responsibilities that having a child imply. Third and last, and in a way permeating all of them, it is Snyder's realization of transcendence through the child and the need to preserve the natural environment for future generations.

In his reading of "It Was When", Steuding interprets that the poet is trying to remember where Kai was conceived. The bamboo house, the jungle with its creatures, the farmhouse, the boulders on the south beach are all possible settings of the moment that led to Kai's conception. Here Masa's fertility fills the poet with joy and makes him praise the energy she contains and liberates in Kai: "new power in your breath called its place./blood of the moon stoppt;/you pickt your steps well" (31). As voice, his wife expresses her power in her breath and she is identified stereotypically with the moon when referring to her pregnancy. In this poem, the poet shows how his attention has been caught by the mystery of life. Like a scientist, he formulates several hypotheses about the place where his future son was possibly conceived. He remembers the places where Masa and he made love but he is not capable of pointing out the exact moment when Kai was created in Masa's womb. He finally surrenders and in the end seems to recognize that both Masa and him were instruments through which life emerged. His position is that of awe and interest for this new reality.

In "The Bed in the Sky", the poet shows the first "symptoms" of his future paternity. Although Kai has not yet been born, he is already making Snyder feel more attached to the house and cautious of his integrity. At one a.m. Snyder rides his motorcycle back home. He is careful not to slip on the iced pavement, an image that Steuding interprets as a sign of his growing consciousness as father (139). He knows that he must remain safe and healthy to support his family. In the past, he would have followed his impulse "to stay outside alone/and watched the moon all night," (32) but now home, represented in the image of the bed where Masa lies in the warm and dark night, makes him want to be back and lie beside her feeling how their baby turns:

But the bed is full and spread and dark
I hug you and sink in the warm
my stomach against your big belly

feels our baby turn (32)

“Kai, Today” takes the poet back to the exploring mind of “It Was When.” The poem can be divided in two parts. A first one where the poet reflects on the different circumstances that led Masa and him to meet and then conceive Kai, and a second part, where Kai’s birth is described. Steuding explains that Snyder’s references to a teen-age boy “stretching the river” and a weeping girl who is afraid of a beggar are the images of a young Gary and his wife before they even met. After this description, Snyder incorporates the Zen Koan “What’s your from-the-beginning face?” to the poem. Here the poet wonders about the myths of life and death. Steuding relates this poem to Plato’s statement that said that humans existed before birth and that this existence was more perfect. However, it should be noted that Snyder is a Buddhist and therefore he believes in reincarnation. He is not thinking in platonic terms. For him birth is only a transformation; this is perhaps why at some point he refers to Kai as “born again.” After this elucidation, the poet turns to describe Kai’s birth. He also sees his body coming out of his mother’s womb as dolphins coming out of the sea. In his poetry, Snyder often uses images of other living creatures to refer to the human world that he sees as part of nature:

spiralling, glistening, blue-white, up

And out from her
(dolphins leaping in threes
through blinding silver inter-
faces ...) (33)

In “Not Leaving the House” the poet’s life experiences a sudden, even abrupt change. Snyder implies so by beginning the poem with two verses that are set apart from the rest: “When Kai is born/I quit going out” (34). He is impelled by the circumstances to take care of the daily routines of the house, like cooking. He needs to adapt to the new situation which he dresses of spiritual connotations by enumerating, as Steuding rightly describes, all kinds of objects that are used in a ceremony: Navajo beads, peacock tail feathers, badger pelt, and a pot of yoghurt (140). This can be understood as a sign of how highly Snyder considers the birth of his first child, so important it is for him that he transforms it in a sacred thing surrounded by ritualistic elements. He is also becoming aware of how Kai’s arrival means not only a new life within the family but also a new perspective on his relationship with Masa: “From dawn til late at night/making a new world of ourselves/around this life” (34).

It is also curious to notice that he tries to keep the house calm by not letting anybody in except their friend Non. He helps Snyder to take care of Masa and the child and the poet seems to consider him to be part of the family: “Masa, Kai/And Non, our friend.” This is an example of how Snyder believes in the creation of extended families where people who do not have to be related by blood to the family become part of it.

This last poem ends the group that Steuding analyzes as having to do with energy’s expression in the family life of Gary Snyder. This critic declined to speak of two more poems, “Meeting the Mountains” and “Why I Laugh When Kai Cries,” where Kai is at the center of the poet’s attention.

Murphy has analyzed “Meeting the Mountain,” but he has not paid any attention to the second poem “Why I Laugh When Kai Cries.” He analyzes the first one as a poem where Kai’s behaviour is described in a sequence, composed of different fragments and

displaying a sort of ritualistic rhythm (102). It can be interpreted as Kai's baptism with nature, because Kai appears to be aware of what surrounds him: the water of the pool and the mountain behind it, in front of which he stands up and cries joyously. Here the poet is also interested in the child's learning process that is based on experience. The child needs to get closer to the object, touch it, taste it, and play with it. Only by getting to know the new object can the child, Kai, apprehend what reality is made of. Experience is a part of learning and Snyder as a father is enchanted by his child's first learning experience.

Finally, I consider "Why I Laugh When Kai Cries" as a poem where all the anxieties of the new father are solved. He sounds casual and confident about his paternity from the very beginning of the poem: "Nothing is to blame:/daily hunger, baby rage-" He has an explanation for his child's behaviour, Kai is hungry and wants to eat, nothing to do with the previous attitude as shown in poems like "Not Leaving the House." He is no longer overcautious, he is relaxed and laughs at his child's cry. Also his relationship with Masa, that for the time she was pregnant and right after Kai's birth, lacked the sexual impulse described in the first poems of the book, seems to recuperate the passion it used to enjoy. The poet is again attracted by Masa whom he sees now as sexual partner and not only as mother, a role that makes him consider her almost a distant goddess.

Shortly after Kai was born Gary Snyder and his family moved to the United States. He wanted a place to establish his homestead. In fact, some time ago he had already bought some land in California with a group of friends. He finally established his homestead there, in the San Juan Ridge, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. In 1969, his second child Gen was born. Then the building of his family house began, a house he named Kitkidizze, the Japanese name for a plant that is abundant in the San Juan area. This house was designed having in mind primitive constructions and the importance of certain elements like fire for ancient cultures. Several friends helped him to build it and a community of people was created around it. His community has never wanted to suppress family from their agenda. Even though, as Oved refers, communes usually have tried to avoid the organization of his members into families, Snyder's case is different. His was an eclectic community in terms both of the people who made it and also of its foundation, according to Sanfield, "Buddhist-Jewish-Hopi" (117). It was also a very open, flexible kind of community. Curiously enough, Kai's name means in Sino-Japanese "open", "beginning", "founding."

Although Sanfield describes the community where Kitkidizze is as a community "without a center or a leader" (118), I think that Snyder has acted as such and a good proof of it is Halper's book *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life* made with the contributions of a series of friends of his who describe their relationship with the poet and his significance for them. I think that it is important to emphasize a series of features that characterize the life of this group in order to understand Snyder's coherence between what he writes and the way he lives, for instance the practice of "zazen" or group meditation or the careful handling of resources due to the ecological approach to the region. This community is not isolated from the life of the rest of the people who live in the area but participates actively whenever is necessary. Snyder and the people who live beside him may want to experience new types of life however, this does not mean living in an utopian world but instead turning to what Snyder speaks of as "the real work", "what needs to be done", "the ability to sensitize the contemporary American psyche to more appreciative, less exploitative social and economic possibilities than are currently widely available within the strictures of Western worldviews and values" (Coyote 163).

In my opinion, Snyder is deeply involved in the life around him. He does not act as the stereotypical poet isolated in his world but, as a person who regards poetry as a way to communicate an important message to his audience, and this message speaks of preserving what remains of nature in the era of ecological disaster and also of turning to family as the best place to put into practice what one learns every day. As he said in an interview with Peter Barry Chowka:

One of the things that I have learned from being in Japan and have come to understand with age is the importance of a healthy family. The family is the Practice Hall. I have a certain resistance to artificially created territories to do practice in, when we don't realize how much territory for practice we have right at hand always. (106)

It is very interesting to read Kai's and Gen's evaluation of their relationship with their father. Both of them admire him. They praise his approach to life which they consider to be very positive in several instances. For example, they find his environmental interests to have been an important influence in their upbringing. Kai says that it was a way to spend time together. His father has transmitted to him the tradition of the American wilderness by sharing time with him in activities such as hiking, collecting mushrooms or fishing. Moreover, both of them value Snyder's love for discussion. Kai recognizes that it has "given (him) a lot of respect and trust in (his) judgement" (141). And Gen says that the amount of time he has spent talking with his father has taught him an "incredible amount of things" (142).

Though Snyder lived in a time when the family unit was very much criticized by the countercultural movement, he manages to redefine it. He has created a concept of family that takes others into account, not only human beings but the entire creation, and tries to live in harmony with it. He practices what I label "ecology of family" in the sense that he concentrates on each part of his family, works on it and with it and establishes meaningful relationships with them and also with the community where he belongs and the natural world around him. And as he supports, from an ecological point of view, that everything is interconnected, he devotes to each member of the family as much time and energy as he does for any of the living creatures he defends.

Although, Snyder's treatment of woman in his poetry may not contribute to her empowerment, his treatment of family is original in the sense that he creates a family that transcends the nuclear kind and reevaluates the extended family by making the community participant in it. Moreover, as father, he does not respond to the image of the authoritarian patriarch but, shows instead the image of a man who can be nurturing and caring and enjoy the daily routines of the family. This rehabilitates man's role inside of the house and his involvement in the family. Thus the habitual, idealized nuclear family of the 50's and 60's where "Father knows Best" is redefined because he enlarges family by opening it to both community and a caring father.

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