

COMMUNITIES

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Summer 2021 • Issue #191

ECOLOGICAL CULTURE



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

By Cara Judea Alhadeff, PhD

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



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

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

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

throughout Europe and North Africa. Now, as an adult, I attempt to live, in every aspect of my daily life, Gandhi’s philosophy of not wasting as a commitment to nonviolence.

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

Animating our embodied energy allows us to shift our relationship to consumer-waste culture’s everyday violence—creating a bridge between infrastructural change and individual-collective accountability. For example, how we build our home, how we animate the embodied energy of each object and the space we

create by combining them, is a deliberate commitment to local and global nonviolence. I am happy to be in dialogue with others about this intimacy that deeply shifts our relationship to objects and people as disposable.

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

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

We have found that home is a dynamic and diverse *practice*, an ongoing unfolding to be reanimated each moment in relation to our needs, desires, values. Home is an action, a reflection of a constellation of our belief systems. Home is a living organism with a metabolism that continually transforms energy. Like the focus of Native American Pueblo architecture, ours is, as Barbara Kingslover writes, “to build a structure the earth could embrace” (211). Compelled by biophilic, earth-loving motivations we seek an exchange, a reciprocal relationship with the environments around us—local and beyond.

I am reminded of *buen vivir* (good life), the Spanish translation of the Quechua *Sumak Kausay*. The normative standard of living in the US, the American Dream, presumes that the “good life” implies having more than we need. This Western idea of prosperity is rooted in “enforced consumption” (Ivan Illich)—a technocratic model of property ownership. “Private property” at-

tempts to fix home as a static unity, stripped of relationality and only available to those who are deemed entitled to it.

“At its root, our economic crisis is a crisis in consciousness because we see ourselves as separate from our *environment*, when in reality, we’re inextricably connected to all this is. As a result, we’ve deluded ourselves into thinking that land should be owned and then profited from by some at the expense of others. ... Even the word *environment* points to this disconnection: It stems from the Old French *environer*, ‘to surround, enclose, encircle,’ implying a subject that is separate from the objects it is surrounded by. ... [Aldo Leopold warned us:] ‘We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect’” (Adams 152, 43).

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

Wendell Berry shared similar sentiments: “‘What I stand for is what I stand on’—reminding us that land must be measured not only in acres and dollars but in love and respect” (Hawken 86).

Within the framework of neoliberal globalization, that which cultivates and harvests apathy, the free market is a euphemism for economic terrorism, and the litany of our collusion with corporate forms of domination is nearly infinite. We institutionalize collective spiritual numbness as our industrial-waste consumer culture engineers our own demise.

Navigating our own extinction along with the collapse of the known world, we witness not only our fears and failures, but also the exhilarating potential to radically transform our Anthropogenic status quo that defines our species’ hubris. Transitioning from our biocidal Anthropocene Era (human-induced ecological destruction due to advanced capitalism, rampant consumerism, international development, environmental racism) into a creative-waste biophilia requires embodied interdependency.

This intimacy-based movement is rooted in spiritual practices and everyday life choices. It resonates with geologist Thomas



Berry's concept of the Ecozoic—in which humans share mutually beneficial relationships with the world around them. Intellectually, structurally, and spiritually, we integrate with our natural environment, rather than compete with it. Renouncing the Anthropocene as we shift into the Ecozoic Era means that we honor the sentient abilities (electromagnetic cellular consciousness) of animals, plants, trees, and the organic intelligence of these non-humans, our kin. *We all* are by nature electrical beings—animated by our electromagnetic fields.

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


Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era, my cross-cultural climate justice book, challenges cultural habits deeply embedded in our calamitous trajectory toward global ecological and cultural, ethnic collapse. It explores how we can rethink relationality; how we can, as Eduardo Kohn declares in his *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, “decoloniz[e] our thinking” (224) in order to embody intersubjectivity. Unlearning ideologies of entitlement and waste can generate a cultural paradigm shift rooted in socio-spiritual economics.

Because disinformation campaigns spread by fossil fuel interests, Agribusiness, and Big Pharma deeply root us in assimilationist consumer-bred entitlement, we must be attentive to the ways in which we unconsciously embody the very hegemonies we seek to dislodge. We must be aware of the ecological and social costs of replacing one dominator culture with another. The characters in *Zazu Dreams* witness social and environmental costs of subjugating others through fossil-fuel-addictions and their ostensible “green” replacements. Both carbon-intensive economies are dependent on people and objects-reduced-to-“resources”-as-disposable.

Leah Sha'rahi, the Mizrahi mystic, declared that “Everything you see has a spark of holiness in it that is waiting to rise up. It wants to be free, like a person in prison who longs to be rescued” (Firestone 180). Rescuing an everyday object means that we release its inherent dignity. Although not directly identifying with Animism, Hinduism, or even the Kabbalah, Sha'rahi believed that everything has a soul, every object is sacred, the most menial tasks are sacred. When we embrace the sacred possibilities of mutual accountability we can begin to uproot our materialist society, eventually rebuilding in its place a “Living Democracy” (Frances Moore Lappé) that aligns our values with the natural world.

As all forms of climate crisis/climate chaos are interconnected, all forms of environmental justice are equally interconnected. A devotion to repurposing objects, to constructing co-beneficial, regenerative infrastructural support systems, is an antidote to industrialized convenience culture.

Although I am haunted by the horrors of our insidious and explicit techno-utopic race into a robotic 5G future, I cling to the possibility that we can shift our self-destructive complicity that sustains ravaging anthropogenic environmental racism. I am devoted to collective action that could generate the reciprocity of Ecozoic infrastructures.

I am always eager to collaborate with other activists, scholars, and artists. If you are interested, please contact me: photo@carajudea.com. 

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

Dr. Cara Judea Alhadeff has published dozens of books and essays on environmental justice, spirituality, philosophy, performance studies, and ethnic studies journals/anthologies. In numerous museum collections, her photographs/performances have been defended by freedom-of-speech organizations. Former professor at UC Santa Cruz and Global Center for Advanced Studies, Alhadeff teaches, performs, and parents a creative zero-waste life. She lives with her partner, Rob Mies, and their son, Zazu, in the Love Bus: a biocentric art installation/performance-based tiny home using only repurposed materials and equipment: www.facebook.com/LoveBusFamily. See also www.carajudea.com, www.zazudreams.com, and Menagerie Woodworking at www.facebook.com/menagerie.woodworking.5.

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1. “Reusing embodied energy” (Hawken 90) not only saves both energy and capital costs, it is also spiritually intelligent.
 2. “Dominator civilizations are characterized by people who don't recognize that their own well-being depends upon the well-being of the communities in which they live. As a result of their sense of alienation, people within those civilizations seek to control and dominate others, usually through social structures that wield power from top to bottom” (Adams 77).