Silverstrand: An Ecocritique of Place and Creativity

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The sea is a tabula scriba whose story is written in the strands, if you know how to read them.

Figure 1: Looking west from Silverstrand at sunset across the Santa Barbara Channel to Anacapa (left) and Santa Cruz (right) islands, with the oil platform Gina protruding between.

Silverstrand seems a place stuck in the sixties. Cut off from the city of Oxnard, California, in which it is incorporated, by the marina to the north, Port Hueneme Naval Base to the west, and the commercial and navy ports to the south, it has been almost forgotten by Ventura County—an anachronism of the postmodern age. Perhaps for this reason, it attracts surfers seeking great waves, anonymity, or both. Although there is a culture of surf rats—the Silverstrand Locals—who know each other well, they are insular and wary of, if not outright hostile toward, outsiders. Perhaps this explains why I like it. I am the same—a relic of the sixties, who treasures that period as a sort of Golden Age of Dionysian extravagance. Not that I would want to relive that period again; I simply wish to re-experience the era’s communitas that made me optimistic about the future of humanity.

Silverstrand demonstrates paradoxically that one can be among many without sensing much communal bonding; by the same token, one can be alone here and feel at-one-ment in the cosmos and global community. I discovered just such a tension while beachcombing, an activity that brought to mind the various reveries on walking by diverse writers such as Henry D. Thoreau, eco-artist Hamish Fulton, and ecopsychologist James Hillman.
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Beachcombing Reveries

With visible breath I am walking.

A voice I am sending as I walk.

In a sacred manner I am walking.

With visible tracks I am walking

In a sacred manner I walk.

—Black Elk

Shoreline Sauntering

Like walking, beachcombing stimulates reverie, a gnostic^2 practice during which I sense a numinous presence, or epiphany of the anima mundi (world soul). Of course, I am not alone in this perception—Thoreau famously extolled the virtues of “sauntering” in nature as a sacred practice in his famous essay, “Walking.” One of these benefits was to stimulate rumination, which in turn spontaneously spawned epiphanies when, “at rare moments, some thought visits one” (2012). It is during these “moments” that transformation becomes possible. In “Walking” Thoreau proposed a slower, more mindful form of ambulation:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering . . . .

We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return . . . . (1993, italics original)

Here Thoreau suggested the personal transformation that becomes possible when walking in natural surroundings, allowing us “never to return” to our former selves and perspectives on life. In so doing, he showed that his was a different kind of walking that often spawned philosophical rumination: “I walk out into a Nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer”
(1997). Walking allows us to feel literally grounded, repeating the actions of our hunter-gatherer ancestors that have been lost through citification. Thus, sauntering, like the Zen practice of *kin hin*, is walking *mindfully* or *meditatively*. Understood this way, walking combines story, movement, and ritual into an ecopsychological, spiritual, and ultimately *indigenizing* practice.

![Figure 2: Silverstrand at sunset and low tide, exposing debris field.](image)

While beachcombing I experience the rapture of enlightenment that I believe Thoreau, and countless others have attempted to express: a contacting of the *anima mundi*. I liken the occurrence to a *frisson*, or thrill, such as that depicted by those who have ingested entheogens and/or have practiced Asian meditation techniques. Perhaps this explains my interest in the *anima mundi* as the goal-source of my personal spirituality. For, in experiencing the numinous in nature, I am connecting to the soul of the world; I am tapping into my “divine spark,” as the depth psychologists say. I am “soul making,” as Hillman calls it, and I feel ecopsychologically healed by it. I am indigenizing myself to the place of Silverstrand.

**Hamish Fulton’s “Walking Art”**

Although Hamish Fulton has been alternately considered a sculptor, photographer, and conceptual or land artist, he likes to call himself a “‘walking artist’” (Grande 129). In the early
1970s Fulton first began to explore his environment in a way that involved experiencing the landscape phenomenologically as integral to his art. While visiting South Dakota and Montana in 1969, Fulton developed the philosophy that art is *how you view life* and has little to do with actual object production. His art works evolved from hikes taken, among other places, along England’s Pilgrim’s Way, through the Beartooth Mountains of Montana, across Japan’s Kii Peninsula, on Baffin Island in Arctic Canada, and to the summit of Popocatepetl in Mexico—all spanning four decades.

Fulton does not approach nature as merely “landscape” in the traditional sense of a still image, but as a *phenomenological* experience. His interpretation of nature and the reasons he chooses to photograph particular images directly result from his physical involvement in it. As he moves, each measured footstep mediates between his body and the traversed landscape. When Fulton photographs scenery, he is not separated *from* it so much as he is walking *through* it and incorporated *into* it. Thus, the different types of terrain become fortuitous elements in the work and determine the length of the walk, the direction, and the number of photographs shot. Fulton has commented that his art

. . . is about the experience of walking. A walk has a life of its own. . . . The walk is the walk and the artwork is the framed photograph and text. The artwork is not a record and cannot convey the experience of the walk. It is about a state of mind. But the artwork could not exist without the walk. . . . In some works there are subjective statements regarding my state of mind. My intention is that viewers use their own imagination to fill in the rest of the story, the way they think it might have been. (Fulton 78)
For Fulton, walks are a form of spiritual meditation in which the rhythm of the walk links him to the land. Consequently, he thinks “Walking is sacred . . . because it binds land, mind, and body” (in Auping 12).

In addition, there is a storyteller quality sustaining Fulton’s work: by stimulating a leap of imagination from art object to place, he connects viewers with their past experiences of landscape and ultimately with their feelings about nature in general—a therapeutic movement that indigenizes the artist and audience alike. Not surprisingly, Fulton interprets his story as spiritual and says, “Being in nature for me is direct religion . . . From paradox comes Energy. And the Energy that is required today is Spiritual Energy” (in Auping 69). Fulton refers to the tension arising from the conflict of oppositions found in nature—a contradiction that religious stories and myths attempt to resolve but never quite settle. And that is the point; for it is in the attempted resolution of paradox that a healing transformation of outlook occurs.

Like walking, beachcombing is therapeutic because by promoting knowledge of self through introspection, it transforms self and through it the world. As psychologist Roberts Avens avers, “the Delphic injunction ‘Know thyself’ and the modern precept ‘Study nature’ [ultimately] become the same maxim, for self-knowledge is nothing else than consciousness of the world (anima mundi) as perceived by the self” (26, italics original). He says such an attitude constitutes “a kind of universal ecology. Everything in the cosmos interconnects with its immediate surrounding [sic], and these surroundings with wider environs, until the world, the solar system, and more are included” (Avens 26). Through the activity of beachcombing I become privy to and more appreciative of Silverstrand’s interconnective ecologies.
Most of the year, the Ocean-Where-the-Islands-Are-in-Front (fig. 1, 3)—as Central California’s indigenous Chumash Indians called the Pacific Ocean at Silverstrand—presents a benign and predictable milieu, and the channel separating the beach from the offshore islands reposes in relative tranquility because of winds and air temperatures that fluctuate little. Bright skies and clear days often persist for weeks on end. In similar fashion, natural coastal upwelling of cold water from the depths of the ocean replenishes its surface layers with nutrients. Such upwelling results from the interplay of the winds, the surface currents, the rotation of the earth, and the shape of the hidden slopes of the continent’s foundations. When the mainland winds combine with the deflecting effect of rotation to blow the surface waters offshore, deep water must rise to replace it. As a result, whatever inhabits the deep water is thrust up to the surface. Chumash fishermen knew to take advantage of upwelling and other seasonal variations of climate to harvest plankton-feeding anchovies by the thousands as they moved inshore in summer.

In contrast to the monotony of weather during spring through fall, winter produces wild, wind-driven storms that ravage the beach with gigantic swells, regurgitating debris washed down the nearby Santa Clara River to the north from the inland plant nurseries, farms, and orchards (fig. 3, 6). When storms move in, the jagged waves take on a leaden hue as they first hoist then
heave themselves onto the sand with a crashing, crushing crescendo of rocks and pebbles
dislodged from the grips of seaweed “holdfasts” that have brought them in from deeper water
offshore. Famed ecobiologist Rachel Carson noted that even without the aid of weeds or storms,
waves transport a considerable quantity of sand, gravel, and shell fragments, creating the sandy
or pebbly beaches often found in sheltered, recessed shores or coves, where such debris may be
deposited but from which it cannot be so easily washed away (*Edge of the Sea* 44).

*Figure 4:* Argentine barrel found on Silverstrand.

Silverstrand offers such an incurving shore, where myriad flotsam may be encountered
during a walk on the beach, especially following a storm, as I discovered. In addition to the usual
debris of pebbles, shells, and glass, I once came across a 55-gallon, blue plastic drum stamped
“Argentina” (fig. 4)—a reminder, as Carson pointedly remarks, of “*man*’s invasion of the sea”
(*Edge of the Sea* 183, italics added). Here I emphasize Carson’s use of what otherwise might be
considered in this context simply the generic term *man* because, in this case, environmental
“invasion” seems to have been a predominantly, if not totally, male activity. Ecocritic Lawrence
Buell notes Carson’s use of such gender-specific language that “mordantly reflects on man’s
mistreatment of the edenic places of the earth” (292). On one level, Carson’s wording reflects the
accepted style of her time, but on another, subtextual level, she proffers a critique of anthropo-
and especially *andro*-centrism. Woman is seldom, if ever, nature’s foe in Carson’s work, but
*man* frequently is—a trope Carson had explored previously in *The Sea Around Us*, in which she
wrote that “*Man* has returned to his mother sea only on her own terms. *He* cannot control or change the ocean, as in *his* brief tenancy of earth, *he* has subdued and plundered the continents” (15, italics added). In this way, she prefigured ecofeminism that doubly indict[s] *man* for *his* domination and mistreatment of *his* environment, including women and feminine nature: the “mother sea.” In particular, Carson complains,

> *Man* unhappily has written one of *his* blackest records as a destroyer on the oceanic islands. *He* has seldom set foot on an island that *he* has not brought about disastrous changes. *He* has destroyed environments by cutting, clearing, and burning; *he* has brought with *him* as a chance associate the nefarious rat; and almost invariably *he* has turned loose upon the islands a whole Noah’s Ark of goats, hogs, cattle, dogs, cats, and other nonnative animals as well as plants. Upon species after species of island life, the black night of extinction has fallen. (*Sea Around Us* 77, italics added)

Although Carson is not specifically referencing the Channel Islands, the activities she describes—cutting, clearing, burning, and introducing nonnative plants and animals—all occurred on them, and especially on Santa Cruz (fig. 1), where island restoration has been an ongoing concern for over three decades (see, e.g., Nature Conservancy). Without actually laying the blame for our ecocrisis on men *per se*, Carson makes clear the hidden meanings behind what would now be considered sexist, androcentric, or masculinist terms. In so doing, she “adeptly exploits the protective coloring of the generic pronoun—a satirical obliquity no longer open to enlightened discourse,” according to Buell (292). Carson, although constrained by the standardized discourse of her day, managed to subvert convention and make such restrictions work for her in getting her ideas across, whereas writers today are subject to criticism by feminists when they use masculinist language that is seen as a promulgation of sexist
stereotypes. The resultant irony that is replete in Carson’s rhetoric enables polysemic understanding and draws attention to how language paradoxically can promote sexism, however unintentionally, at the same time it challenges such perspectives.

Carson balanced her critique of “man” with mythopoetic language about the nonhuman inhabitants of the shore. As a result of “man’s” seeming use of the sea as a giant, bottomless trash can, she often found mingled with the bits and fragments of sea creatures “spars, pieces of rope, bottles, barrels, boxes of many shapes and sizes” (*Edge of the Sea* 183). Such flotsam often carried living hitchhikers such as *Lepas*, the gooseneck barnacles of the open sea that are virtually everywhere, waving their fronds and dancing in unison like creepy miniature drill teams. When a barnacle dies, its shell can remain stuck to its host for a long time, creating alluring effects for the collector. I considered it a successful shelling day on the beach to find an unbroken sand dollar with a half-inch acorn barnacle (*Balanus glandula*) attached to the dollar’s “flower” (mouth) side (fig. 5). I marveled at finding such a cast-off treasure, as if the Sea Goddess were saying, *Here, take this, I don’t need it anymore.*

![Figure 5: *Dendraster excentricus* (sand dollar) with *Balanus glandula* (acorn barnacle).](image)

Flotsam—Carson’s name for sand dollars and all the other detritus that washes ashore—tells much about the shore’s ecology. Flotsam, she observed, appears as a “net” spread across the beach—“the drifitage of ocean brought to rest on shore” (*Edge of the Sea* 164). This flotsam-net is oddly composed and woven tirelessly by wind, wave, and tide. Caught in the seaweed strands
might be crab claws, sponge bits, hole-bored and broken mollusk shells, bird bones, and feathers. The weavers of this flotsam-net use the materials at hand, and the net’s design changes depending upon the shoreline’s geographical features. In this way, the items captured in the flotsam-net reflect the kind of bottom that is offshore. Although there might be few living creatures in the beach litter, it nonetheless contains the suggestion of millions of lives either lived in nearby sands or transported here from far away. In pondering the immensity of these numbers and distances, I imagine the Silverstrand flotsam as debris deposited by the Sea Goddess as she pushes-sweeps-cleanses herself in an attempt at some sort of civic sanitation of not only dead creatures but all those unwanted items foisted upon her by the invasive “man” with whom she just might be displeased.

Perhaps the Sea Goddess is Artemis. For, the pagans of Greek antiquity evidently considered her domain to be not only mountains and forests but the “sea,” “sea-life,” and “everywhere,” as the “Second Homeric Hymn” to her attests:

She loves to hunt
in the shadows of mountains
and in the wind
on mountain-tops
[She shoots] off
groaning arrows
The peaks of great mountains
Tremble
The forest
in its darkness
screams
with the clamor of animals
and it’s frightening
The whole earth
starts shaking
even the sea,
the sea-life
She has a strong heart,
she darts in and out
everywhere . . . (Boer 5-6, italics added)

This connecting of Artemis to the sea does not require a great stretch of imagination. After all, in her lunar aspect, Artemis is controller of the tides, the knowledge of whose changes is of critical import not only to boaters and surfers but to beachcombers, just as it was to the Chumash before us, who needed to know tidal and meteorological details because crossing the Santa Barbara Channel to the Channel Islands of ʻanyapax (Anacapa), mičumaš (Santa Cruz), wima (Santa Rosa), and tuqan (San Miguel) could be quite dangerous (fig. 1, 3).

So important was this traditional ecological knowledge that the Chumash Artemis cognate, Momoy, was also their word for “month” (Blackburn 101). And as with Momoy-Artemis, the tides “present a striking paradox,” the essence of which, according to Carson, is a cosmic “force” that sets the tides in motion but lies “wholly outside the earth” (Sea Around Us 119). Although the tide affects all beaches neutrally, its nature is effected locally, with striking differences happening within geographically close places. This phenomenon is seen throughout California’s coastline with beaches separated by short distances often sporting widely variant
high and low tide times. Thus, local topography—including that which is undersea and invisible, such as the bottom’s slope or the channel’s depth—is in some ways more important than geography in determining the features that make the tides, for these details determine how far and how intensely the tide will rise.

Although low tide, when more of the sea bottom is exposed, is generally considered best for beachcombing (fig. 2), this rule does not apply to “spring” tides that occur twice a month when the moon is almost new and again when it is full. At these times, the sun, moon, and earth are in alignment, and the sun and moon combine their gravitational effects to cause the surf to leap (i.e., to spring) high on the beaches. Because of their extremes in distance—the highest flood tides and the lowest ebb tides of the lunar month—spring tides exert such force during their relentless movements that while the flow may deposit much flotsam at its high mark, it is often swept away within the unyielding grip of the ebb. Even so, sometimes the best shelling is at the high-mark of the spring-tide flow, where I often found mixed in the flotsam-net some of the most colorful and tiniest shells, pebbles, and sea glass.

Nor is flotsam comprised of small items only, as I discovered one blustery day on Silverstrand. The ocean had increased in choppiness and swell size, when in the distance I noticed a struggling, double-sailed windjammer, the Irving Johnson. The 90-foot brigantine resembled a nineteenth-century ocean voyager that now plunged and listed over the swells as it apparently attempted to return to the adjacent marina. Something seemed wrong, however. Even an inexperienced sea person such as I could sense incipient disaster in the ship’s violent tilts. The closer it lurched toward land, the more obvious it seemed that the ship wasn’t going to achieve its goal. Sure enough, bitterly cold winds pressed the windjammer closer to the marina jetty and shore until it finally ran aground about two hundred feet offshore. It stopped short of crashing
into the rocky seawall, but it began to take on water as the beach-break brutalized it with violent rocking.

Figure 6: The stranded *Irving Johnson*.

Soon several yellow U.S. Coast Guard helicopters surrounded the beached brig, and one by one its crew members were airlifted to safety. By low tide the next morning, the *Irving Johnson* was about 20 feet offshore (fig. 6). Although the purpose of the ship’s voyage had been to teach sailing skills to students as a way to connect with nature, the would-be educators instead modeled just how separated from nature Western civilization has become: virtually all of the experts who commented afterward said they would not have taken a ship out in the weather and sea conditions of that particular day. Could we be collectively the flotsam discarded by an uncaring Artemis-Momoy vengeful of the grave injustices wrought against her? I ponder this thought as offshore oil rigs glow in the black Pacific channel like the orbs of Lamia.

The Allure of Shells

The Moon Snail

An inveterate (okay: obsessive) shell-collector most of my life, I found Paradise on Silverstrand, and soon began including stones and sea glass in my catches of the day. When I strolled the shore at low tide, sifting through the flotsam-net until something caught my eye,
asking me to pick it up, which I would, to discover a Moon Snail shell, I sensed a communing with Artemis, who similarly to the Moon Snail was once a voracious predator. Whereas Artemis’s favored weapon was the arrow, the Moon Snail’s armaments are a solvent-emitting proboscis and a rasp-like radula, both situated on the foot of the creatures. When Moon Snails find another mollusk, they envelop and suffocate it with their massive feet that in some species are too large to be withdrawn into the shell. On the anterior part of the foot is a boring organ (proboscis) that secretes a non-acid calcium chelating compound that softens shells. The rasp-like radula is then applied to drill an extremely neat, beveled hole. Similarly, marine biologist Melbourne R. Carriker proposed a “chemo-mechanical theory of penetration in which the abrasive action of the radula removes shell softened by secretion from the accessory boring organ . . . on the ventral tip of the proboscis . . .” (“Comparative Functional Morphology” 263). It seems that the proboscis emits a chemical that dissolves shell material (creating the beveling) until the shell is soft enough to allow the radula to finish the job with its boring action. This process shocks bivalves into opening up, enabling the Moon Snail to devour them.

During one sojourn on Silverstrand beach I had found numerous shells of different species—including a few Moons—with perfectly round, beveled holes, which had caught my eye because preexistent holes facilitate using shells in jewelry (fig. 7a, b, c, d, e). Research and study revealed why these holed shells were so plentiful: they had been the prey of Moon Snails, several species of which exist in the Silverstrand area. The *Neverita reclusiana*’s region extends from Northern California to Western Mexico, and it grows to a size of 38 mm. *Norrisia norrisi*’s (fig. 16) range is similar, from Monterey to Baja California, Mexico, and it achieves a maximum growth of 59 mm. *Polinices Lewisii* (fig. 7b, c) ranges from Vancouver Island to Baja California, and with a 140 mm shell diameter, this predacious Moon Snail lives up to the Greek meaning of
its name—“manifold strife”—an apparent reference to the Moon Snail’s voraciousness, seen in the 2-3 mm holes (fig. 7a) bored through its victims. So important were Moon Snails to the ancient Greeks that even Aristotle recognized them (Carriker “Shell Penetration” 417). Now, however, they are the bane of commercial fishermen because they decimate shellfish populations, and attempts to control them have failed.

**Figure 7** (far left): Bivalve cockle (a) with bored hole; open-spire, spire-removed *P. Lewisii* (Moon Snail) dorsal side (b) and ventral side (c); open-spire, spire-removed *Conus californicus* (cone) ventral side (d); open-spire, spire-removed *Olivella biplicata* (olive) ventral side (e); closed-spire, spire-removed snail, ventral side (f); closed-spire *T. californiana* (cowry) dorsal side (g) and ventral side (h).

**Figure 8** (center): Outer side of bivalve *Tellina* shell with beveled, bored hole.

**Figure 9** (right): *P. Lewisii* (Moon Snail) pendant with *C. californicus* (cones), *O. biblicata* (olive) clasp, and garnet bead.

Moon Snails are edible, but perhaps they are not very tasty, which could explain their absence in Chumash middens (see, e.g., Arnold, ed.). Nor were they evidently used for beads or ornaments, even though Moon Snails have an open spire (fig. 7b, c; fig. 9), similar to the olive (*Olivella biblicata*: fig. 7e) and cone (*Conus californicus*: fig. 7d), which were used in ornamentation. Having an open spire makes longitudinal stringing simple; the catch being that the posterior end that is closed during the life of the snail must be ground off either naturally or manually to expose the open hole. In addition, because the Moon Snail is wider than it is long, it lends itself less to stringing than do olive and cone shells (fig. 7b, c). Even so, I found ways to
use the open-spire, spire-removed moon shells as pendants by inserting a wire through the hole and bending it into a pendant loop (fig. 9). Once I determined their facility in jewelry making, I began scouring Silverstrand daily for moon shells. However entranced I was by their luminous beauty, with colors ranging from gold to pink and lavender, I still felt compelled to justify keeping something that had no apparent purpose other than aesthetic. When my three prudent sons needled me about my plans for this burgeoning shell collection—other than taking up space in my home—I decided to make jewelry with them.

**The Ear Snail**

*Figure 10* (far left): *Haliotis iris* (abalone) face pendant, assorted shell-fragment eyes and nose, *Strongylocentrotus purpuratus* (purple sea urchin) headdress, garnets, and glass beads.

*Figure 11* (second from left): *H. rufescens* (red abalone exterior) swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*) pendant with inlaid garnet beads, *S. purpuratus* (purple sea urchin spine) bill, shell fragment ventral fin, *O. biblicata* (olive) beads, labradorite bead eye.

*Figure 12* (second from right): *H. rufescens* (red abalone interior) pendant, *O. biblicata* (olive) beads, and molted cockatiel feathers.

*Figure 13* (far right): Face pendant with *Lottia limatula* (limpet) eyes, *T. californiana* (cowry) cheeks, *C. californicus* (cone) nose, *Cypraea moneta* (money cowry) mouth, *Leptopecten latiauratus* (scallop) fragment headdress, garnets, labradorite, and glass beads.

In addition to moon shells, abalone shells—even if only fragments—always produced a wave of excitement in me. For one thing, their pearlescent inner shell is widely recognized and used in jewelry (fig. 11, 12, 13). The Chumash, whose culture goes back at least ten thousand years, also appreciated abalone, called *t’aya* and *qasi*, possibly referring to different species. They treasured the shells, which were fashioned into amulets worn by *ʔantap*, members of the
secret religious cult (i.e., shamans) (e.g., Arnold, ed.; Blackburn), and by Chumash women in puberty ceremonies, who fashioned the outer rim of the shell, which has a row of four large holes that when broken off make “teeth,” into back scratchers (Rojas 133). Because of their shape and large size—some species are over a foot in diameter—abalone shells were also used as dishes and carved into fish hooks, ornaments, and beads called abalorio by the first Spanish Americans who encountered the native people. The Chumash word tu’ means both ear and shell—possibly a reference to the spiral shape of many mollusk shells, including abalone, the inside of which does indeed resemble a human ear, with its cochlear spiral. For special occasions, Chumash men and women wore abalone shell jewelry, including carved and decorated shell ornaments in their ears and noses; ’e’l was their name for “necklace.” In addition to personal ornamentation, abalone shell chips provided a favored material for inlaying a variety of ceremonial objects and tools, including the tomols—canoes built to cross the channel separating the mainland from the islands.8

The few extant Chumash stories that contain references to abalone gathering (Blackburn 289-290) take place on the Channel Islands (fig. 1), indicating that even before Euro-Americans appeared on the coastal scene, the mystical mollusk was not easily accessed on the mainland. The less populated islands, however, apparently contained some abalone colonies so profuse that their shells touched each other. It also seems the Chumash had far less an impact on abalone populations than their Euro-American successors. Native people collected abalone from the intertidal zone, their harvests were relatively small, and their tidal restrictions—collecting occurred only during low tide—prevented excessive overharvesting. Because of this, it is thought they had a relatively minor effect on the abalone population. In contrast with the Moon Snail, abalone meat was prized by the pre-historic Chumash, who pounded it on mortars before
consuming it in much the same way that is done now. Wild abalone meat can be quite tough—especially the larger steaks that indicate greater age of the mollusks. When properly prepared, however, it is delicious.

**An Ode to Abalone**

*Once upon a time* seems a fitting start to a story about abalone, whose history is the stuff of legend, replete with sex, irony, and intrigue. Harvested to near extinction from its primordial home along the rocky shores of the California coast, the hapless Haliotis—of which there were at one time eight thriving species—is at the forefront of the state’s environmental protection program. Whether it lives happily ever after or goes the way of the condor remains to be seen. Since the halcyon Haliotis days of my youth, over-fishing and pollution have contributed to depleted populations. Now there are simply too few mature abalones to successfully reproduce.

Another reason why abalone have not rebounded as expected is that their main predator, the sea otter, has. The comeback of the sea otter—which favors this tasty treat—has impacted abalone sustainability. Once on the precipice of extinction itself, the sea otter’s range mimics that of the abalone. Some marine biologists now theorize that over-hunting of the sea otter at the beginning of the 19th century allowed the abalone populations to grow abnormally high, and when the sea otter’s populations were restored in the early seventies, they resumed their favored diet. Abalone might sustain its population with just one predator, but not with two. Sea otters plus humans equal *au revoir*, abalone.

**Toward a Phenomenology of Transformation and the Imaginal**

I often contemplated the fate of abalone as I scanned Silverstrand’s shore for their shells, feeling blessed by the Sea Goddess whenever I found even tiny fragments of the nearly extinct mollusk, which I worked into jewelry designs (fig. 11, 12, 13, 14).

Making shell necklaces and
artistic creation in general has always been my passion, for something magical happens when I
engage in art making. Temporality takes on different meanings, for one thing. It is as if time
stands still—what religion historian Mircea Eliade calls in illo tempore: the “mythical and sacred
time, . . . the time of origin, the time that ‘floweth not’ because it does not participate in profane
temporal duration, because it is composed of an eternal present . . .” (88, italics original). Mythic
Time thus may be thought of as the sense of a never-ending, perpetual present—of being here
now, as Richard Alpert cum Baba Ram Dass advised—an experience that seems individually
healing as well as communally bonding, wherein transformation becomes possible. I believe that
in these moments of art making—as during many, if not all, creative endeavors—an esoteric,
mythopoeic transmission occurs, with the art piece mediating between the artist and the art
viewer. Such moments are often experienced as imbued with a sense of communitas.

Adding to the discussion, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (b.1884 – d.1962)
outlined in The Poetics of Reverie a “phenomenology of the creative imagination” that focuses
on “cosmic reverie” as a “phenomenon of solitude” that is rooted in “the soul of the dreamer”
(14). For Bachelard, cosmic reverie is a “state” that “possesses a sort of stability or tranquility. It
helps us escape time” (Reverie 14). In other words, cosmic reverie, or daydreaming, facilitates
entrée to Mythic Time:

[T]his contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike
any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a
world that bears the mark of infinity. Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely
through memory, we can recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this
contemplation of grandeur. . . . And one might say that daydream is original
contemplation. (Bachelard Poetics of Space 183, 184, italics original)
Bachelard’s “world that bears the mark of infinity” correlates with Eliade’s Mythic Time, except that Bachelard’s idea of the daydream that spawns this world can only occur in solitude and during inactivity. Whereas daydreaming seems to be what I experience when art making and am alone in these moments, I am not idle, albeit only my hands are visibly moving. For this reason, I am inclined toward philosophers such as Jean-Paul Weber, whose ideas counter Bachelard’s notion of the idleness of aesthetic daydreaming by focusing on the movement involved in art making—what Weber called “the mobility of aesthetic experience” (56). In support of his theory, Weber pointed out, “Consciousness is not a Milky Way of states of mind . . . but a continuity” that he likened to Henri Bergson’s “duration,” William James’ “stream of consciousness,” and Edmund Husserl’s “pure flow of experience” (56-57, italics original):

To the extent that aesthetic enjoyment participates in this moving duration, itself borne on the profound impulses of unconsciousness, aesthetic enjoyment is not a fixed state, a thing, a crystallization miraculously set apart, but an intermittent and vague wave which sometimes washes over us, leaving us stunned, sometimes lightly skimming over us like the wing of a memory, sometimes remaining obstinately silent, something we call boredom. As long as the lilt of this wave breaks over us we are the arena of a metamorphosis: it is this metamorphosis of the individual who is concerned into one who contemplates . . . (Weber 57)

Weber’s wave analogy seems particularly apt as I contemplate the creative wave flooding over me, generating stories about characters who speak to me through their cowry shell mouths or eyes that the Sea Goddess has thrust ignominiously onto the shore, just as they may have for the Chumash and many other indigenous traditions before me (e.g., Koerper). And when I make a necklace with these and other spiraled orbs, I sense a phenomenological remembering of
Artemis-Momoy and also the Chumash shamans who created ʿatišwin (talismans) with shells and other natural objects (Blackburn 172, 265, 270, 275-76). These talismans symbolized the unique relationship between the shaman and his or her “tutelary animal” or “dream helper” (Blackburn 39) in much the same way that my necklaces reveal the images conveyed within and by the shells to me.

In crafting this jewelry, I am connecting with Silverstrand and ensouling us both, as Hillman suggested when he said that even the tiniest things may be considered to have soul, including “what you wear around your neck, the keepsake you bring back from vacation or the little stone you pick up on the beach” (162). Anything, whether found on a beach and held in the hand or made into an amulet can be a “soul-speaking object” (Hillman 162). In fact, such objects depend “less on their origin in nature than on their treatment by our hands and minds” (Hillman 162). In other words, art making is soul making—not only for the artist but for the audience—as Fulton affirmed with his walking art. It is a collective endeavor by the artist and viewer(s) that inspires communitas.

I view my shell jewelry as beachcombing eco-art whose audience is whoever or whatever acquires my jewelry. Although creating is a solitary endeavor, I suggest that knowing someone (or something)\(^\text{10}\) will wear my work creates an invisible, transpersonal borderland connecting me to the wearer, if subconsciously so. This movement from the artist through the medium to the audience in part defines “eco-art,” as do its modes of appeal that include “shock or humor” and education “about the systemic nature of our world” (Sanders 77). Just as a gastropod creates its shell, making jewelry and all art becomes “emergent rather than intentional during the productive process” (Glazebrook 22), developing, for me, through an ongoing interaction with shells, rocks, sea glass, beads, and feathers.
Nor am I alone in my consideration of beachcombing art as eco-art. Spanish artist Joan Miró (b.1893 – d.1983) apparently made daily trips to the beach at dawn “to collect things washed up by the tide. Things lying there, waiting for someone to discover their personality” (in Jaffe 291). Sometimes he would assemble them into “curious compositions” (Jaffe 291) that reflected his Early Fauve sensibility. In 1914 the French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp (b.1887 – d.1968) found a bottle rack on the beach, put it on a pedestal, and exhibited it (Jaffe 290). In doing so, he created art from something…

torn from its utilitarian context [and] invested with the lonely dignity of the derelict.

Good for nothing, there to be used, ready for anything, it is alive. It lives on the fringe of existence its own disturbing, absurd life. The disturbing object—that is the first step to art. (Jean Bazaine in Jaffe 290)

In the contemplation of such “disturbing” objects, the viewer becomes aware that nature is not always pleasant—a condition that elicits the environmentally sensitive response required of eco-art.

The notion of eco-art is iterated by Ada Medina, for whom the substance of her work comes not from “an exterior language applied onto the surface,” but as a “deeply embedded activity” (Medina 16). The physicality involved in making something “new” with ancient materials thus generates a plethora of forms and possibilities whose nature is to emerge, attract attention, and hopefully inspire eco-intelligent response. In this manner, art becomes an “extension of being” (Medina 20) that situates the artist paradoxically on the seemingly impenetrable borderland between interior and exterior domains, supporting Fulton’s theory about art making as a generative process that mediates inner and outer, creator and audience, culture and nature.
This tension may also be perceived in the conflict of oppositions found in nature—contradictions that yield transformation in their attempted resolution, rather than in their actual resolution, which is impossible. When I recognize that “good” cannot exist without its polar opposite “bad” (and vice-versa), I am enabled to change my attitude about “bad” and accept its inevitability.

Allow me to clarify: my eco-art is not about exploiting, “faking,” or sentimentalizing nature or indigenous traditions, as some art—especially film—has been accused of doing. My pieces are rather about creating an ecologically-minded body of work to promote a production ideology that functions “with rather than against nature” (Glazebrook 23, italics original). For one thing, by representing semi- and non-human images, my shell jewelry embodies a nonanthropocentric perspective. For another, whereas my initial motivation for selecting shells to be used in jewelry may be phenomenological, in perceiving the shape, color, and size of a shell, I am also considering its ecological place in evolutionary theory.

Knowing a shell’s taxonomic name, which is frequently Latin- or Greek-based, seems to spark images that are classically mythic in nature, leading me to perceive faces in the combinations of shells that singly may evoke only parts of faces.

Figure 14: Face pendant with *Tegula eiseni* (banded turban) eyes, *Nassarius perpinguis* (whelk) nose, *Acmaea mitra* (limpet) cheeks, *C. spadicea* (chestnut cowry) mouth, pen shell hishi beads, labradorite beads, and molted cockatiel feathers.
Figure 15: Face pendant with *L. limatula* (limpet) eyes, *Fissurella volocano* (volcano limpet) mouth, *L. latiauratus* (scallop) ears; *Norrisia norrisi* (brown moon snail) nose. Figure 16: (far right) “Alien Face” shell pendant with *T. californiana* (cowry) eyes.

Consequently, an argument could be made that using recycled shells, glass, and rocks from my beachcombing expeditions constitutes yet more of the anthropocentric, exploitive activities of humankind against which Carson and others have railed. To this I would respond that my brand of eco-art does not exploit, pollute, or damage the environment in the same manner that other “extractive” marine activities—such as fishing and whaling—do, the main difference being that I never take live creatures; I take objects that have no other use except for their decomposition into sand, a process that takes hundreds if not thousands of years. Although some creatures, such as hermit crabs, find homes in shells empty of their original inhabitants, I take only those broken and without hiding places. In addition, I always observe the sanctions against taking anything from so-designated state beaches.

Others might question whether the selling of art somehow taints it as just another capitalist exploitation of natural resources. While I do sell my necklaces, I charge only a minimal amount to cover my expenses, and I gift far more than I sell. Truthfully, I enjoy making shell jewelry so much that I have difficulty charging for my pieces, much preferring to give them away. I feel the same about publishing photographs of my jewelry, which causes concern among some jewelry designers who fear copyright infringement—in fact, I welcome others to view my art and become inspired enough to create their own. Being handmade and one-of-a-kind, no two pieces are ever the same, even when I use components of the same size and type. Moreover, by placing my necklaces on consignment at the Chumash Indian Museum, I am supporting the efforts of the local tribe to educate the general public further about Native American lifeways, a cause I have supported many years.
Shell Jewelry as Eco-Art

In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard applied an approach he called topoanalysis—“the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (8)—to a variety of phenomena, including shells, which for him symbolize the human body. Part of his fascination had to do with how mollusks have built their shells “according to the teachings of transcendental geometry” and have constructed their dwellings “around the axis of a logarithmic spiral” (Poetics of Space 105). It is this coiling image—seen in phenomena from the micro- to the macro-cosmic—that has entranced humans for eons. Through his topoanalytic daydreaming of shells, Bachelard demonstrated how certain scientific theories may, in actuality, be “vast boundless daydreams” (Poetics of Space 112). In other words, science may not be as deeply grounded in rationality as has been widely presumed.

For Bachelard, the snail represents a dynamic relationship of manifestation and mystery that permeates the emerging world, provoking curiosity about the immense powers concealed within the snail’s shell when it is retracted, yet paradoxically arousing apprehension that these hidden forces are “preparing ‘a way out’” (Poetics of Space 111). Bachelard’s “dream-idea” proffered the shell as the strongest evidence of “life’s ability to constitute forms,” for there seems no evolutionary explanation for their spiral shape (Poetics of Space 112). For this reason, Bachelard suggested that whatever “has form has a shell ontogenesis, and life’s principal effort is to make shells” (Poetics of Space 112). Shell-building is certainly a familiar metaphor to describe human psycho-social development. Perhaps this is a part of why I identify with shells: they embody imagination as well as psyche. It is this soul-making aspect of shells that allows the creation of necklaces with them to be understood as ecopsychological practice—as eco-art.
Because of its concrete symbolizing of abstract concepts, art, according to theorist Patricia B. Sanders, is singularly able to raise awareness and advance the mind-set shift requisite for human sustainability (77). Moreover, as eco-art theorist Suzi Gablik avers, the word “ecological” nowadays has become synonymous with “metaphysical,” as reawakening awareness of our symbiosis with nature has developed into the most urgent spiritual and political requirement of today (49). With this in mind, I suggest an ecopsychological approach to art making and nature that is tempered with science: whereas it may be true that shells can be enjoyed without knowing, for example, their taxonomic names, I find that I appreciate them far more once I know scientific information such as species and eco-place—how they fit into their ecological niches. Knowing taxonomy theoretically enables my identification of a creature’s habitat and consequently, that of the fauna and flora nearby or on it—facts that for me are indispensable to a successful restoration of the ecological soul, or what I call indigenization.

**Restoring Psyche and City**

According to Gablik, soul restoration requires redefining the “self as relational, rather than as separate and self-contained,” as has been its modern development (51). This means creating a “connective aesthetics” politics that recognizes the absence in our contemporary cultural worldviews of a “spirit, or ‘binding power’ that holds everything together” (Gablik 51). Such aesthetics goes beyond the romantic notion of art as an inward search by speaking to the power of relatedness and establishing bonds that call us into connection. Nor is such linkage possible only in nature; in some ways the city—the polis—provides an even better setting than the wilderness for a poli-tics of connective aesthetics.

Along this strand, Hillman reminds that restoration of the ecological soul occurs not only in natural settings but in cities as well (21). He grouses about the back-to-nature mentality that
continually imagines a better, truer life . . . away from the city” and vehemently rejects “this anti-city view” while warning against “being lured by its sentimental charm” (21). For, “this anti-city view” has contributed to the city’s deracination of soul, adding to the pervasive malaise of city-dwellers. Before, however, we can come to an understanding of the soul of the city, Hillman warns that we must first disabuse ourselves of the prejudice that cities are solely human-created and detached from nature. This imaginal separation of city and nature causes us to think that only in nature are beauty and soul found, when as a matter of fact, city gardens, fish ponds, bonsai trees, and art objects can be repositories of natural beauty, reminding us “to feel soulful” (Hillman 155-156). The revisioning of the city is therefore part of the transformation in worldview needed to address our ecocrisis successfully.

Because imagination is the key to such change, post-Jungian Lionel Corbett cites artists and writers as facilitators of societal transformation. He theorizes that imaginative people are inspired by “archetypal forces,” which as they evolve materialize via creative individuals into a “collective consciousness” (93). Similar to Thoreau, Corbett likens this process to the mythopoeic transmission of Homer and Hesiod, alluding to the importance of cultural narratives (93). In Corbett’s view, imaginative individuals derive their creative source from the shared psychic phenomena of their ancestors, which they revision and re-create in new forms.

Avens concurs with Corbett while adding an environmental dimension: “Art is not nature second hand but a second nature” (59). Here he broaches the concept that art reveals inner as well as outer nature. By allowing the “true essence” of things to emerge, art “proclaims the same process of creation that we observe in nature—a poiesis in the sense of making or bringing forth” (Avens 63, italics added). Creative endeavors thus enable people to incorporate new images about their places in the world, from which they acquire the capability to dream onward
ethopoietic constructions of place that ostensibly facilitate more ecoethical attitudes and behaviors. As the field of art therapy attests, this process can be experienced as healing—not only for the artist, but for the community of art viewers, I suggest. For just as art creation impels access to Mythic Time—a therapeutic experience—so does art viewing.

Nor is this ethopoiesis restricted to art creation, for when I wear my necklaces in the city, I am often transported imaginatively back to the beach, particularly when I am asked about them, and a walk in the city bears certain similarities to a stroll on the strand. For one thing, noted Hillman, because beach and city walking are both soul making activities to which people often turn during periods of acute psychological stress, they can be understood as “meditative therapy” (252). He eloquently elaborated:

One goes for a walk to get the stuck, depressed state of mind or its whirling agitations into an organic rhythm, and this organic rhythm of walking takes on symbolic significance as we place one foot after the other, left-right, left-right in a balanced pace. Pace. Measure. Taking steps. With the soul-calming language of walking, the dartings of the mind begin to form into a direction. As we walk, we are in the world, finding ourselves in a particular space and turning that space by walking within it into a place, a dwelling or territory, a local habitation with a name. The mind becomes contained in its rhythm. (Hillman 253)

These observations led Hillman to believe that there “is probably an archetypal cure going on in walking, something profoundly affecting the mythical substrata of our lives” (253). To illustrate his point, Hillman observed that when people are most anxious, as in nightmares, they are often unable to move their legs. Contrary to popular opinion, then, “the city is a place of soul because it allows our souls their legs, our heads their faces, and our bodies their animal
styles” (257, italics added). We need only to “see through” the city’s surface exterior—its face—to discover the invisible truths that reside within. Walking, even in the city, thus combines story, movement, and ritual into an ecopsychological, indigenizing practice.

I ruminate upon these insights while perambulating the city streets near my home. My ritual begins midway up the side of a hill that overlooks a green belt connecting the city of Camarillo with other parts of Ventura County, California. This green belt, like others in the county, was created when the voters passed an open space initiative, Save Our Agricultural Resources. SOAR restricts most types of development, which means that I am privy to a breathtaking view of avocado and lemon orchards fronting fields of crops that alternate among broccoli, celery, and other vegetables not easily recognized by this non-farmer. The fields in turn yield to the northernmost reaches of the Santa Monica Mountains, with its spectacular Old Boney ridgeline, a craggy spine of granite cliffs (fig. 17).

![Figure 17: Old Boney with agricultural field in foreground.](image)

At the bottom of the hill I round a corner, glance toward the adjoining Community Garden whose space was donated by the Department of Water, and head toward the catch basin that separates the orchards from the fields. Whenever the basin holds water, as it does now, a bevy of birds populates its shores. Today I see several mallard pairs and a lone juvenile or two skulking at a safe distance, for getting too close to an alpha male or his mate can risk a raucous attack. A motion at my foot draws my attention. I glance down to see a lizard dart behind an
electrical box. Aha! It is Pocoyi—my first alligator lizard (*Elgaria multicarinata*) of the season—spring is here! A chorus of *chur-wei chur-wei* pulls me away from the lizard and back to the basin’s mudflats, where cavorts a band of semipalmated plovers (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)—sandpiper kin recognizable by their sable neck rings that contrast strikingly against their white throats while matching their dark brown masks and caps. Suddenly I notice a pair of white-faced ibises (*Plegadis chihi*) foraging nearby (fig. 18). I realize that I don’t have to be on Silverstrand to be at the beach.

![Figure 18: White-faced ibises (*Plegadis chihi*) forage in a Camarillo catch basin.](image)

For a bit I muse about the shore as metaphor, where oppositions merge and separate and all is in flux, and where transformation becomes possible. The shore is knowledge, or *gnosis*: a mediator in this instance between nature and the city. In contemplating the catch pond and its myriad visitors, I comprehend Hillman’s observation that the “soul has always been associated with a reflective part in us . . .” (21). Reflectivity may be seen in city pools, ponds, shades, and shadows—anywhere reflections happen. Yet, nowhere does culture clash more with nature than at the catch basin, which is directly across the street from St. John’s Pleasant Valley Hospital, whose generator today belches out fumes that envelop me as I walk past, reminding that I’m *not* at the beach.
I take one last look at the plovers, which are now so still I have trouble distinguishing them from the mud. Focusing on these tiny things is soul making, a phenomenon the Japanese understood through their practice of nature miniaturization, which Hillman dubbed “pondering the particular” (168). He challenged urban planners to envision small details like drinking fountains, fish aquariums, and singing birds as natural elements within the city instead of expanding green belts and parks in the attempt to transport nature into the city. Taking Hillman’s cue, I ponder the particular, imagining details like lizards, plovers, and generators: nature, narrative, and gnosis have coalesced to restore psyche, city and communitas.

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NOTES
1 In *Black Elk Speaks* (Neihardt et al. 3).

2 I use the terms “gnostic” and “gnosis,” as defined by Avens, to mean the esoteric acquisition of knowledge.

3 All photos and images are by author.

4 The association between “mother” and “sea” is not Carson’s invention, as the French homonyms for both words attest: “la mère” and “la mer,” respectively.

5 For more about Momoy, see author’s “Eywa and Momoy: Nature as Shamaness in Myth and Film” (2012).

6 In Greek mythology, Lamia was a daemon cursed for her cruelty by being unable to close her eyes.

7 Following the style of some archaeologists, e.g., Don Laylander in “Shell Bead Exchange” (2013), I use the term “spire-removed” to describe shells whose spires have been ground off either naturally or manually.

8 The Chumash were actually better known for their *Olivella* shell beads that were manufactured on Santa Cruz Island and used for monetary exchange. The name “Chumash” is an Anglicized version of the name for Santa Cruz Island, *mičumaš*, which means “shell-bead makers” (e.g., Arnold, ed., *The Origins of a Pacific Coast Chiefdom*, 2001; Blackburn *December’s Child*, 1975).

9 For more examples of the author’s shell, rock, feather, and beach glass jewelry, see https://www.etsy.com/shop/Mythicstrands/items.

10 Men, who are generally less inclined to wear necklaces, often manage to find other ways to display these ornaments: a musician friend hung his beach-stone guitar pendant on a lamp switch; my Hinduism professor draped his shell and stone elephant pendant over an altar.