Gary Snyder is a poet. In 1975, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his collection *Turtle Island*. The book is a vessel which carries themes of nature, love, possession, and many other themes that connect man to the larger Turtle Island that is North America. *Turtle Island* is worthy of being read because of that bridge it builds between the natural world and the individual; in Snyder’s own words: “The poems speak of place, and the energy-pathways that sustain life” (Snyder, Introductory Note). This essay will examine and explain, in my chosen voice, the poems from the first section, *Manzanita*, and their significances.

**Anasazi**

The purpose, the plea of the whole collection is to have humans “hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island,” (Introductory Note) a call to meditation on the history and formation of self. To evoke this, Snyder entitles the first poem “Anasazi,” a word translated to “ancient ones.” The Anasazi were a Neolithic people whose dominion in the American southwest lasted around one thousand years (Childs). They made their homes in seemingly impenetrable rock cliffs. Those cliffs made the Anasazi culture, the “smell of bats. / the flavor of sandstone / grit on the tongue.” (Snyder 3). Snyder seems to desire that history, that richness of labor true, and though he concedes the tiresome work, he reminds the reader of relief, the “trickling streams in hidden canyons / under the cold rolling desert” (3).
The Way West, Underground

In the next poem, “The Way West, Underground,” Snyder crafts a worldliness that retains personal description and intimate detail. The days of the American northwest are heterodoxically described, days of “split-cedar / smoked salmon” (4) and a family of bears, who seem to be just as human as the intended audience, or perhaps the audience is unaccustomed to coastal poetry “where blackberry brambles / ramble in the burns.” It is a song. It is a song of foraging and gathering; and to gather, it is useful to travel. Thus, Snyder takes me personally to Japan, to the Ainu and Gilyak, to the Orient “long before China” (4). Need I know what the Ainu and Gilyak be to know that there is a greater existence wrapped around the iron and silica and sandstone? Need I have been bathed in Finnish fashion to be bathed in description? Surely not, for it is the essence of “netting, trapping, bathing, / singing holding hands” (5) that suggests companionship. The final line is “Underground” (5), and Snyder qualifies it with the image of an appendage, a hand or foot, blackened from traipsing the globe, with swirls. It is the art of a time long passed, long buried, yet still intrinsic to humanity.

The Dead by the Side of the Road

In “The Dead by the Side of the Road,” Gary Snyder moves on from existential history to the dealings of mankind, a sober and unflinching perspective of animalian death. Roads are the paths of humans, and it is by these paths that humans kill. Snyder
remarks on a hawk, skunk, fawn, ringtail, and doe—all killed on the human path (7). But all are used, just as the first nations might have used the bodies. Upon reflecting on the dead, Snyder’s anonymous narrator prays “to their spirits. Ask them to bless us” (8). He believes in souls, even those of animals, and he trusts in the efficacy of spiritual petition. This too seems to draw the audience into their selves; it reminds of “our ancient solidarity” (Introductory Note).

**I Went into the Maverick Bar**

Gary Snyder longs for Turtle Island, but he pities America. “I Went into the Maverick Bar” recounts Snyder’s interaction with the artificial world. In New Mexico, he “drank double shots of bourbon / backed with beer,” where cowboys horsed around, and lovebirds danced as though it were “the fifties” (9). “America—your stupidity. / I could almost love you again” pines Snyder, a man too disillusioned to return to the oil-fueled grubbery of the Union. He returns to himself, “to the real work, to / ‘What is to be done.’” (9). His work is a different union, a holy union like that of a tree and soil. It feeds from the ground, roots sap nutrients from the past, and it grows upward: “What is to be done” (9).

**No Matter, Never Mind**

Not all the poems possess the dexterous descriptors of “Maverick Bar” or “Dead.” Indeed “No Matter, Never Mind” strips away externalities in favor of rawness. It is a genealogy. “The Father is the Void / The Wife Waves / / Their Child is Matter,” (11) is
the beginning of things. But life has not begun yet, not until "Matter makes it with his mother" (11). This daughter, Life, comes from Jungian non-animus, Matter, and the antithesis—Mother Waves. For from matter nothing comes, unless it complements and assumes the periodicity of oceanic movement (and certainly Snyder admired the sea west of Oregon). There is no polluting incestuity, only sacred begetting, which is to birth of the Mind. The voice of Snyder, as the voice of myself, is formed from the matter, the synapses of the mind delicately sewn with rhythm as Mother Waves. But in somber acquiescence, not to be mistaken for nihilism, it is true that Father Void comprises half of all of the earliest identity of self. It is the mother who allows for life, the father merely conjugates to permit the existence of matter, though it is still important. Despite this, though, the reader is left grappling with why Snyder would entitle this "No Matter, Never Mind."

The Bath

"The Bath" is a foreign scene. It is the depiction of three familial humans washing unabashedly together in a sauna. It is the pensive conclusion of possession, and perhaps one of the unseemliest poems to me. Gary washes his son Kai, and they two become close (12), and the question is "is this our body?" (12). Then "Masa comes in, letting fresh cool air / sweep down from the door / a deep sweet breath" (12), a manifestation or inspiration for the Mother Waves from "No Matter, Never Mind." She too helps wash the boy, and Gary indicates another semblance of possession, remarking on "the body of my
lady, the winding valley spine” (12), and he even goes so far as to “reach through [the space between the thighs]” (13) and hold her, another strange act of possession. But though the action seems a statement, Snyder asks again, “is this our body?” (13) as though he still requires affirmation from his wife. The fourth stanza finds Gary and Kai Snyder “sucking milk from this our body” (13), and Gary describes it as “mother’s joy” (13) but never seems to let the mother speak. He realizes, “this our body” (13), not a statement yet, merely an onomastic conclusion. The focus shifts from bathing to nascence as Gary describes “Kai’s little scrotum” (13) and the “seed still tucked away, that moved from us to him” (13). Gary seems to marvel at the power of life to move throughout beings, to move the years of genetic history through two sexual partners and then into the one “emerging” (13) son. Now it is a statement: “this is our body” (13). And Gary’s possessive mind works again in describing how the mother belongs to the boys Kai and Gen, and how they belong to the mother who passes “her sons to other women” (14). The body grows larger than humans though; it becomes “the cloud across the sky. The windy pines. / the trickle gurgle in the swamplike meadow” and the humans embrace the forces of nature and climate that caress the Turtle Island. The body does not mean a man or woman or boy anymore. “This is our body. Drawn up crosslegged by the flames / drinking icy water / hugging babies, kissing bellies” (14) could refer to Masa or even Gary, but it is about the unity and playfulness that define a multifunctional, multigenerational human. And that very human is “laughing on the Great Earth” (14).
**Spel Against Demons**

Gary Snyder is angry here. His poem is not actually a spell, but the words are designed to ward off evil practices. He is perfectly clear in admonishing the “release of Demonic Energies in the name of / the People” (16) because the People are beings of nature and goodness, and Snyder detests corruption. Obviously “messing with blood sacrifice” (16) is also out of the question because that would involve mistreating the gifts given by Turtle Island. And though Gary Snyder is angry in this poem, it is not the “stifling self-indulgence in anger in the name of / Freedom” (16) that he possesses; rather, he cries out in hope that mankind would no longer be self-serving creatures. He argues that we must be like wolves, and though wolves practice seemingly violent acts, they have a certain “self-restraint” (16). Snyder laments “aimless executions and slaughterings” (16) that come from human hands, for while man needs eat, he needs not destroy entire ecosystems to make way for factory farms that fatten coffers more than the hungry. It is not enough to be powerful, the key element is wisdom, for “Knowledge is the secret of Transformation!” (16). To create a brighter day, a more harmonious existence between man and nature, Snyder decries false insurrectionists and demons.

The poem terminates with the shout of Smokey the Bear:

```
NAMAH SAMANTAH VAJRANAM CHANDA
MAHAROSHANA
SPHATAYA HUM TRAKA HAM MAM (17)
```
This translates as “I DEDICATE MYSELF TO THE UNIVERSAL DIAMOND BE THIS RAGING FURY BE DESTROYED” (Snyder), and exemplifies the deeply spiritual dimension in which Snyder thinks. His prayer and incantation are to invoke Smokey the Bear that he might avenge humanity and exact some toll on the evildoers.

**Control Burn and The Great Mother**

A long time ago, people indigenous to the pacific northwest would “burn out the brush every year” (19) as a way of cleansing the land and renewing the flora. For someone so in tune with nature, perhaps Snyder views it also as a means of renewing oneself, a way of burning off the stupor that accumulates. The second stanza introduces the manzanita, a “fine bush in its right” (19), and it releases its seeds under incendiary or excretory circumstances (19). Snyder reveals his desire to “help [his] land / with a burn. a hot clean / burn” (19). Whether he wants to purge his area of actual ruffage, I know not; perhaps he again refers to a cleansing from demonic and vile treachery that was the great afflictor in “Spel Against Demons.” Either way, Snyder wants life and culture like how the natives practiced, saying, “it would be more / like, / when it belonged to the Indians” (19), but his use of visual language accentuates a final word, spaced twice below the penultimate line. “Before” (19) is the goal, the terminal paradise. Before what? Before the loggers, back when it was cutting; before factory farming, back when it was food to nourish, not profit; before the corrupting non-Zen ideologies, back when it was nature and love for Mother Earth.
And speaking of Mother Earth, who is it? For Snyder she is the judge. “The Great Mother” is a short poem, its message direct. She contemplates and weighs the deeds of the living. Snyder warns the audience that they might be watched, that “Some she looks at their hands / To see what sort of savages they were” (20). The hands that burn the land are not evil. The hands that burn their brethren are.

The Call of the Wild

One of the most heartbreaking poems of *Manzanita*, ”The Call of the Wild” is Snyder’s reminder of how Americans stray from the essence of the great North American continent: wilderness. The first passage is the story of loss. A rancher, miner, logger will shut down the howling coyote. It is an inconvenience, but a quick call to the “Government / Trapper” (21) will solve the problem. But doing so will cause Snyder’s “sons [to] lose this / Music they have just started / To love” (21). His heart hurts because he knows his children will be denied the precious sound of a beast in moonlight.

The second section is less clear. It seems to serve as a setting-marker. “The ex acid-heads from the cities” have abandoned metropolises for the “forests of North America, / The land of Coyote and Eagle” (21). They are naïve and future-facing, sleeping in “Geodesic domes, that / Were stuck like warts / In the woods” (21). Snyder chastises their disingenuity, for they shut out the coyote and “sold their virgin cedar trees...To a logger / Who told them, / / ‘Trees are full of bugs’” (22). His displeasure
comes from the fact that these former addicts have “converted to Guru or Swami” (21) yet exemplify no sage compassion for the earth. They are sell-outs.

With anarchoprimitivist disposition, Snyder uses the third passage of “The Call of the Wild” as a complaint against the government. They “wage the war all-out” (22) which violates Snyder’s belief that Smokey the Bear will avenge. The government is anti-communist, anti-bug, anti-defeat of any kind. This driving hatred pushes them to “bomb...Day after day, across the planet” (22) which in turn blinds and deafens the innocent birds and splinters tree trunks, casting deer guts across the blast zone (22). He fears for the fact that this is not a war against a specific demographic. It is “a war against earth” (23), and the lachrymose conclusion is so:

envoy

I would like to say
Coyote is forever
Inside you.

But it’s not true. (23)

The prophecy says that there will come a time when the wilderness within will be destroyed by the warfare without. The American government has declared war on its home, and it will wipe out the howls of yore and replace them with the crackle of explosives.

**Prayer for the Great Family**

Even in the face of governmental oppression, Snyder gives thanks. His prayer is an intimate choice. An examination of each thanksgiving reveals seven natural pleasures.
First, he thanks Mother Earth for “her soil: rich, rare, and sweet” (24) because it provides a means of growth. Then he gives “gratitude to Plants, the sun-facing light changing leaf” (24) for their steadfastness, citing how they stand “still through wind / and rain” (24). He then thanks the wind, showing “gratitude to Air” because of the way it enters lungs and permits them sing in “clear spirit” (24). But the body cannot solely be nourished by air, so Snyder thanks animals as equals who teach “secrets, / freedoms, and ways: who share with us their milk” (24). Next, he thanks “Water: clouds, lakes, rivers, glaciers” for all those manifestations that create a diverse and beautiful world. And he gives “gratitude to the Sun” (24) for its strength in permeating forests, mists, and even caves; he is grateful for the warmth and assurance it provides (24). Finally, Snyder thanks the larger expanse, the “Great Sky / who holds billions of stars” and transcends “all powers, and thoughts / and yet is within us” (25). He establishes a personal connection of love, harking to the earlier genealogy of “No Matter, Never Mind” and calls the Great Sky “Grandfather Space. / The Mind is his Wife” (25). While this whole ‘poem’ sounds like Gary Snyder, it actually takes after a Mohawk prayer (25), and this demonstrates again his desire for Indian times.

Source

“Source” is, like “Prayer for the Great Family,” a meditation. With these words, Snyder ponders the growths of rock, trees, shrubs. The Manzanitas are shelters “with birds and woodrats underneath” (26), and because Snyder believes the animals and
humans are in essence the same, it is his conviction that the Manzanitas and all matter of natural growths are the homes of mankind, not the clusters of smog-choked duplexes and flats. He dreams of when there were no Spaniards (26) back before disease and chauvinists ravaged the countryside. It comes to night, and there is little left to wonder. The only thing left for his mind to do is to rejoice on being one with nature, drinking deeply “that black light” (26). To do so is to allow himself not to exist in nature, but to let nature exist in him, to let the black purity flood his body and meld as it was in the beginning of time.

Manzanita

The eponymous poem “Manzanita” is another scene of grace. It represents the passage of time. It takes place before dawn, at “moon-set” (27), and once again, though animals are not anthropomorphized per se, they become level to humans. “The coyotes / weave medicine songs / dream nets—spirit baskets” (27) that evoke stellar soundings called “milky way music” (27). They dance about and sing, coyotes unashamed to be true and favored by Snyder. He remarks on the simple richness of nature, the pines made “gold-purple” (27) in the tender yet unwavering rays of morning light. The sun somehow exists independent of time, its power not in moving day from night but rather painting different hues with different shades in intervals designed by humans. Animals awaken, “a woodpecker / Drums and echoes / Across the still meadow” and once again Snyder slips into the music of wild, the most ancient beats and rhythms that somehow
unite under the cover of darkness that they might be seen joined in broad daylight. Even a man cannot full interrupt this divine congregation, and his arrow lands in a “smooth red twisty manzanita bough” (27). A cursory eye would see a gangly creation stuck in a cluster “of hard green berries” (27), but Snyder’s thoughtful gaze amplifies the berries into quaint “little apples” (27). The point is not the fruit though, but that in the symphony of nature, even a seeming triangle can conjure the light fantastic, fit for tripping.

Charms

This is the final poem of Manzanita. “Charms” is about beauty. It is a story about purity, unadorned, body. The story of love and beauty starts at “naked or half-naked women” (28). Snyder was a proponent of polyamory, in tearing down the walls that confine a singular man and singular woman, and so for him, the open form of multiple women is an invitation to enchantment (28). The “curve of the back or arm, / as a dance” induce a certain wonder, perhaps even lust. It is a primal urge for companionship, even if temporary, that allows Snyder to especially feel that deep rootedness in nature. Most animals do not exhibit monogamous relationships, and instead they follow whatever sort of mate can best ‘charm’ them. Snyder himself admits he “could be devastated and athirst with longing / for a lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse” (28) if they so much as employ “some toss of the whiskers / or grace-full wave of the tail” (28). There is no other reason except that an action like those “enchants, and thus / / CHARMS” (28). This is a
rawness unseen in many of his other poems from the *Manzanita* (though “The Bath” does contain or at least suggest some common elements of sexuality).

This was not supposed to be a critique, but my views are nonetheless present. This is my voice sharing the story passed along by the voice of Gary Snyder, poet, who so received the story from the matter and mind and waves and void and space and all other cosmic beings. It is valuable reading if one desires insight into an earthling, not just a man, but someone of the world.

Note, sections of quoted text with abnormal spacing are arranged so as to preserve the style of the text created by Snyder himself.
