

PART ONE



DEPARTURES

A landscape is a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements, and narratives. It is a cultural code for living, an anonymous “text” to be read and interpreted, a writing pad for inscription, a scape of and for human praxis, a mode of dwelling and a mode of experiencing. It is invested with powers, capable of being organized and choreographed . . . and is always sedimented with human significances. It is story and telling, temporality and remembrance.

—CHRISTOPHER TILLEY, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*

Pilgrimage is born of desire and belief. The desire is for solution to problems of all kinds that arise within the human situation. The belief is that somewhere beyond the known world there exists a power that can make right the difficulties that appear so insoluble and intractable here and now. All one must do is journey.

—E. ALAN MORINIS, *Sacred Journeys*

The correlate of the migratory condition of [modern humans’] experience of society and self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of “home.” It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear. It has therefore engendered its own nostalgias—nostalgias, that is, for a condition of “being at home” in society, with oneself and, ultimately, in the universe.

—PETER BERGER ET AL., *The Homeless Mind*

Perhaps the world resists being reduced to mere resource because it is—not mother/matter/mutter—but coyote, a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meaning and bodies. . . . Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turn on revisioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse.

—DONNA HARAWAY, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

ONE

Power and Desire in Earth's Tangled Web



One of the defining narratives of Western culture has been a story of power and of knowledge: that science and technology—the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and its technical application toward human welfare—have established humanity as the reigning power on this Earth. Though this power might not always be equitably shared nor wisely deployed, it is a power, so the story goes, that has been harnessed by human ingenuity from the forces of nature. It is the power of the steam engine, the turbine, the atom, and the silicon chip (and, aiding in the circulation of all of these, the power of the dollar, pound, or yen).

It seems paradoxical that some of those more privileged within this economy of power—relatively educated and, on a global scale, well-off Westerners—betray doubts about this techno-humanist project. Millennial times encourage such doubts: from wide-screen tornadoes, earthbound asteroids, and extraterrestrial invasions, to the real-life escap(ad)es of sects like Heaven's Gate, to the more common lament over the loss of “that old-time religion,” the idea that humans are subject to the whims of a higher power, or that we must answer to it for the misuse of our own power, is widespread.

In one of its more recent guises, this power takes on the form of the Earth itself, the body of a being increasingly known by its feminized, ancient Greek name Gaia. This book is about one of the responses to this particular form of power, and about those people who seek out places where one might reconnect with it, feel the pulse of its energy, and allow it to guide one's actions in the direction of some sort of reconcordance of a world gone askew. Many of these people consider themselves part of an emerging New Age of spiritual and ecological awareness. They share a desire to communicate with a numinous, extrahuman Other—a realm of power, meaning, and intelligence found somewhere beyond the boundaries of the ego, and be-

yond the confines of a rationalist modern worldview. This desire is felt to be part of a broader societal imperative—a refusal of the disenchanting consequences of secular, scientific-industrial modernity, and an attempt to develop a culture of reenchantment, a new planetary culture that would dwell in harmony with the spirit of the Earth.

This desire for contact with an extrahuman Other, if it is taken seriously, raises a series of questions: about the *reality* of the Other, the different *kinds* of Others imagined or experienced to be real (such as gods and goddesses, spirits, angels, or extraterrestrials), and the possible forms of relationship between human individuals and such nonhuman intelligences. In their most stark formulation, these concerns revolve around the question: is the Other encountered by these Gaian pilgrims *real*, or is it simply an empty screen onto which they project their own fantasies and unconscious desires? A religious believer would typically answer this question by affirming the first possibility—that these Others are *quite* real (and may proceed to make significant distinctions between them, for instance, between benevolent and maleficent ones), while the majority of secular intellectuals would likely deny their reality as such, explaining them instead as wish-fulfillment fantasies or useful social constructs at best.

I will stake out a third position in this book, one that avoids the sterile, as I see it, dichotomies that underlie the terms of the question—dichotomies which separate the *human* from the *nonhuman*, and the *real* from the *illusory*. My premise, rather, is that both of the opposite poles of these paired dichotomies emerge out of an interactive web that is tangled and blurred at its very origins. This is a tangled web within which the world is ever being created—shaped and constituted through the imaginative, discursive, spatial, and material practices of humans reflectively immersed within an active and animate, more-than-human world. It is a tangled web of selfhood and otherness, identities and differences, relations both natural and cultural; a web through which circulate meanings, images, desires, and power itself (the power to act, to imagine, to define, impose, and resist). I will argue and try to demonstrate that the Earth—actual places, landscapes, and geographies—and imagination—the ways we conceive, narrate, and “image” the world—are thoroughly intertwined within this tangled web of power- and desire-laden relations. And I will suggest a few ways in which we might begin to reimagine our lives, and the landscapes which surround us, from within a recognition of this messy entanglement.¹

In a sense, the question that underlies all of what follows, is this: If the Earth speaks to us, as Donna Haraway suggests in one of the epigraphs that opens this study—if it speaks to us not in any language familiar to linguists, but as a kind of “coding trickster with whom we must learn [once again?] to converse”—how are we to interpret what it says? How, amid the tangled politics of living in places where the Earth seems to speak *louder* and *clearer* than elsewhere, are we to make sense of its speech?

INTERPRETING CONTESTED LANDSCAPES

Making sense of the world, and of the places and landscapes in which we live, is basic to human experience. Philosophers call the art and science of making sense hermeneutics—an allusion to the messages delivered by the Greek god Hermes, the meanings of which were never self-evident but had to be carefully unpacked and interpreted. This study aims to make sense of two landscapes, distinct and unique places on the surface of this Earth, by providing hermeneutic readings of the social, cultural, material, and ecological forces which interact to shape them, and by burrowing into the cultural images and discourses produced by those groups of people who live in close interaction with those landscapes.² Much of my focus will be on the *interpretive* moment in their production: their cultural construction through stories and place-myths, symbols and representations, images and tropes, all of which emerge out of and, in turn, shape the practical and repeated encounters of residents and visitors with the features of the given landscapes. To this task I bring the tools of the social scientist: specifically, those of participant-observer ethnography, hermeneutic phenomenology, social and environmental history, and cultural-constructivist discourse analysis.

At the same time, this book provides a study of the geographics of the sacred in the New Age and earth spirituality movements. By *geographics* I mean the ways the surface of the Earth (*geo*) is “written” (*graphein*), inscribed, and constituted, in discourse, imagination, and practice, and how in turn the Earth constitutes or inscribes *itself* into the ideas and activities of people. The two places on which I focus, Glastonbury and Sedona, are among the most widely celebrated of sites believed to be sacred by followers of New Age and earth spirituality. As a result of their popularity they have become vigorously contested between competing interpretive communities. These local struggles, in my view, represent intensified versions of broader cultural clashes—struggles between competing worldviews and notions of nature, land, place, and relations between humans and nature. As large numbers of people perceive society to be in the midst of a thoroughgoing crisis, an ecological, cultural, spiritual, and political crisis of an unprecedentedly global scale, attempts are made to reconceive the myths or master stories of society to respond to this crisis. New Agers and ecospiritualists reach out *beyond* modernity's dominant metanarratives in their efforts to make sense of the world and to facilitate its transformation. They invoke seemingly nonmodern sources, which range from the creatively anachronistic (pagan folk traditions, premodern ethnocultural identities, re-creations of ancient Goddess-worshipping cultures) to the more audaciously speculative, prophetic, and fantastic (alleged extraterrestrial contacts, free-wheeling decipherments of Mayan codices, psychic revelations of ancient civilizations like Atlantis, and so on). They attempt to ground themselves

within real or imagined “traditions” thought to be older than, deeper than, and thus more universally rooted than those of the modern world.

This search for new or *amodern* (Latour 1990) stories with which to build an alternative metanarrative, casts its net closer to home as well in its quest for interpretive resources. In particular, it draws upon scientific ideas that are thought to be compatible, such as Gaia theory and organismic or holographic conceptions of nature. All of these are brought to bear on the actual places and landscapes where the “culture of reenchantment” attempts to take root. As New Agers and earth spiritualists move to such pilgrimage centers, these various representations and beliefs about nature, landscape, and history clash with those of other people living there, and struggles develop over what to do and how to live at these sites.

Ultimately, however, the newcomers’ values come up against the two predominant, legitimizing value imperatives of our time: the epistemological imperatives of *science*, and the economic imperatives of *transnational capitalism*. The latter, in particular, imposes a monetarization and rationalization onto space and time which is antithetical to certain of the values of New Age and ecospiritual culture. As I will show, the responses which emerge out of the tensions and clashes between these are predominantly the following. With the first (science), there is a range of interactions and negotiations which take place between science and its popular consumption: these include New Age challenges to science, which may take the form of outright rejection, but more frequently involve the selective appropriation of science, or at least of its language and its aura, combined with calls for an alternative or new-paradigm science. With the second (capitalism), there may be attempts to develop an alternative economy of sorts, but more frequently—and usually more successfully—there is the development of a tourist-based service industry catering to the needs of tourists, pilgrims, and spiritual seekers. These attempts in turn affect the nonhuman landscape.

The questions I will raise and try to answer in the process include the following. (1) What accounts for the attraction, or spiritual magnetism (Preston 1992), these specific landscapes hold for believers and practitioners of New Age and ecospirituality? In what lies their charisma or potency? (2) How do these landscapes become so highly charged with a richness of conflicting cultural meanings? Specifically, how are the landscapes themselves—their component features, numinous qualities, and active ecological agents—woven into the activities of diverse groups of people? (3) What are the differences and similarities between the alternative values and interpretations of these landscapes represented by New Age and ecospiritual beliefs and, on the other hand, the values and interpretations held by the other cultural communities connected to them (for instance, evangelical Christians, real estate developers, and others)? How do these differences and conflicts play themselves out in the practice and politics of everyday life? (4) And finally, to what extent do these subcultural conceptions present a vi-

able alternative to contemporary Western society's dominant ideology of nature—nature seen primarily as resource, property, and commodity? Do these ideas and practices facilitate or enable possibilities for developing counterpractices and spaces of resistance to the commodification of the Earth? Or do they merely reflect and perpetuate processes within the dominant society, such as the globalization of consumer capitalism, the replacement of resource extraction industries by tourism and “disneyfication,” and the commodification of spirituality or of environmental concern?

THE NEW AGE AND EARTH SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENTS

The concept of the New Age arises from the belief or hope that the present time constitutes a historical turning point inaugurating an era of ecological harmony, personal and planetary integration, and spiritual fulfillment. Over the last thirty years, the term has been used to describe a heterogeneous spectrum of ideas, beliefs, organizations, personalities, and practices, many explicitly religious, others less so, all of which together make up a large and decentralized subculture. Without stretching the term too far, New Age spirituality or, more broadly, New Age *culture* as a whole, can be seen to include the ideas and practices of several million North Americans and Europeans, affecting many others less directly.³ While drawing its principal inspiration largely from sources outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, New Age spirituality reworks mainstream ideas into new forms. Its defining characteristics include belief in the primacy of personal transformation; an optimistic and evolutionary (though millenarian) outlook on the future; a monistic and immanent notion of the divine (which brings it closer to Hinduism, Christian Science, or belief in a Star Wars–like universal “force,” than to mainstream Western traditions); and a do-it-yourself form of epistemological individualism, whereby personal experience, drawn upon an eclectic and syncretic array of sources, serves as a more important locus for determining what is true than the authority of custom, scripture, or ecclesiastical power.

New Age culture, however, is neither easily identified nor circumscribed. It includes people who identify themselves with a variety of specific religious or spiritual traditions, as well as tens of thousands of more eclectic seekers and dabblers, self-styled gurus, and conspicuous consumers drifting through the contemporary spiritual marketplace. Though my gaze will be limited to the North American and British contexts, New Age culture has increasingly become international, affecting local traditions and giving rise to hybrid forms of religious and spiritual practice and identity.⁴ Moreover, the new and alternative spiritualities which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s have proliferated and diversified to the point where significant differences have developed between their related streams. Among these streams are two which will figure prominently within these pages. The first is a broad and loose grouping of orientations which I will be calling *earth spirituality* or

ecospirituality (I will use these terms more or less interchangeably, though they are not, strictly speaking, identical). Earth spirituality overlaps with, but is in some ways quite distinct from, the mainstream of the New Age movement.⁵ In this category I would include the women's spirituality movement, the ecopaganism and pantheistic nature mysticism of many radical environmentalists, the whole-earth beliefs of the neotribal "Rainbow family," feminist and environmentalist revisionings of mainstream religious traditions (such as Matthew Fox's and Thomas Berry's Creation-centered Christianity), and various forms of neopaganism and Native reconstructionism and revivalism, such as Wicca, Celtic and Druidic paganism, neoshamanic and Native American forms of spirituality, and syncretistic Afro-Caribbean religions.⁶ Proponents of contemporary earth spirituality understand the divine or sacred to be *immanent* within the natural world, not transcendent and separate from it, and speak of the Earth itself as being an embodiment, if not *the* embodiment, of divinity.

Markedly different in its emphases is the second stream which will figure prominently here, and which I will call *New Age millenarianism* or *ascensionism*. This more otherworldly stream has been more closely identified with the term "New Age" in recent years, and has become particularly well known through the growing body of literature by authors who allegedly "channel" information from "discarnate" and highly evolved spirits of supposedly ancient or extraterrestrial origin.⁷ Ascensionism reflects a more dualistic (or neognostic) cosmology, identifying "forces of Light" aligned against those forces which would constrain humanity's spiritual potential. This evolutionary potential of humanity is often modeled on the motif of "ascension" to higher levels or dimensions of existence; and ascensionist literature makes frequent use of quasi-scientific language to describe the "higher frequencies," "vibrations," "light quotients" and "energy bodies," energy shifts and DNA changes, that are said to be associated with this epochal shift.⁸

Earth spirituality and ascensionism can be seen as two sides of a loosely unified spiritual-cultural movement: one seeks to rekindle the connection with Earth's power directly, while the other looks for wisdom beyond our planet's weakened frame, but both aim to challenge, largely through spiritual means, the status quo of late modernity. Despite their differences (which may be very significant for believers), the two streams overlap and blend, in practice, within the amorphous culture of New Age and alternative spirituality. Sharing roots in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and the spiritual experiences of the Baby Boom generation, they draw on a common language shaped by, among other things, the importation of Eastern thought in the 1960s (notions of karma, reincarnation, and so on), the personal-growth orientation of humanistic and transpersonal psychology and of the holistic health movement, the popular ecological imagery of the last thirty years, especially that of Gaia and "earth mysteries," and a propensity

to absorb, reshape, and reinvent traditions to suit individual spiritual needs. The latter characteristic has led many scholars to speculate that New Age spirituality may, in large part, be a response to the increasingly globalized and polyglot culture of postmodern capitalism (e.g., Lyon 1993; Ross 1991; Mills 1994; P. Johnson 1995; Bruce 1996; Heelas 1993, 1996; Kubiak 1999).

HETEROTOPIC SPACES OF POSTMODERN CAPITALISM

The idea that the modern era has shifted or is mutating into a postmodern one has been much debated. *Postmodernity* is said to signify a new historical epoch marked by an exhaustion of the metanarratives of Euro-American modernity—the belief in the linear forward march of objective Reason, technological and social Progress, and their unified subject, Humanity—and by corresponding shifts in historical consciousness, artistic sensibility, and individual and collective identity. The Eurocentric modernist worldview, it is claimed, has been decentered by a babel of alternative discourses, at the same time as capitalism, the world's reigning economic force, has mutated into much more flexible and transnational, decentralized and post-Fordist forms.⁹ Whether these changes warrant the label *postmodernity* or are better captured by such terms as *late modernity*, *reflexive modernity*, or *advanced* or *transnational consumer capitalism*, is a point that is much debated by sociologists; however, it could be said that processes of postmodernization are occurring all around us, at different rates in different places.¹⁰

Postmodernization involves changes in political economy (the decline of state authority, the transnationalization of economic and financial capital, a new international division of labor and gentrification on a global scale), in culture and identity (globalization, fragmentation, and the compression of time and space), and an ever greater saturation of social space by communications and information technologies. The latter developments result, some argue, in a decreasing ability to distinguish the “real” world from the “hyperreality” of image and spectacle, simulation and model (Baudrillard 1983). They also lead to a “society of generalized communication” in which cultural differences have become much more visible (Vattimo 1992). Internationally, relations between once colonial or imperial societies and former colonies, or, more generally, between the global rich and poor, have altered. Tourism, for instance, has become a generalized mode of being, whereby the world's rich consume the Earth's cultures, landscapes, and monuments, while the poor rush to package and market themselves for the tourist's gaze (MacCannell 1992; Urry 1992). At the same time, the growth of far-flung diasporas, the flight of refugee groups, and the nomadic circulation of migrant workers has contributed to a “reverse movement of peoples from formerly remote regions of the world into the centers of wealth and power” (MacCannell 1992:1), with all this movement resulting in an increasingly hybridized and polyglot world culture.

Meanwhile, class, nationality, and other markers of identity have been fragmented, and, in their place, social relations have become saturated with shifting cultural signs and symbols (Lash and Urry 1994). Among these are the markers of ethnicity, race, and religion, but their meanings are at once eroding, mutating, and melding, as “human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate and subvert one another” (Clifford 1988:22). The cultural style of postmodernity becomes that of a global eclecticism, with the “whole of mankind,” in philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s words, becoming “an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend—visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in Tivoli of Copenhagen?” (in P. Johnson 1995:163). Or as Jean-François Lyotard puts it, “one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games” (1993:42). Postmodern lifestyles in turn produce postmodern personalities: fragmented, multiple and contradictory identities pursuing schizoid intensities. If in modernity, as Marx and Engels described it, “all that is solid melts into air,” then in postmodernity even the individual self becomes, in Lukács’s words, “kaleidoscopic and changeable,” “nefarious and evasive,” “transcendentally homeless” (1971). For neoconservatives nostalgic over the (real or imagined) meanings of an earlier age, postmodernity represents the *intensification* of modernity accompanied by the unleashing, to the furthest extents, of narcissism, desire, instinct, impulse, hyperindividualism, and hedonism (e.g., Bell 1976). For the traditional left, meanwhile, this latest phase of capitalist expansion only intensifies the gap between a wealthy global elite and a growing and increasingly marginalized and powerless underclass.

Neither celebrating nor bemoaning these developments, sociologists Philip Mellor and Chris Schilling argue that the centuries following the Protestant Reformation have been “accompanied by a shrinkage in the social spaces filled by transpersonal meaning systems.” As natural and social worlds have become emptied of their previous meanings—as, for instance, a “sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and ultimately the astronaut”—privatized values take over, leading to a growing sense of “ontological insecurity,” a sense of disorder and discontinuity in the events and experiences of everyday life (1994:34). Understandably, there are countermovements—fundamentalist religious groups, ethnic nationalisms, new religious and ecological movements—all expressing a cultural desire to reestablish a sense of communal and universal foundations. Proponents of New Age and earth spirituality respond to modernity’s perceived failure by seeking some sort of reconnection with the Earth: they feel compelled to look beyond the images and commodities of popular culture in search of the *real* nature, the *real* sacred, for hints that the Earth speaks and that gods are in our midst. But these hoped-for new foundations are proposed in an arena which is increasingly that of the marketplace, a

realm in which “tradition,” the “sacred,” “nature,” the “good life,” have all become signs in a play of “staged authenticities” (MacCannell 1992). Privileged tourists may set out from their safe abodes to explore the world of their perceived others, seeking signs of some sort of authenticity, but those others learn to resist the categories imposed on them, or play them with a nod and a wink. Postmodernity reflects this mirror play of images and desires, this fragmented and deterritorialized landscape within which new identities and places are being constructed and contested, and where the very notion of authenticity has become a sales pitch, a joke, or a site of cultural or ethnic strife.

In this globalized and polyglot, spatially and temporally compressed world, physical landscapes have themselves become more fragmented, contradictory, contested, and indeterminate in their meanings. Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopia* offers an apt metaphor for conceptualizing the kinds of spaces I will be describing and interpreting in this book. Heterotopias, for Foucault, are spaces which exist in relation to other social spaces “in such a way as to suspend, neutralize or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected or mirrored by themselves” (1986:24). They are spaces of discontinuity and heterogeneity, bringing together meanings from incommensurable cultural worlds. Carnivals, brothels, prisons, gardens, museums, cemeteries, shopping malls, amusement parks, cruise ships, festival sites—such heterotopic spaces simultaneously mirror, challenge, and overturn the meanings of those features to which they refer in the surrounding society.¹¹ In a more optimistic reading of Foucault's argument, heterotopias constitute spaces of resistance, insofar as they resist and undermine any attempts to encompass or dominate them within totalizing forms of “power/knowledge.” In heterotopic space, “the common ground on which [. . .] meetings are possible has itself been destroyed” (Foucault 1973:xvi). Inasmuch as the dominant formations at present are those which serve a capitalist economy, heterotopic “counterspaces” can be defined as those spaces and spatial practices which resist or disrupt the nexus of commodification, resourcification, and privatization. The sacralization of Sedona and Glastonbury can, in this sense, be seen as attempts to create such heterotopias of resistance.

On the other hand, with the blurring of such dichotomies as sacred-profane, nature-culture, urban-rural, private-public, and commercial-noncommercial, heterotopic space is that which is neither mere commodity nor noncommodity—it is both of these and none, including as it does a surplus of contradictory meanings and practices which cannot be brought into a unifying synthesis. Heterotopic space, in this sense, is “the geography that bears the stamp of our age and our thought—that is to say it is pluralistic, chaotic, designed in detail yet lacking universal foundations or principles, continually changing, linked by centerless flows of information; it is artificial, and marked by deep social inequalities” (Relph 1991:104–5). As ar-

gued by Baudrillard (1983), Jameson (1991), Hannigan (1998), and others, the heterotopic space par excellence of postmodernity may in this sense be the theme park (Disneyland), the fantasy city (Las Vegas), or the shopping-entertainment complex (West Edmonton Mall). Neither the red rocks of Sedona nor the green hills and waters of Glastonbury are quite as artificial and commodified as these kinds of spaces. Indeed, their construction as sacred, natural, and authentic would seem to pit them in opposition to the consumer-entertainment mythology of Hollywood and popular culture which is embodied by places like Disneyland and Las Vegas. Yet, as I will show, the sacralization of Glastonbury and Sedona—the attempt to shape them into sacred land haunted by the noble spirits of Indians, Celts, and mysterious others—has itself depended on a history of far-from-sacred pursuits: in Glastonbury, the machinations of power-hungry monarchs and competing ecclesiastical estates, the imaginative forgeries of monks, and the political agendas of romantic nationalists; and, in Sedona, the removal and extermination of Indians, the profiteering of agriculture, energy, and real estate industries, and the image machinery of Hollywood itself. The resulting mixture of desires and power plays has turned both into multivalent and conflict-ridden heterotopias. Far from being merely the emblems of a marginal but idyllic rurality surrounded by natural power, they are both firmly entwined within the cultural and political-economic circulations of advanced, postmodernizing capitalism.

Beneath the shifting flux of images which characterizes postmodernity, however, there are signs that “invented communities” based on shared meanings may still be possible. Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) argue that the transformations accompanying post-Fordism and transnational “disorganized capitalism” involve not only an increased mobility of circulating objects such as money, productive capital, and commodities; they also allow for an increasing reflexivity in social relations and identities. This reflexivity, they posit, could lead to the development of an informed society full of “new sociations,” not only the electronically mediated communities of like-minded Netizens, but also cosmopolitan communities centered around re-fashioned or reimagined places (such as the two which I will examine in this book). Within an increasingly homogenized global culture, then, there is a concurrent heterogenization (Appadurai 1990) and localization—ongoing attempts to redefine and reinvent specific places and to reposition them within contested and contradictory geographies of space. Places are remade for a variety of reasons: to attract flows of tourists and entrepreneurs, or to repel migrants and low-wage capital, but also to make them more livable and meaningful, however tenuous these meanings. Within this context of postmodernization and “glocalization” (Robertson 1995), New Age and earth spiritualities play a complex and ambivalent role in the places where they have grown. My intent will be to shed some light on the role they play, exploring their potential to contribute to an ecologically sensitized differentiation of places, spaces, landscapes, and communities.

PERSONAL STARTING POINTS

A Travel Tale

The long hot summer of 1988, when record-breaking temperatures across North America convinced many on that side of the Atlantic that global warming was real, I was a graduate student hitchhiking along the back roads of the British Isles. I had spent several weeks trekking across Ireland and Scotland and had turned in, tired and ill, for a few days' rest at a friend's home in London. When I set out again with only a vague idea of heading west, I hadn't expected it would turn into a sleepless, forty-hour zigzag across such a strange countryside. I say *strange* not because there is anything particularly unusual about south-central England. But these two days, the eve and the day of the summer solstice, introduced me to a different kind of landscape, a more diffuse and nomadic sort of subcultural geography which congealed according to its own curious logic.

I was picked up by a carload of young men heading for Stonehenge, the most celebrated and, at the same time, most commercially defiled ancient stone monument in Britain. But getting to "the stones" was not going to be easy this time of year. Since the early 1970s Stonehenge had been the scene for a People's Free Festival held every June, but by the mid-1980s this annual gathering of countercultural forces had somehow turned into a pitched battle between well-armed police troops and unarmed "hippies"—as they were still called by locals and the press—and the festival was officially banned. With a strong police presence surrounding the megalithic site this year, our vehicle joined what was to become a nearly mile-long convoy of semi-dilapidated cars and colorfully painted vans and buses snaking along the Wiltshire countryside. The convoy of self-styled travelers finally settled for the night on a country lane outside the town of Amesbury, then proceeded to party the way they imagined that their ancient forebears may once have done—with bonfires, music, diverse intoxicants, and general revelry.

In the hazy morning I set out again, accepting an unexpected lift to the larger but less popular stone circle at nearby Avebury. By evening I had arrived in the small town of Glastonbury, or, as its devotees would have it, the sacred Isle of Avalon. A Christian pilgrimage site of great repute in medieval times, Glastonbury has been rumored to be the burial place of King Arthur, the final destination and repository of the Holy Grail of Christ's blood, carried there allegedly by Joseph of Arimathea, and an ancient pre-Christian holy place. For some, it is even thought to be the center of a giant zodiacal earthwork carved thousands of years ago into the surrounding countryside, as well as a long-time pit stop for UFOs; and, with its famous Tor and its numerous springs, one can easily see how it might be taken for a place that was sacred to an ancient Earth Goddess.

On this night, a palpable energy filled the town's narrow streets and pubs,

as locals and visitors alike gathered to celebrate the solstice and to climb the Tor, the 520-foot conical hill that rises quixotically above the town and marks it as a *place apart* from the otherwise flat lowlands of central Somerset. Making my way up the windy hill, I passed by scattered bonfires re-sounding with the strumming of guitars and beating of bongos. Partway up, in a large clearing on one side of the Tor, a solemn ritual was being performed by a couple dozen berobed members of a contemporary Essene order. Finally I reached the broad, gently sloping summit, where well over a hundred people were gathered. The atmosphere was festive: guitars, drums, chanting, dancing, and several dogs running around, until, at a certain point, a large circle of bodies took shape and voices led its participants in a solstice rite. (All this appeared spontaneous enough to me, but not to a few of the more anarchistic revelers present, whose quirkily satirical sheep bleats — *maa-aaa, maa-aaa* — though ignored by the more devoted celebrants, indicated to me some of the diversity of this gathering.)

By dawn, a mist had surrounded the now quiet Tor and separated it from the town below, leaving the unmistakable impression that this was indeed a “blessed isle” located somewhere between the mundane world below and some mysterious Otherworld. Still drowsy, I sat and gazed out into the ocean of gray all around, the town far below, and the idea dawned on me that here — on this hill that may have been sacred to Christians, pagan Celts, and their more mysterious predecessors — the transcendently sky-directed religiosity of my own Greek Catholic upbringing was somehow being reconciled with the earthy and more pagan orientation of my subsequent intellectual searches. Here, it seemed to me, Earth and sky meet, and pagan and Christian, ancient and modern worlds, intermingle in some strange harmony. Nothing at all seemed out of place here: in the middle of my hitchhiker’s whirlwind, this was the eye of the storm.

Over a decade has passed since this event, but it has remained in my memory as a kind of anchor point within my travels. And this feeling has been reinforced by the repeated references I’ve heard since from numerous pilgrims and travelers who have followed their urge to visit such reputed places of power or “energy points” on the Earth’s surface. Though their experiences have inevitably differed from mine and from each other’s, their stories demonstrate a common thread: the thread of *desire*, a personal and cultural desire for a reinvigorated relationship with the Earth, in the sheer physicality of its more distinctive geographic formations, and with the forces that are imagined to be allied with it in a time of resistance and renewal.

Critical Sympathy

During the three years in which I conducted this research, in the mid-1990s, I was a participant-observer of this increasingly global subculture. I attended meditation retreats and psychic fairs, group visualizations and ritual circles. I watched the mediumistic performances of psychic chan-

nelers, and dowsed with copper rods the invisible energies believed to circulate within the enigmatic crop formations of southern England. Along the way, I visited several of the sites that have become gathering places and travel stops for New Age and ecospiritual pilgrims, from Britain's megalithic monuments to the remains of the so-called Anasazi culture in the U.S. Southwest, from California's Mount Shasta to intentional communities and "centers of light" like Scotland's Findhorn Community. In each of these activities, I could, and often did, fit into the role of participant. This role came easily to me, as I had had contact with certain streams of these alternative cultural movements for well over a decade prior to taking on this research, and I remain sympathetic to the urge infusing the quests of many of their participants. I am buoyed by the diversity of expressive styles and the pluralistic democratization of spirituality that can be found in these movements (particularly in the more creative and self-reflexive branches of neopagan ecospirituality), and I see these as a healthy postmodern antidote to the various resurgent fundamentalisms at large in the world. In the current intellectual sparring between a modernist and scientific rationalism and a postmodernist or multiculturalist identity politics, I find the more intellectually sophisticated contributions of New Age or "New Paradigm" thought—the idea of "planetary consciousness" and the quest for personal liberation, psychological healing, and ecological renewal—to provide a potentially useful counterpoint.

At the same time, I have been dismayed by the depoliticization and privatization of New Age values and ideas since their emergence in the countercultural brew of the 1960s and 1970s. The general lack of political analysis in the New Age movement extends not only to its engagement with the general culture, but also to relations of power and authority within New Age groups and organizations, and to its problematic relations with other disempowered groups, such as contemporary Native communities. I am disturbed by the speed by which New Age ideas have been commercialized and sold, turned into commodities, marketable fads, and individual lifestyle options—and by the way many New Agers uncritically devour, regurgitate, for a price, and otherwise appropriate the symbols and practices of other traditions. My interest, therefore, is marked by a critical and skeptical perspective which sees New Age and ecospiritual beliefs as potentially *disempowering* and *disenlightening* as much as they may facilitate personal empowerment and enlightenment.

My observant participation, therefore, has always been tempered by my own personal commitments: to the practice of a critical social science, and to the project of a democratic ecological politics and philosophy. As a scholar and activist, I place myself among those who believe that engaged, critical, and reflexive sociocultural research has much to contribute—not so much to knowledge for its own sake, but to the development of a wise, just, intelligent, and ecologically sensible and sustainable society. In contrast to many New Agers and other spiritual seekers, I have maintained a heal-

thy skepticism toward anyone's "revealed truth." But mine is a skepticism rooted in an anthropologist's sympathy for human imagination and creativity in all its forms—an appreciation of the multiple and varied ways humans have come to culturally construct their worlds. This "sympathetic skepticism," as anthropologist David Hess describes it, brackets out questions about the objective truth of people's beliefs, and instead tries to see them "from the perspective of the people who hold them" and "by situating these beliefs in their historical, social, and cultural contexts" (1993:159). Such a view makes it easier for the cultural analyst to see the effects of these beliefs and how they play themselves out in the broader cultural arena. This approach also rejects the oversimplified view that these movements are part of a growing "irrationalism" which threatens to topple the edifice of scientific rationality (e.g., Kurtz 1985a; M. Gardner 1991; Faber 1996). Rather, I see them as representing *alternative* rationalities, more or less coherent within themselves, vying with each other and with the dominant rationality (scientifico-positivist, utilitarian, and instrumental) for epistemological status and recognition.¹² I see New Age and ecospirituality as responses—as lucid or confused, coherent or incoherent as their practitioners—to the challenge that Chellis Glendinning has called the need "to re-invent an Earth-honoring way of living" (1995:84). Whatever the shortcomings of the responses described herein, I believe the task itself requires our utmost attention.

OUTLINE

Of the seven chapters which follow, the first two provide the background and context for the empirical work of the next four, while the final chapter presents my conclusions. Chapter 2, "Reimagining Earth," introduces the main New Age and ecospiritual ideas about Earth and landscape, and describes the historical evolution of these ideas, their reception, and frequent rejection, by the scientific community, and their relation to broader cultural discourses about nature. Chapter 3, "Orchestrating Sacred Space," focuses in turn on the practices and activities of "Gaia's pilgrims." I contextualize their activities within the larger geographical context of the post-sixties counterculture and the growth of spiritual tourism, and I examine the things they do (or claim to do) at places they consider sacred, interpreting these as spatial practices which themselves sacralize the landscape, and which, by repositioning peripheral places into a sacred geography in which they are taken to be central, articulate an *alternative geography* to that of industrial modernity. And yet, the landscape is hardly a *tabula rasa* to be shaped like putty into whatever people desire; so I present a model for interpreting places and landscapes as *heterogeneous productions*, shaped or orchestrated not only by the activities of human social groups, but also by nonhuman biological and material others, the actions of which resist as well as accommodate human impositions on the land.

Chapters 4 through 7 consist of empirically detailed, interpretive readings of Glastonbury and Sedona. The first is a town marked by a significant and focal landscape feature, Glastonbury Tor, which together with an ensemble of other landscape features is soaked within a complex, many-layered, and much-contested history (or geology) of cultural myths and meanings. The second is in some ways a more obviously *natural* landscape; the layers of cultural myths and meanings on which I will be focusing here range from those of Native Americans to present-day New Age pilgrims, evangelical Christians, and a high-stakes real estate industry. These four chapters constitute the substantive core of this book; and readers more interested in either of the two sites than in broader theoretical or sociological questions may wish to proceed directly to the relevant chapters (4 or 6), returning to chapters 2 and 3 afterwards.

Following these place-readings, I attempt, in the final chapter, to pull together the theoretical and empirical strands making up this work. Drawing on some of the specific place-stories of my interview subjects—stories about how they came to their destinations, and how they have been changed by them—and on the representational discourses and imaginal languages that circulate around these places, I develop a hermeneutic phenomenology of such ecospiritual heterotopias. The model I present involves recognizing three active constituents in the making of such places: (1) the creative imagination, desire and intentionality of the place-pilgrims; (2) the landscape or place itself, with its specific environmental features and agents or “actants” (entities that can be said to *do* things)¹³ and the various interpretive possibilities these afford to people; and (3) the cultural lore that builds up around these places, which includes stories, symbols, place-images and representations, and various expectations derived from these. These three factors interact with each other, but also with the outside world, with competing interpretive communities, and with broader sociocultural realities. I attempt, finally, to arrive at some conclusions about what the *place* of such heterotopic places, and of New Age and ecospiritual *place-practices*, might be in today's world. I end with a few tentative suggestions which I hope might encourage and facilitate dialogue between New Agers and ecospiritualists, their skeptical detractors, and others involved in the social life of the places they share.