

REVIEWS & REFLECTIONS

BRAVING THE DISTINCTIONS: REFLECTIONS ON MAKING NATURE WHOLE

By Gavin Van Horn

CALLUSES AND CONSIDERATIONS

In restoring a piece of land, big or small, a person is asking questions not just with mind but also with body. If a restorationist is honest, she probably pauses at some point and thinks: Why the hell am I breaking my back for this? In the short term, it can be difficult to perceive what, if anything, has changed due to one's labors. Restoration workers or stewards may make decisions that result in disappointments even in the short run. In the medium term, climate change will affect, and possibly undo, the good work a restorationist is trying to accomplish. In the very long term—geologically speaking—we know that a sixth great extinction will be followed by a seventh, and so on. How can one avoid a cynical fatalism about the value of restoration activities in the face of such uncertainties and changes?

I think the answers to such questions lie in what William R. Jordan and George Lubick, in their remarkable book *Making Nature Whole*, refer to as “the fourth dimension” of restoration.¹ This fourth dimension is the dimension of imagination, performance, and meaning, the *why* of what we do as we directly confront our deep dependence on nature as well as the limitations of our own ability to manipulate it—or as the authors put it, a negotiation of the human experience of being *apart from*, as well as part of, nature. This fourth dimension of restoration is especially relevant—in fact, central, the authors contend—to a particular form of restoration practice: ecocentric restoration.

THREE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

If you have not read *Making Nature Whole*, then it is doubtful that you have yet heard of *ecocentric restoration*. This would not necessarily be due to unfamiliarity with conservation literature or practice; it is because Jordan and Lubick invented the term. (Inventing terminology seems to come naturally to Jordan, who—with his colleague, Keith Wendt—was also responsible for coining the term “restoration ecology” in 1977.) When we spoke recently, Jordan told me that he and Lubick intended that the epigraph for *Making Nature Whole* would be “Brave the distinctions.” The phrase, taken from an editorial by *New Republic* editor Leon Wieseltier, wound up being misplaced in production, but was to have signaled to the reader that the book would insist on the distinction between self-interested and other-oriented conservation practices and, perhaps more provocatively, the importance of those distinctions in developing these practices as performing arts—that is, contexts for dramatizing the “otherness” of the natural world.

Braving the distinctions, then, the authors assert that ecocentric restoration is a *distinctive game to be playing with nature*, a symbolic performance of sorts that involves at least three distinguishing features: (1) a “self-conscious encounter with nature as other” (nature goes on without our help, and its purpose is not centered on us), (2) proactive engagement that makes us deeply aware of human influences on ecosystems, and (3) a form of tribute (to nature’s intrinsic value, in which all the parts—not just the convenient ones—are restored)—that is, a giving back in full knowledge that this giving will never be sufficient. Jordan and Lubick observe that ecocentric restoration is also an idea “that takes shape pretty naturally once the key elements—concern for the old ecosystems, a sense of historical time, perhaps a bit of nostalgia, the idea of restoration as redemptive, and ecology—come together” (84).

But ecocentric restoration is clearly not the only

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land management game in town. One way to divvy up the ecosystem management pie is to picture a large slice that represents what the authors call *meliorative* land management. This would include any form of land or water remediation or restoration that focuses on improving the status or condition of a valued species or habitat (be this for financial reasons, or for aesthetic enjoyment, or to avoid legal repercussions, as might be the case in the creation of a wetland to “replace” one that has been destroyed). There may be many motives for meliorative management, but the benefit to humans drives the practice.

An even larger slice of the pie would be represented by “working landscapes” that are cared for with a long-term interest in their sustainability or as an amenable site of human habitation. Selective logging might be an example of this, or an organic farm with a conservation easement, or rotational cattle grazing that protects surface water and stream banks.

Another pie slice would be represented by a more hands-off, preservationist approach, based on the idea of “untrammelled” wilderness—lands that are minimally managed and protected from certain forms of human use (though as Jordan and Lubick rightly insist, these lands are not protected from environmental change or “ecological drift”).

A small sliver of pie now remains in our metaphorical pie tin. Actually, in deference to the authors—who compare ecocentric restoration to a Sabbath practice (173,188), in which work for material gain ceases and one honors the intrinsic (or God-given) “otherness” of creation—let us say that one-seventh of the pie remains. This one-seventh is ecocentric restoration, a type of restoration practice that is distinguished by its insistence “on the literal re-creation of a previously existing ecosystem, including not just some but all its parts and processes” as well as “an ongoing attempt to compensate for novel or ‘outside’ influences on it in such a way that it continues to behave or can resume

behaving as if these influences were not present” (2). Or as the authors describe this—admittedly impossible—task elsewhere, importing “the [ecological] past back into the present” (117).

What unites all of these land-management practices—what makes them pieces of the same “pie”—is that they are all responses to unwanted and/or undesirable ecosystem change. But the authors are more interest-

“[The] fourth dimension [of environmental restoration] is the dimension of imagination, performance, and meaning, the why of what we do as we directly confront our deep dependence on nature as well as the limitations of our own ability to manipulate it...

ed in what divides the pie than in what unites it. The book, as I mentioned, is about “braving the distinctions,” and Jordan and Lubick stake out their ground in no uncertain terms: “As self-conscious creatures, humans experience the world as something they are both part of and apart from. That being the case, if the aim of environmentalism is to provide the means for negotiating a healthy relationship with the environment, then it has to provide psychologically effective ways of dealing with both aspects of this experience. From this perspective there are just two forms of land management: ecocentric restoration and all the others” (5).

Making Nature Whole makes many important—indeed, unique—contributions to the ongoing articulation about what restoration is and why it is valuable. Perhaps foremost among these contributions is that it skillfully traces the social history of the idea of ecocentric restoration, offering “a story not of a great watershed and wild surmise but of stepping-stones, of seat-of-the-pants experiments, modest insights, and small

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realizations, not by one or two but by dozens and even hundreds of people” (38). The story arc is one that includes modest pioneering attempts and fitful starts at ecocentric restoration in the early part of the twentieth century; a decades-long period of neglect from the 1940s to the 1970s in institutional contexts (e.g., the National Parks Service, The Nature Conservancy); and the emergence of community-based restoration programs during the 1980s and 1990s, which the authors highlight as ecocentric restoration’s coming-of-age as a communal experience. Along the way, the reader is treated to insightful commentary on how and why the story of the UW-Arboretum has become an “origin myth” for restoration (75-83); an exploration of Aldo Leopold’s recreational restoration with his family at

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“the Shack” (87-93), which strikes me as a novel contribution to Leopold scholarship; interesting material about the early

experimental efforts of Paul Shepard in the 1950s, which anticipated future volunteer-based restoration in the Chicago region (108-113); and convincing arguments about why tallgrass prairies in particular acted as “a prominent incubator and proving ground for ecocentric restoration . . . in its most ambitious form” (108), which helps explain the vigor of the restoration “culture” characteristic of the Midwest (38, 80-81, 122, 138). In recent decades, Jordan and Lubick argue, the proliferation of citizen-based ecocentric restoration groups has “constituted a kind of revolution in the organizations and communities involved,” for it has become a way “to connect large numbers of people with old ecosystems, linking ecology with sociology and history.” Restoration has thus moved beyond an eccentric or specialist form of land management toward a practice “involving thousands of people who work to restore endangered native ecosystems in

their neighborhoods or in parks, preserves, and other public lands” (179).

PART AND APART

Readers of *Making Nature Whole* are sure to gain an expanded appreciation for the various tributaries that feed into the idea of ecocentric restoration, and its subtitle, “A History of Ecological Restoration,” is not false advertising. A history it is. But *Making Nature Whole* is also equal parts sociology and moral anthropology. It is the latter subject—what makes us human and how arguments about restoration’s goals and practices reflect this—that makes the book utterly unconventional.

For if one layer of *Making Nature Whole* is about the emergence of different forms of ecological restoration (before this practice had a name) over the last one hundred years, a deeper stratum of the book pinpoints a perennial human problem: how to humbly and respectfully negotiate our relationships with non-human “others” whose interests may not now or ever be compatible with our own. Ecocentric restoration, the attempt to restore all the “parts” of a living system, provides a direct means for confronting the question: “How does a society come to transcend this apparently natural anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism or self-centrism and to recognize or confer value not only on the members of the community made valuable by their familiarity but also on the unfamiliar other?” (18). Jordan and Lubick remark that, in this respect, ecocentric restoration offers “a way of carrying out one of humankind’s most ancient tasks” (179).

I turned the last page convinced that ecocentric restoration does indeed describe a distinctive way of engaging the “otherness” of nature—and does, as the authors contend, confer its own set of values and deserve its own label. There is a provocative tension in the book regarding the human experience of *apartness* (from nature) as a necessary precondition to

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bringing a system back (14-15). Indeed, the authors write that the “objectification of nature [is] essential to ecological restoration” (34), for it is necessary to perceive nature from “outside” in order to comprehend the extent and degree of human impacts upon it. (Such consciousness, I would assume, may even precipitate acute feelings of alienation that, in turn, provide the ethical impetus to reconnect or more justly relate to nature.)

The book focuses on the history of an idea, and tracing this idea is an imaginative exercise that requires a partial “view from above.” But ecocentric restoration did not emerge from brains in glass jars—it came about as a response to real places, by real bodies in place, from people who became invested in renewing relations between humans and non-human species that share (or once shared) a particular history. The success of volunteer restoration efforts—what may be seen as the emergence of a culture of restorationists, which *Making Nature Whole* tracks so well—is dependent on physical expressions of care for local places.

At the heart of ecocentric restoration’s distinctive value, then, is a place-based physicality that should not be overlooked. If it is true, as Jordan and Lubick argue, that ecocentric restoration depends on an objectifying gaze—the human capacity to see the forest for the trees, so to speak—then it should not be lost that the practice of ecocentric restoration does not happen by telepathy. As helpful and as necessary as it is *to step back* and ponder the history of a changing landscape, we can never really *step out* of our physical and social entanglement with the natural world; ecocentric restoration is not merely a mind game.

SWEATY SACRIFICES

I’d like to speculate on a couple of ways in which place and body matter deeply to ecocentric restoration—not as a corrective to the book so much as a complement, a way of indicating one productive direc-

tion that the conversation about ecocentric restoration could travel.

It’s sometimes painful to wake up for a restoration workday, occasionally awkward to join with others in this common task, and often physically demanding. Anthropologist Laura DeLind refers to such bodily investment in community-building as “sweaty sacrifices.”² This is the demanding work that binds a community together, that creates a sense of “we-ness.” It would be wrong to read “community” as only the bleary-eyed group of humans that gather on Saturday or Sunday to clear out invasive honeysuckle or fill Hefty bags with garlic mustard. This community includes the land. The land doesn’t just shape people in a poetic or metaphorical sense; it also physically shapes individual bodies. Buckthorn-scratched forearms. Raised welts from poison oak. Twisted shoulders. Overtaxed lumbar. Torn clothing. Maybe even a couple of burn scars from stray brush-pile ashes. This kind of giving of oneself creates relationship; restorationists in a sense are responding to the landscape’s gifts by giving a small measure of themselves, in body and mind. If heavy is the head that wears the crown, as the old saying goes, then calloused are the hands that hold the loppers.

As *Making Nature Whole* makes clear, ecocentric restoration is clearly something other than a naïve nature Romanticism. There are beautiful odes to nature, as there are to lovers. But ecocentric restoration thrusts a person beyond a naïve love; it embroils one in the difficult work of navigating the relationship between self/other, human/nature, objectivity/subjectivity, and rational evaluation and empathic vulnerability. There is potential value here for a love that has much greater depth than star-struck fawning—because it is tested; because it asks something of us; because it demands our sacrificing something of ourselves to discover something greater.

These sweaty sacrifices are balanced by the pleasures derived from self-abnegation—in momentarily

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transcending one's own limited self-interests, the spirit swells. These pleasures may include the experience of running one's fingers through the silky hairs of Indian grass; marveling at the vivid purple petals of a coneflower or spiderwort; learning to read the history of a landscape by recognizing its plant associations; sensing the seasonal cycle through the caress and smell of the wind; gathering the offerings of rare plants and sowing seeds in areas bereft of them; feeling one's muscles harden as they are shaped by resistance; and exploring what has been in a landscape and imagining what could be there with enough care and attention. We, in essence, can discover who we are by relating (bodily) to where we are.

A growing literature (especially among philosophers, geographers, and conservation psychologists) on “bodies as placeholders”—and humans as bodies in place—would be useful in further considering the distinctive value of ecocentric restoration. Much of this literature reflects a deep dissatisfaction with Western “modernist” narratives, in which consciousness-blessed human subjects manipulate a world of objects, and the dualisms of mind and body, culture and nature, spirit and matter are presumed. Indeed, there are those who argue that the only way to approximate objectivity is through greater inclusion of diverse subjectivities—what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges,”³ and others have named intersubjectivity, relational epistemology, or vernacular ethics.⁴

I suspect that many of us need a way to effectively respond to the gift (Jordan and Lubik call it the “givenness”) of nature. We need a way to craft an etiquette, develop a way of being, and process a way of thinking about the land with our hands. We become aware of landscape change—and the extent and depth of those

changes—by involving our bodies. Indeed, it could be that, as philosopher Jim Cheney has written, “the body is the instrument of our knowledge of the world” and “the inscribing of the nervous system *in* the landscape” is the ground out of which understandings of self and community, myth and culture, emerge.⁵

If this is true, then the means of restoration are as important as the ends. Though it might be more expedient to hire contract laborers with heavy machinery to restore a site (an “engineering paradigm”⁶), the involvement of local citizens in long-term restoration provides a context for cultivating more than merely land. Meaningful relationships are invited, forged, and restored in such places, providing opportunities to experience nature as a trans-active event, a socio-ecological system, and a biocultural *process*. Ecocentric restoration, understood in these terms, can be construed as a series of faithful responses to place (see Van Wieren for an interesting related discussion of restoration as a “public spiritual practice”⁷).

A remarkable number of groups of volunteer restorationists currently labor in the Chicago metropolitan area, the region I inhabit. These are people who care deeply about their local woods, savannas, prairies, fens, and other ecosystems. They carry on and nurture the tradition of citizen science, or what at another time in history was the valued tradition of polymath-amateur-naturalists. They are mavens of local landscapes, village elders, and medicine women and men. Among these people, I have met those who know the Latin binomials of hundreds of plants; they can discuss soil types and hydrology in historical perspective; they can touch glaciers through imagination; they can identify bird species by the trill of a few notes. In ecocentric restoration of the kind Jordan and Lubik discuss in their book, ideally, one becomes a part of an embodied and ongoing conversation with the landscape and its human inhabitants. This dialectic involves a faithful commitment to a landscape's history and its possibilities, and this give-and-take, push-and-pull, changes

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not only the land to be restored but the people participating in the restoration.

So to return to the question with which I began: Why is it worthwhile to restore an ecosystem? Why should a person or a group of people put time and effort into such activities if change is the only constant? I would argue this: because it implicates us as participants, partners, and co-creators in the well-being of living systems, prompting questions about our role in the destruction or alteration of parts or all of a landscape and directly engaging us in more-than-human worlds. What may be regarded as disposable—those woods over there, that patch of weeds between buildings, that field by the construction site—becomes known as a place with its own history and with a history that we, with our bodies, consciously or unconsciously direct. In short, we become more attuned to what we are: related.

As Jordan and Lubick repeatedly assert, no one type of land management is sufficient to meet all ecological or social needs, and the demands of ecocentric restoration may limit the breadth of its appeal. I entertain visions, however, of ecocentric restoration becoming a more widely practiced public expression of a bioregional ethic (as does Jordan, elsewhere⁸). (And as long as I'm dreaming, how about zoning ordinances that allow "ecocentric commons" for each neighborhood, and where feasible, between towns and cities?) If such visions are compelling, it is worth exploring how ecocentric restoration intersects with placemaking—how the process of becoming *part of* place may involve concerted, long-term efforts to return all the other non-human denizens of that place. *Making Nature Whole* provides a magnificent cartography for why "it is arguably by way of just such small, symbolic projects, which reduce effective work to an expressive act, that people negotiate the inner transformation of mind and spirit on which the fate of the world ultimately depends" (212; 194-199). No doubt the work of Jordan's "Values Roundtable"⁹ will begin to provide

topographical relief for that map. Having been given such a solid foundation in *Making Nature Whole*, perhaps it is appropriate now to shift metaphors from the visual to the haptic¹⁰—what we touch and are touched by—for as Jordan and Lubick state, "the clearest expression of the value of this work for the people involved is not yet in print but on the ground" (179).

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NOTES

1. W.R. Jordan III and G. Lubick, *Making Nature Whole: A History of Ecological Restoration* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2011). All further page references from this book will be given in the text.
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4. B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2002); D. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996); E.S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena," in S. Feld and K.H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), 13-52; E.S. Casey, "Between Geography and Philosophy: What Does It Mean to be in the Place-World?" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91, no. 4 (2001): 683-693; L.B. Delind, "Of Bodies, Place, and Culture: Re-situating Local Food," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2006): 121-146; G. Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); P. Stuckey, "Being Known by a Birch Tree: Animist Refigurings of Western Epistemology," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2010): 182-205; and T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011).
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8. M.V. McGinnis, F. House, and W. Jordan III, "Bioregional Restoration: Re-establishing an Ecology of Shared Identity," in M.V. McGinnis, ed., *Bioregionalism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 205-222.
9. "Environmental Prospect: The Journal of the New Academy for Nature and Culture," <http://environmentalprospect.org/2012/12/introduction-to-the-values-project/>.
10. B. Szerszynski, "Local Landscapes and Global Belonging: Toward a Situated Citizenship of the Environment," in A. Dobson and D. Bell, eds., *Environmental Citizenship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 75-100.