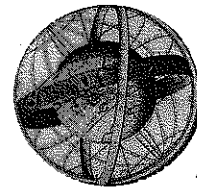


# The Search for Origins and the Desire for Wholeness

in the New Age Movement:

TRANSCENDENTAL HOMELESSNESS  
AS A SYMPTOM OF POSTMODERNITY

by Carmen Kuhling



"The transformative journey... *Magical Blend* accepts the premise that society is undergoing a fundamental transformation. A new world is being born, and whether this birth is an easy or a difficult one will depend largely on the individual. It is our aim to chart the course this transformation is taking, and to assist the individual to cope with and contribute to the birthing process. We believe that people's thoughts influence their reality; if this is true then the world we live in is a combination of our highest hopes, our deepest fears, and the whole range of experience that falls in between. Our goal is to embrace the magical behind the mundane. In this way we hope to act as a catalyst to encourage the individual to achieve his or her highest level of spiritual awareness. We endorse no one pathway to spiritual growth, but attempt to explore many alternative possibilities to help transform the planet."

When theorists of the left discuss the New Age movement, it is usually to dismiss it as individualistic, abstract and ideologically confused. While such charges are not untrue, such a dismissal overlooks the extent to which the New Age movement shares similar aspirations, histories and desires with what we call the left that may be instructive for us. The above "statement of purpose" of the New Age movement, published in the journal *Magical Blend* is a "New Age manifesto" in the sense that it, like other manifestos of the left, expresses the desire for a "break with history," for transformation, for change. However, what distinguishes New Age "manifestos" (besides their high level of abstraction, their reification of the "spiritual" and their failure to articulate concrete or collective strategies to accomplish their goal of transformation) is the frequency with which they use concepts such as rebirthing, reclaiming, recharging and other images which imply that we have lost something which must be regained. In the New Age imaginary, "we" originally existed in a state of unity with each



other, with "nature," with our "selves," a unity that was shattered by the serpent of civilization, the apple of technology. In this way the New Age positioning of "nature," the "primitive," the "spiritual" and, ultimately, the past as sites of wholeness, fulfillment, completeness, can be seen as one particular response to various "crises" of modernity, i.e., of "science," "reason" and, more generally, the crisis that has accompanied the reevaluation of the project of the Enlightenment. But, perhaps, this search for origins, this desire for reconciliation, which appears in exaggerated form in the New Age, is something we need to be aware of in the project of reconstructing the left, and is a symptom of our contemporary "transcendental homelessness," of a condition which some call postmodernity.

The "New Age" desire is the desire to "reconstruct" a community through reconciliation with various Others, with nature, with the Third World, with the aboriginal and with the divided parts of the self, which are posited as integral to the self. Insofar as this New Age fantasy of reconciliation has emerged in reaction to various crises announced by postmodernism, it is, in a sense, a symptom of postmodernity, and can tell us a great deal about the extent to which we invest in various "origin myths" in order to consolidate our sense of continuity with both the past and the future. We will need to acknowledge the extent to which this fantasy is shared, to some extent by theorists of the left, if any reconstructive project of the left is to be in any way successful. My intention in studying the New Age is not only critical — I will also draw out how, despite what some would call the ideological confusion of the New Age, it provides an interesting point of departure for imagining a "postmodern politics," for it is animated by a critique of technological rationality and the desire for community, and for a revival of political agency that underlies the current attempts at reformulating a politics of the left.

Furthermore, the New Age fantasy of reconciliation with various Others, with, for instance, the "Third World"/ aboriginal, with "nature" (Haraway), and with the divided parts of the self (Lacan) provides a point of entry into the formulation of "difference" and the constitution of the Other in contemporary social thought. The formulation of difference and the Other provides the most pressing challenge to our capacity to formulate a version of postmodern politics. First, in reaction to the colonialist impetus to consume or annihilate the Other, the New Age has responded by identifying with, or, in Irigaray's terms, "consummating" with, the Other, a strategy which ironically replicates the same denial of difference found in colonialist narratives of the Other. Second, the New Age desire to "protect" nature through its programme of "cleansing," "detechnolo-



gizing," "decivilizing nature" constructs nature as the site of some idyllic, preindustrial, essentialized past that is as much a commentary on the dissatisfaction with the antagonism of the social and with the contingent character of identity, as it is a fear of environmental destruction. Third, New Age self-help technologies which stress achieving "inner balance" and "harmony" represent the New Age fantasy of the unified, accessible, and coherent subject devoid of conflicting desires or a chaotic unconscious. The Other in the New Age is coded through the figures of the "alien," the crystal and "auras," figures which reveal how the realms of the "Third World," "nature," or the "the spiritual" are sites in which fears and desires, in which projection and transference, regarding "difference" are played out.

Part of the appeal of the New Age can be explained by its positioning of the subject as a traveller who can potentially transcend the epistemological limitations of the body and social location, through access to another dimension. The figure of the traveller, who can travel both through time and through space, appears with increasing regularity in contemporary popular culture in movies, television shows and even advertisements. This positioning of the subject as time traveller reveals our desire to recreate our origins, to rewrite or re-discover our "roots" and, in a sense, to consolidate the fantasy of "autogenesis." The fantasy of time travel is integrally linked to what Lukács calls "transcendental homelessness," a condition of the modern Western mind which emerges out of the tenuousness of identity. This condition is characterized by the experience of the self, in Lukács's words, as "kaleidoscopic and changeable," as "nefarious and evasive." The fantasy of time travel is one manifestation of the desire to go home, to recreate our origins. This desire to recreate our origins, this transcendental homelessness is a symptom of the postmodern skepticism towards origin myths, and reveals our ambivalence towards the dissolution of these grand narratives. It reveals the chaotic and contradictory desires of the postmodern, split subject. The New Age desire to be a time traveller, expressed in the phenomena of astral projection, and "harmonic convergence," is representative of nostalgia without irony, the part of the postmodern subject caught in the abyss that yearns for the sacred, the absolute, the community and the totality.

The fantasy of the time traveller as played out in the yearning to recreate our origins is integrally related to the tenuousness of identity in a contemporary context. The West has constructed nature, the Third World, women, primates, aboriginals and Others as the site of the "primitive" in an attempt to reconstruct our "past" in order to come to terms with our "present." What gets coded as primitive becomes articulated in a self-sustaining set of binary opposites that became central to consolidating the Western sense of self and Other. The primitive becomes a repository for the fears

and desires of the Western subject: it is nature to our culture, the field of the unrepressed to our "disciplined" society. Hence the time traveller represents the fantasy of the Archimedean point, the God's eye view; this traveller is the historian who accurately captures our "essence" through "re-reading" our past.

Even more, this phantastic figure, the time traveller, is perhaps the New Age revolutionary subject. The New Age time traveller is an expression of the desire for transformation, for a "break with history," since this time traveller can "re-read" the past and forecast the future. The New Age manifesto at its most extreme is a call to join in "harmonic convergence." This transformation, however, has no real vanguard, no concept of species-being, no theory of alienation (beyond the Garden of Eden myth that we were corrupted by civilization). The New Age vision of transformation, at least in the phenomenon of harmonic convergence, thus is both despatialized and detemporalized. We are to "explode in an ecstasy of light and sound" in another dimension when we have reached a sufficient degree of "spiritual elevation." The more moderate, and perhaps, comprehensible, expression of the New Age world view is encapsulated in the slogans "think globally, act locally," "one people, one planet," and other phrases which advocate an organicist, holistic philosophy evoking images of harmony, integration, balance. The New Age manifesto reads like a "final solution" which seeks to impose order, unity and purity on a chaotic, disorderly, world.

This desire to impose order on the social can be seen as our response to the problem of difference. Entrapped in binary logic, we posit the Other as something which we can either consume or consummate with, annihilate or merge with, repudiate or identify with, devalue or idealize. The boundary between self and Other is experienced as intolerable; we must either forcibly erase all vestiges of the Other's existence or construct an ideological fantasy that the Other is really us in disguise. In new right movements such as neo-Nazism and the Heritage Front, the "primitive" is formulated as the Other, the object which is devalued; the Other must be annihilated in order to consolidate the identity of the subject. In New Age, however, the Other becomes idealized. The new right is caught at the moment of the dialectic in which the Other, for instance what is coded as the "primitive," must be consumed or annihilated to ensure self-certainty, and to consolidate the self/Other boundary, whereas the New Age is arrested at the moment of "consummation" with the so-called "primitive," where the self tries to recognize itself in the Other through a dissolution of the self/Other boundary. Insofar as the New Age movement articulates what some would call an essentialized version of nature, woman, native Celt, oriental, and Others with which it identifies and seeks to discover in the self, it presents one alternative to dealing with the subject/object gap that, ultimately,

advocates a denial of difference. In effect, such formulations, which are positioned in political rhetoric as vehemently opposed to the new right, ironically replicate its annihilation of difference and its lack of concern for the Other through merging with the Other. For instance, the New Age is motivated by an impetus to find ourselves through identification with the "goddess," the "shaman," the Celt, the masculine "Iron John," the "aboriginal," the "primitive," animals, crystals, etc. as ways of reclaiming our own natures, positing these figures as "selves" that we have lost but can regain. These figure as extensions of the self, to prop up the identity of the Western subject and to patch the gaps of the exhausted narratives of the Western subject.

The New Age, then, can be seen as a "symptom" of postmodernity. In order to avoid dealing with the messiness of multiplicity and of polyvocality, the New Age deals with difference by trying to eradicate it. However, the idealization of the primitive in the New Age, in its most generous moments, is symptomatic of an "anthropological nostalgia," a mourning for what we have "lost" and, in a sense, an attempt at reconciliation with others that have been hurt by colonialism and industrialization. The fantasy behind the movement, however naive and ideological, is to make reparation with those we have wronged by giving them an exalted, purified status. The figure of the primitive in the New Age is an apology for the past.

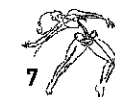
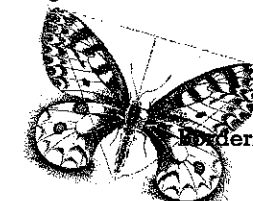
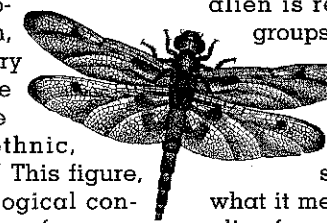
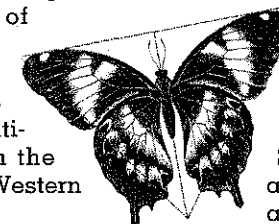
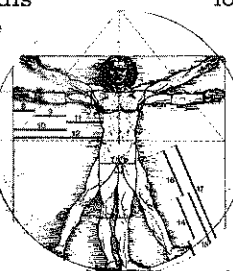
Similarly the New Age figure of the alien is a repository for our hopes for the future and an expression of our desire for a postcolonial imaginary. The figure of the alien, both in the New Age and contemporary science fiction, reveals the intense ambivalence we have toward the unknown, the future, as well as ethnic, racial, sexual and other "differences." This figure, however, is more than just an ideological construction, for it represents the fantasy of a non-exploitive relationship between two disparate and even technologically unequal cultures. New Age narratives of "friendly" contact with extraterrestrials share the same spirit as that which is behind our current theorizations of "postcolonialism" and behind current attempts to formulate representations of and material relations with Third World cultures which do not resort to "primitivisms," "orientalisms," or other oppressive tendencies that have characterized First World-Third World relationships in the past. A simple critique of the alien as "ideological" overlooks the extent to which the fantasy of alien contact is representative of a new postcolonial imaginary.

Since the alien represents the "most Other of the Others" that we know nothing about, the characterization of this figure can tell us a great deal about

how we view difference. For instance, in popular science fiction, aliens are often portrayed as terrifying, hostile and threatening. In New Age, however, the alien is benign, friendly and helpful. Many New Age gurus profess to be able to "trance channel" alien entities who are helpful, beneficent, kind. New Age literature is littered with references to "transeekers" and other alien entities which offer simple folk wisdom and platitudes.

A recent Caramilk commercial is an example of how the New Age tendency to transform the strange into the everyday has influenced popular culture and advertising. Here the Pyramids, Stonehenge and other "unexplained natural wonders" are explained as being merely a good-natured but colossal joke on the part of the superior alien entities that created them merely to have "a bit of fun." This theme is also apparent in the Reece's Peanut Butter Cups ad which presents circles left in wheat fields in England as merely alien attempts at perfecting this "mysterious" confection. Both of these examples reveal the New Age desire to minimize the threatening, unknowable aspects of the alien by denying the alien's "alienness," making this Otherness appear in the realm of the explicable, mundane, and in fact, consumable everyday. They show how the New Age incorporation of the alien into the everyday has been a recent and undeniably popular marketing strategy that has infiltrated mainstream advertising. The appeal of this strategy of anthropomorphising the alien resides in its capacity to alleviate anxiety regarding difference by domesticating it: if the alien is really human, perhaps different ethnic groups and races, perhaps men and women, are also really the "same."

Furthermore, the fantasy of the alien also tells us about our relationship to difference since it is about the fantasy of community and the struggle with what it means to be human. The significance of the alien for us lies in its gaze: we imagine it imagining us as a singular species, as a "whole" community of "humans," as an object of desire. From the alien's point of view, we are a common species; we have common identifiable characteristics, and we are basically "good." The popularity of this alien point of view can be seen in *Star Trek* and *Terminator 2*; to both Lieutenant Commander Data and the "good" Terminator, we as humans are an object of desire, of perfection, something they would like to understand and implicitly to become. Data, for instance, tries to learn to paint, to dream, to tell jokes, all in an attempt to become more human. The Terminator tries to find out why we cry, why we don't like to kill people (!). Thus aliens or, in this particular example, androids/cyborgs, allow us to imagine ourselves as an idealized imago; in these versions, we are good, compassionate, and ethical.



However, the point I am trying to make is not that these aliens reveal the assurance with which we believe we are "good," or that we are a "global" community, but rather, our profound fear that we are not. In the context of global conflict, imagining the alien imagining us enables us to constitute ourselves as a community, for, from the vantage point of the alien, we are a community, a "global village"—the alien does not see our "difference." It is from the point of view of the alien that we can conjure up Earth Day slogans such as "one people, one planet," alongside the satellite/alien view of the planet earth. Ecologism is not, then, a human or even an "earthly" imaginary; it is rather an alien imaginary. The figure of the alien reveals the desperation with which we are trying to revive various discredited narratives: the human as essentially "good" and the global community as essentially unified. In a postmodern era, we cannot believe in these narratives ourselves, so we let the alien believe them for us.

The New Age, like several left and feminist theorizations of community, ultimately subscribes to a closure of the gap between subject and object, and articulates difference as something that has to be overcome. For instance, Dorothy Allison, in a collection of articles edited by Doris Young, proposes an ideal feminist community as characterized by a "shared feeling of merging and belonging," with an "ecstatic sense of oneness." In the same collection, Isaac Balbus represents the goal of radical politics and the establishment of community as overcoming the "Otherness" of the Other in reciprocal recognition. This is not to say that all attempts to achieve a recognition of collective interests should be abandoned, but rather, that such formulations must take account of the inevitable antagonism of the social, the impossibility of "fixing" difference, the contingent character of identity and, in particular, of the fragmented, multiple and conflicting desires of the subject. Any theory of community that denies difference is doomed to failure. Thus the challenge for radical politics is how to formulate a version of community that stops short of consummating with the Other. The problem, in Hegel's terms, is how to cancel the opposition but preserve the difference.

In turning to the crystal, it is interesting how the New Age posits nature as an Other, which again, becomes a repository for the fears and desires of the New Age subject in response to an antagonistic Social, an antagonism which the New Age tries to overcome by annihilating the gulf between the "human" and the "natural." The insistence on the healing powers of rocks and crystals represents an insistence that both animate and inanimate natural actors are a part of our community, and that nature, like the primitive, becomes the source of purity,

beauty, happiness and harmony in response to the corrupting influence of "culture" and of technology. Nature, like the primitive, is formulated, in terms of origin myths, as an original "unity" which we lost, a "state" from which we became separate. The New Age configures nature as oppositional to culture, to technology and as a "force" within ourselves struggling against the "alienating," frequently dehumanizing, effects of culture. Thus the New Age buys into the same set of dualisms as scientific rationality, but views nature as an extension of ourselves rather than as an expendable resource. Scientific rationality has been predicated on the construction and systematic domination of nature, on a construction of "nature" that is dependent on a set of mutually sustaining binary dualisms between male/female, nature/culture, civilized/primitive. Whereas the legitimacy of the fundamental premises of Enlightenment rationality rests on the subordination of the latter set of signifiers, the New Age has responded by an elevation of the female/natural/primitive. Nonetheless, the New Age approach still serves to perpetuate the logic of enlightenment rationality through a simple inversion which is still driven by binary logic.

The crystal operates as a symbol of continuity, both across time and across space, since it reminds us of our connectedness to Others, our community. Ironically, however, these objects serve to act as stand-ins for real relations with the Other—they come to mediate relations between individuals. For instance, in some versions of the New Age, "attunement" with nature or natural symbols (such as the crystal) takes precedence over human relations. In this version of the New Age, some crystals are called healers and openers, others are conditioners and cleaners. This association with qualities we commonly ascribe to hair products draws out the New Age emphasis on "cleaning," "clearing away of debris," a theme that is frequently used with reference to the "self help elements of the New Age" that I call psychic cleaning. Such antiseptic, sterile metaphors the New Age relies on are reminiscent of the emphasis on purity and unity in the Nazi "final solution."

The fantasy of the coherent, unified essentialized subject is also clearly symbolized by the "aura," a metaphor for the desire for a protective shield, for clearly identifiable boundaries between self and Other, which some New Age practitioners claim to be able to identify visually or photographically. To Jean Baudrillard, this desire for a protective shield is a symptom of "schizophrenic" society, against "a state of terror which is characteristic of the schizophrenic, an over-proximity of all things, a foul promiscuity of all things which beleaguer and penetrate him, meeting with no resistance and no

halo, no aura, not even the aura of his own body protects him."

Furthermore, the symbol of the aura reveals more than just a desire for a protective shield, it represents the fantasy of the unity, the opacity of the subject, a subject that recent psychoanalytic literature has called into question. In effect, the image of the aura is an example of the desire to annihilate the Other in the self. The New Age subject's desire, then, is to become fully comprehensible to itself, for once the subject is "read" through aura readings, astrological readings, etc., unconscious and conflicting desires, multi-layered meanings, ambiguities, all conveniently dissolve into one description, one reading which reorders them. The split subject is superimposed with a "reading" which "organizes her actions, behaviours and gestures into a unifying framework which explains "them." Thus the chaotic unconscious, contradictory conflicting desires, aspects of the subject that are inaccessible, incomprehensible, ambiguous, or in other words, the parts of the self that we designate as Other, are annihilated.

The phenomenon of the aura on one hand reveals the fantasy of the opacity of the social, the desire for unmediated intersubjectivity, unobscured by language, social location, or cultural specificity. On the other hand, aura readings stress individual interpretation and the active participation of the subject in inserting him/herself into the "reading." In a sense, aura, horoscope, palmistry, tarot card and other such "readings" can be seen as merely an enactment of the analytic situation in which the subject can be seen as exhibiting an openness to the social, since s/he is opening him/herself up to the influence of Other. This Other in the New Age is sometimes a "radical" Other, since aura readings are frequently "channeled" through "spirits" or "aliens." Other aspects in the New Age, such as past life regression, hypnosis, lessons on trance channelling and automatic writing, encourage the subject to develop an openness to the Other in the self. In these technologies, aspects of the self that are conflicting, desires that are contradictory and ambivalent, are acknowledged by actually attributing them to a "past life," a "spirit," a doppelgänger. In a convoluted way, then, the New Age perhaps can be read as more acutely aware of the conflicting desires of the divided subject than conventional analysis, since it actually literalizes the notion of the Other in the self. For instance, trance channelling "other entities" or "past lives" as well as the New Age therapeutic move of "speaking to the inner child" can be read as literalizing the postmodern notion of the multiple subject.

The New Age incapacity to deal with difference, to tolerate "openness," antagonism, ambivalence and so on is a part of the Enlightenment tradition from which we have emerged. This intolerance, this

anxiety towards openness, this desire for a suturing of the social, that appears in exaggerated form in the New Age is perhaps the "return of the repressed" of modernism. The primal father, the fully self-conscious subject, who emerged from a sutured and self-defined society, has been slain, but returns to haunt his homeland as the spectre of the New Age imaginary, because he does not know he is dead. Insofar as the left is the progeny of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and other discourses that originally posited an undifferentiated unity out of which difference has emerged, this spectre could haunt the political left as well, unless we become more honest about our own investment in "origin myths." We are, in a sense, caught between the modern and the postmodern: perhaps postmodern theory posits an openness that real humans cannot (yet) accept.

Thus, any reconstructive project of the left, any version of postmodern politics, must become more self-conscious of how its subjects simultaneously fear and desire the dissolution of grand narratives. Lukács captures this ambivalence in his claim that we are both "secular, but yearning for the sacred, ironic but yearning for the absolute, individualistic, but yearning for the wholeness of community, asking questions but receiving no answers, fragmented but yearning for imminent totality."

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