Understanding a Powerful Notion of Nature and the Tibetans’ Unique Engagement with It

Genevieve DeLeon
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0. Preface

A. Qualifications

I would like to preface the following paper with a number of qualifications. Though I had initially intended this paper to be a rather effortless foray into the respectable discipline of anthropology, I’ve found – to my great dismay – that an anthropological sensibility cannot be plucked like a fruit, as it were, from you, my deeply studied teachers in the brief span of a few months (however plentiful your orchard of experience). It, instead, must be cultivated over a lengthy course of time and with only the most particular attention to the turning of one’s own seasons of acquiring knowledge, should the proper tone and insight take root. Such a process I found to be altogether too ambitious for the solitary months I spent writing this paper in the confines of my guesthouse in Ladakh or at home, outside the cocoon of academia.

Like an actor removing his mask after an unconvincing rehearsal, then, I’ve discarded the pages I had written in the guise of authority and returned to the literary voice I know best. I can only hope my readers expect nothing more than what it can offer – at best, a neatly arranged constellation of observation-based ideas that point toward a helpful conclusion not only about the nature of the observed object but, perhaps more so, about that of the observer.

B. Contextualizing my research experience

With that aside, I shall begin by stating that upon entering the research period, I had proposed to study the way in which Tibetans interacted with the natural environment or the nonhuman world around them. Initially, I was apprehensive about this project because I knew it entailed dealing with the nefarious concept of Nature, which I had only
encountered as either an ennobled substitute for the term *natural environment* or as an exclusively Euro-centric construction. With these limiting options, I knew not how to make such a concept applicable to any sort of argument I might make about the ethnically Tibetan individuals I was to encounter during my time in India. But, at the bold suggestion of Tawni Tidwell and with the consent and support of Cynthia Gould and, even, John Belleza, I set out to Ladakh, after a few interviews in Dharamsala, to inquire about the Tibetan-Ladakhi interaction with the non-human and specifically spirit world, placing particular emphasis on their interaction with a group of aquatic spirits called the *lu*, one of many collections of what Professor of Anthropology at the University of New Castle and author of *Civilized Shamans* Geoffry Samuel calls the “symbolic entities in terms of whom the Tibetan religion is structured” (157). The Tibetan interaction with these and similar entities was to be the lens through which I might observe how Tibetans, or at least the group of them I encountered, engaged with Nature.

C. Layout of the paper

I had first, though, to settle this concept, Nature, enough to make an argument about even a small group’s relation to it from a seemingly indirect basis. The completion of this task constitutes Part I of my paper. In it, I explore the rich etymology of the term *nature* and the full conceptual weight this etymology lends it; from there I propose a definition of it not as a place, nor as an exclusive European tradition, but as a dynamic duality of meaning that concerns itself not only with what is know but also with a more fundamental if less explicit reality outside that which is encountered in everyday life. Then, after a brief introduction to the Tibetan Ritual Cosmos and the world of the *lu*, I
establish the conceptual space in which I might point the lens of the Tibetan interaction with these and similar entities towards Nature.

With the groundwork for the paper thereby set, I embark upon the presentation and analysis of my ethnographic research – the numerous discussions and experiences of the non-human world and spirit practice that I had with a range of Tibetans and Ladakhis. In preparing to do so, however, I found myself in want of a mode of analysis for my copious amounts of unstructured, raw material and therein turned to renown scholar of American Environmental Studies William Cronon and his seminal essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or Returning to the Wrong Nature.” As his essay, which concerns the Western engagement with the concept of Nature as Wilderness (a concept which functions in much the same way as does my conceptualization of Nature), greatly helped me to realize the way in which the engagement with Nature that I witnessed was unique and important, I have here encased it in the context of its provocative social constructivist movement and their place in the discourse on contemporary North American environmental issues and then have proceeded to present its ideas as a sort of cultural basis-of-comparison for my own ethnographic observation. In this comparative context, then, I enumerate a number of characteristics of the engagement with Nature I observed and their potential implications for the engagers. Finally, I summarize the conclusions derived from my comparison between Cronon’s and my ideas about of our respective objects of observation and, in the closing section, reflect upon the implications a personal engagement with Nature may have on my own scholarly task at hand.
I. Part I: Groundwork for Observations

A. The term *nature* and its possibilities

The process of tracing out and describing the elements of the term *nature*, with all of its modifications of form and sense, would, given its rich etymology, prove a multi-volume endeavor, no doubt. So I will here attempt only to follow, from a number of different origin points, a rough impulse concerning a fullness of the term’s significance that is commonly overlooked and, thereby, attempt to establish what the utilization of this concept, for the purposes of this paper, entails.

The earliest recorded definition of *nature* in the English Oxford Dictionary, dating to the early 1200s, concerns the “physical or bodily power, strength, or substance” of either a person or natural material (OED “nature” I.1.a.). In its common usage, though, it seemed to entail an assessment not only of the “vital power” of a singular subject, but also of the composure or cooperation of its constituent parts – in short, of its “constitution” (OED “nature” I.1.a.). This manner of colloquial custom meant that it operated simultaneously on two related though rather different dimensions – one of a microcosmic, empirical scale in which a given variable was tested for the degree of its strength, and another whose range was macrocosmic and whose object more dynamic in its evaluation of the harmony or efficiency of a system functioning at large.

Let us look to a workman’s expression, common in the early 19th century, to make explicit the implications of this subtle duality of meaning. The expression – “its *nature* is gone” – was used to describe a timber whose fibers were brittle rather than supple, rendering the timber unable to perform its intended duty (OED “nature” I.1.b.). Here, the expression seems to make two complementary suggestions about its object: its
declaration of the timber’s state of lacking makes references not only to the objectively inadequate health of the fibers – the very fact responsible for the timber’s utilitarian failure – but also to the fact’s more dynamic effect – the failure itself – a reference which implies a more subjective appraisal of the system’s capability (or lack thereof) to perform its primary function. Under close examination, though, the subjectivity of the second, more macrocosmic of these seemingly straight-forward suggestions has the rather puzzling potential to examine whether a timber is still verifiably a timber despite the presence of its “nature.” And so, in this way, the term nature, in its fullest sense, carries with it the capacity to both do and then un-do, or in other words – to affirm and then question itself – for while one of its assessments accepts the object of its examination at “face-value” and from there makes an affirmative qualification of that object’s “vital” characteristic – the other, if taking total advantage of the liberated space of its subjectivity, can threaten the very security of the object’s identification as such.

Such a duality of significance may date back to the term’s Greek origin, phusis (often translated as nature from the Latin natura), whose first pre-Socratic occurrence, found in the writings of Heraclitus¹, suggests a similar tension and contradiction between possible interpretations of meaning (Naddaf 14). The citation comes at the opening of his famous text “On Nature,” in which Heraclitus states that though the words of his text may reveal little to the common, unlearned reader, he will, nonetheless, persevere in “distinguishing each thing according to its nature (phusis) and explaining how it is” (15).

In his work The Greek Concept of Nature, York University Professor of Philosophy

¹ A Greek philosopher of Ephesus (near modern Kusadasi, Turkey) who was active around 500 BCE, and best known for his doctrines of universal flux, the unity of opposites, and that fire is the basic material of the world (‘Heraclitus’).
Gerard Naddaf, explains that *phusis* functions in this line and elsewhere in Heraclitus’ writings as a rather “specialized” indicator not only of the “essential character of a thing” but also, and perhaps more importantly, of “the process by which it arose,” thus allowing the “accent” of the term’s meaning to be placed in any number of places including: “*phusis* as origin, *phusis* as process, or the *phusis* as result” (15). The correlation between the multiplicity of *phusis*’ ancient meanings and those of the Middle English term *nature* here is hardly total, but there is a presence of what may be called a “real semantic continuity” (a term Naddaf uses in another context) that spans their chronological and geographical distance (14). Indeed, numerous texts dating to the period of Heraclitus suggest two readings of *phusis*: one which concerns that which is undoubtedly known to exists and which regards its object to be “the (completed) realization of a becoming” and another meant to refer to the dynamic, macrocosmic aspect of the object – the “real constitution of a thing as it realized from beginning to end with all of its properties” – an aspect that was far less verifiable and far more concerned with a subjective understanding of what is not immediately seen or known (15; 14).

Here, too, an example, presented in *The Greek concept of nature*, of the term’s use in Homer’s *Odyssey* may better lay bare its complete import. The quotation comes from a moment in Book 10, the section concerning Odysseus’ adventures upon the isle of the witch goddess Circe, in which Odysseus, en route to Circe’s house to rescue his lost, drugged, and animalized crew², encounters the god Hermes (13). In an effort to protect

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² When the crew wandered dangerously close to Circe’s palace while looking for supplies, they were seduced by her beauty to enter her estate. She fed them a potion of “baneful drugs” which made them forget about wanting to returning to their homeland and subsequently “struck them with a *rhabdos*” or “magic wand” and turned them into swine (13).
and aid Odysseus, Hermes offers him an “effective drug” – a special plant – to render Circe’s “deadly wiles” upon Odysseus ineffective with its power to “stop change” (presumably, of form – from human to swine) (13). In order to use this protective tool, though, Homer describes that Odysseus must, to a certain extent, “understand its phusis” (13). In describing Hermes’ offering of such an understanding, Homer takes note of Hermes’ description of the plant as having a black root and white flower, as being named moly, created by the gods, and hard to dig (13). “At first glance,” Naddaf notes, the term seems to be employed as an identifier of an object’s static form or “exterior aspect,” but, Naddaf asserts, this can not be its only meaning as Homer could have used (and in other portions of the text does) other terms that concern only what is known by the eye – namely the form or “exterior aspect” of the object (14). In this case, then, Homer seems to suggest that Hermes’ explanation of the plant’s phusis may mean “not only showing something visible, but also giving instruction,” and in a deep sense revealing “both the external and internal (that is, hidden) properties of the plant to Odysseus” (14). Because the plant was created by the gods and because “the gods generally do things and/or create things for a reason,” the “hidden properties” of this plant likely include a telling of the origin myth of the plant to enable Odysseus to understand “how and why it acquired its current powers” (14). Importantly, the “divine origin myth” must be revealed by Hermes in the “divine language” – that symbolic, embellished language of narrative – a language altogether different from that which qualifies the plant’s “external form” (14). Such an explanation, then, would be different not only in its scope (which would be

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3 See eidos, morphe, or phue, potentially expressed kai moi eidos autou edeixe
macrocosmic), but would be different in the very faculty used to describe it – one partly of imagination and creativity rather than pure empirical, rationality.

In its holistic form, then, the *phusis* of an object engages a dynamic tension not only between the microcosmic focus on its form and the macrocosmic focus on its process of becoming, but also between its external and internal aspects – what is immediately seen and known of it (in the realm of the empirical, objective, rational) and what is “hidden” and thus cannot or is not readily seen or known (in the realm of the subjective, imaginative).

And here is my point: it is my belief that the present-day concept of *nature* has inherited the dynamic richness of its relatively recent and ancient etymological history and it is within the context of this dynamic concept of nature and its implications for those who engage with this concept that my paper is situated. The pretence of my paper, then, is the following:

Firstly, that the full notion of Nature has an important duality of meaning encompassing both what is known and what is unknown and that this duality must employ both the faculties of rationality and imagination – prompting one to examine, respectively, both what there is or even what we are as well as what there might be, what we might be.

Secondly, that *that* space in which any individual or group considers themselves to encounter Nature in its fullest sense, or *that* space which for an individual or groups holds both qualifications of being both of the known and of the unknown, becomes an arena of powerful significance as it places one in touch
with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience.

And, thirdly, that this significance, if analyzed, can tell us important things about the individual or group who engaged with Nature.

Let me now proceed with the remainder of the “Groundwork Section” in establishing the connection between Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice, especially that with the \textit{lu}, and this dynamic concept of Nature.

B. Connecting spirit practice and nature

Before examining how the \textit{lu} and other spirit practices function in the same way as the concept of Nature established above, I will present a brief, more literal explanation of the natural environment as Tibetans see it and the place of the \textit{lu} within it.

1. Tibetan relationship to the natural environment

The imbuelement of the land with spiritual meaning is carried out in the Tibetan tradition through two main vehicles – that which concerns the cosmological system itself and that which is often referred to as the Tibetan’s “sacred geography.”

a. The Ritual Cosmos and its inhabitants

Though it is possible to draw connections between the Tibetans’ perception of the material universe and several complex systems of structuring phenomena, the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology can be said to be primarily derived from the system detailed in the early \textit{Abidharmakosha}, a work composed by the Indian Buddhist master Vasubandhu, which dates to around the 4\textsuperscript{th} century AD (Beer 103). This text holds that the entirety of our physical universe, also known as “great universe,” contains a “thousand million
world systems of ‘small universes’” of which ours is “but one” (103). In a creation story that details the collision of four strong directional winds in the void of space, the text tells of how the winds’ volatile chemistry produced a “cosmic ocean” from which emerged the famous Mt. Meru, thought to be the great central mountain of our universe which was marked by “four directional faces” and a dwelling place for the higher gods stretching upwards from its summit (103). Seven concentric rings of golden mountains – progressively diminishing in height and separated by inner seas – then surrounded this great central mountain, and beyond them collected a great saltwater ocean bounded by a final “circular ring of iron mountains” (104). Out of this saltwater ocean arose the four directional continents, including ours, the southern continent, Dzambuling, each one accompanied by two sub-continents positioned on either side (which bore the same color and exactly half the size of their respective main continents) (104).

Invoked frequently in the mandala offerings of Tibetan monks and lay practitioners, it is this framework within which the Tibetans situate their material world (Samuel 158). But if the Mt. Meru schema provides the skeleton for the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the world around them, it is the beings of the Sipe K’orlo or the “Wheel of Life” that fleshes it out, animates it in producing a vibrant, living understanding of the contents of natural world – a concept encapsulated in the common Tibetan expression of the universe, nöd-chüd, literally “container-contents” (158). The organization of the “various modes of rebirth” in this Wheel is the most familiar source of reference for the local understanding of our primary topic, the worldly spirits, commonly organized into Eight Classes⁴ (161). As we will encounter some of these in

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⁴ a system of classification found primarily in the Nyingmapa texts (Samuel 161).
the Ethnographic portion of the paper, the Eight Classes in full constitute the lu, the aquatic deities, the nyen or atmosphere dwellers, the sadag of the soil, the tzen of the rocks, the gyelpo “king-spirits” often mountain deities, the dud who are openly malevolent, the mamo a class of “ferocious female deities,” the sa of the planets, the nodjin or guardian deities of the soil, and the lha proper, a class of benevolent white deities (162-163).

b. The concept of Sacred Geography

And this is where the concept of a “sacred geography” enters. As is perhaps recognizable in the naming of the Eight Classes above, in the Tibetan worldview, each particular group of living beings have their own “proper environments,” making for permanent associations, in the minds of Tibetans, between particular geographical landmarks and their inhabitants (158). Such associations automatically provide for a special understanding of the material world around them, but because of the dependence, fear, and religiously-contextualized and pragmatically-motivated respect for these beings that is held by Tibetans, these sites become not just places of association, but places of religious importance along side “caves where holy lamas had meditated,” “marks that had been left in rocks by Guru Rinpoche or King Gesar,” “lakes whose patron spirits could aid lamas to divine the karmic currents,” even “hidden valleys that had been opened by seers of the past as retreat places for spiritual practice” (158), each of which must be “appropriately maintained” and honored with the construction of a number of symbolic devices (158). These symbolic devices – “temples, gompa, mountain-cairns, rock-carvings, mani-walls inscribed with mantras, ch’orten containing the remains of great lamas of the past,” and also the human-constructed houses for the lu called lu-bang –
then, are also sites of the human being’s “virtuous action” of proper maintenance and respect for a given loci of importance (159). These places of association and constructed devices constitute the sanctified layer of a “whole structure of meaning” distributed through the landscape that “literally grounds” the Tibetan religion in the natural environment (159). And it is within this animated landscape that the lu and other spirits dwell.

2. Tibetan understanding of the lu spirits

With this understanding of the shared habitat of humans and the lu, let us now look more carefully at just what Tibetans believe these spirits are like.

A description of the lu by the president of the European Buddhist University and renowned Tibetan cultural professor, Philippe Cornu, encapsulates a commonly-held Tibetan understanding of the nature of the beings:

The lu are aquatic deities. Of pre-Buddhist origin, they were very quickly assimilated to the Indian nagas. They live underground, in springs, lakes, and rivers…[They] can be vindictive when their natural home is disturbed. The pollution of water, the construction of barrages and dykes, irrigation works altering the course of rivers are acts that can lead to illness if not carried out at the astrologically correct time. The nagas can take revenge by sending diseases such as leprosy to the responsible human beings (Cornu 1990: 226-229).

Though analysis of the lu’s characteristics will follow, note their association with specific loci of pragmatic importance and the subsequent emphasis placed on the potential consequences of their behavior.

In his scholarly volume Drung, Deu, and Bon, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, a Dzogchen Master and Professor at the University of Naples, contextualizes the lu in their folkloric symbology. He recounts a passage from the Birth of Ling, the epic cycle of
poems involving the mythic adventures of the King of Ling, Gesar (a figure not at all
unlike Odysseus cited above), describing the birth of Gesar’s stepbrother Gyatsa Shelkar
which features the lu in an illuminating way:

So, in order to conquer the twelve fortresses of Tibet
And the four demonic realms at the four borders
The deities have chosen a man from among the pure Ling.
He will be able to fight against the bravest men…
He will subjugate the immaterial beings that cause hindrances…
He will be like a superhuman being.
He will be assisted by the Lha deities above,
Worshipped by the Nyen tutelary deity,
He will receive gifts from Tsugna the Lu
And will obtain a body endowed with miraculous faculties (9).

Here, an elaboration upon Gyatsa’s great strength necessarily entails the subjugation of
the “immaterial beings that cause hindrances” – a subjugation that inevitably invokes
Padmasambhava’s subjugation of the non-Buddhist spirits at the inception of Buddhism
in Tibet. Indeed, it is no surprise that many regard Gesar himself an “emanation of the
guru Padma(sambhava)” (Norbu 5). Gyatsa’s description is representative of a long-held
tradition of invoking the characteristics of the all powerful Padmasambhava and other
guru figures – or their “magical and shamanic ambience” in lu narratives, and it
illuminates the notion that though most humans are ‘at the mercy’ of these beings and
must pay respect to them for fear of their power and “vengeful” behavior, there are those
who have developed “superhuman” qualities to which the lu will answer and offer much
in the way of their abundant supply of “gifts” – wealth and prosperity (396). Another oft
told narrative involving the lu features a journey to the underworld, by the great
philosopher Nagarjuna during which the Prajnaparamita Sutras had been “revealed to
him personally by the naga spirits (397). Even his name “alludes to his relationship with
these spirits” and is representative of the association between the lu spirits and the rich folkloric fascination with alchemy and magic (397).

Outside myth, in the local community, these “superhuman” figures are represented by the lamas or shamanic practitioners who are sought out by their “lay clientele” to deal with, appease, even subjugate the worldly gods and spirits through Tantric ritual for the lay community’s pragmatic ends (Samuel 175). Indeed, all of the individuals who I interviewed emphasized the wealth of the lu empire and the possibility that, should these beings be courted with formal ceremonies mediated by the community lama or through more personal offerings, they would benefit kindly from this wealth.

Because of their performance of the formal tantric ceremonies mentioned above, it is stated that “lamas in Tibet function as shamans,” thought they do so “through the techniques and practices of Vajrayana Buddhism.” Here a definition of shamanism, offered by Geoffry Samuel in his scholarly volume Civilized Shaman, as a “category of practices” – in use to “differing degrees” in all human societies will prove crucial to our later analysis of the concept of the lu as related to the concept of Nature:

They concern the “regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience” (8).

3. Parallels in the function of the concept of the lu and the concept of Nature

There are a number of relevant elements drawing the connection between the lu and the concept of Nature established previously.

Perhaps most obviously is the lu’s lack of visibility. Like the processes in the past, invoked by the term nature, by which the moly plant became what it is in the present, the
lu themselves and their lifestyles are, in an empirical sense, “hidden” – not only from view, but to the extent that their form prevents them from directly communicating with humans, from a certain understanding of their actions. In addition, the lu’s “vindictive” tendencies, their capacity to “take revenge by sending disease,” and their reputation for “capriciousness” makes their potential for danger a constant threat, which makes them, in the terms of cultural anthropology, “symbolic representations of disorder and of lack of balance within individual or community” (189). As manifestations of chaos, then, the lu encompass the darker side of the unknown in nature. And the shamanistic, tantric rituals their behavior demands means interaction with them at times forces one to operate “outside the realm of everyday experience” in so far as this is a definitional part of shamanistic practice. In other words, in the lu’s requirement of shamanistic practice whose very use entails an attempted connection to a more fundamental reality – the lu engage the same sort of macrocosmic conceptualization of the universe that nature, in its fullest sense, does.

But, it should not be forgotten, that just as the “hidden” aspect of the moly plant’s nature has an “exterior” counterpart, one that is empirically and certainly known, the lu, too, are understood with certainty to the extent that they inhabit only certain spaces, and that they operate in an ordered schema of sentient beings – within the throes of the Wheel of Life – with assumed aims – ultimately desiring, as humans do, only happiness and escape from suffering. It is also thought, as we saw in the quote from the Gesar of Ling, that these beings, given powerful enough stimuli, follow logical, predictable patterns of behavior, being almost always appeased by offerings, and responsive to the rituals of
lamas. To this extent, then, the lu also represent what can be known and quantified with certainty, even a degree of “objectivity” despite their invisibility.

Not only, then, are the lu connected to Nature because they are an integral and regular part of the sacred geography or natural environment which inevitably constitutes the physical counterpart for the concept of Nature, they also are connected to Nature in their conditions of their existence in the conceptual space they occupy within the Tibetan culture.

It is in the tension of Nature’s dual meanings, then, that we may ground a connection with the lu – for in the interaction with the lu, as in that with Nature, there is a both a concrete, routine engagement with the natural environment, but also a less predictable, more extraordinary one. It is the way in which the concept of the lu functions simultaneously on two levels – objectively with predictability and less certainly or obviously – that makes the Tibetan interaction with lu an appropriate lens for understanding a simultaneous engagement with Nature.

II. Part II: Presentation of Ethnographic Information

Based on the connection between the concept of the lu and the concept of Nature established above, it would seem appropriate to move closer to the heart of my paper – my observations of the Tibetan interaction with Nature - but, given the bulk of primary source material available, there is simply too much to potentially say and too much depth to potentially span. Without strict scaffolding, one takes the risk of one’s house of ideas collapsing.

Such is especially the case when dealing in so-called “conceptualizations,” for one is not handling something objectively quantified and universally understood, but
something more slippery-slimy, something if talked about in isolation becomes an abstraction of an abstraction. In short – one is in want of a basis of comparison, a grounding principle. This is why I will place aside my observations of the Tibetan interaction with Nature for the moment, so I may establish, as I explained in the preface, Professor William Cronon’s theories on the American, but also Western interaction with Nature as a benchmark for my analysis. I will begin with a brief explanation of how Cronon’s argument functions within the theoretical approach with which he is commonly associated – Social Constructivism – and then move swiftly to the presentation of his argument.

A. America’s “Trouble with Wilderness:

1. Social Constructivism and contemporary environmental discourse

A particularly influential force in the contemporary, North-American dialogue on how pressing environmental concerns should be handled is a newly revived strain of thought concerning the social and cultural apparatus with which we approach our natural surroundings and the effects of the apparatus on our actions towards these surroundings. The embodiment of this force, which University of California Professor James D. Proctor in his article “The Social Construction of Nature: Relativist Accusations, Pragmatist and Critical Realist Responses” jokingly names “a new environmental villain,” and what more serious adversaries call the incarnation of a “radical form of postmodern deconstruction” whose “social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws” will be here referred to, in more unbiased terms, as the Social Constructivist Movement (Proctor 352).
Though the “vast minority in much of the academic community,” this movement’s individuals call into debate a broad collection of scholars with its assertion that what we call “nature” is “far less universal and extrahuman than we generally assumed” and that “what biophysical science reveals is less a glimpse into the workings of the natural world than the culture and politics of scientific knowledge” (Proctor 352). The position is perhaps best exemplified in the opening sentence of Professor William Cronon’s essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” namely, “The time has come to rethink wilderness” (Cronon 1). Such may seem an overdose of the intellectually “frothy,” but, as Proctor points out, because “environmentalist discourse generally justifies its ‘oughts’ based on scientifically founded assertions of truth concerning the imperiled state of nature,” the constructivist argument strikes to the “epistemological core” of environmentalism’s moral and political campaign in its undermining of the “fact-value distinction” typically upholding scientific knowledge as an accurate “representation of nature” (Proctor 353).

As is suggested by Cronon’s opening invitation to rethink “wilderness,” much of this environmental debate’s particulars center around the legal definition underlying wilderness legislation in the U.S., here invoked in a passage from Wilderness Preservation: A Reference Handbook:

In general, wilderness is an area unchanged and uninhabited by humans. The U.S. Congress may have said it best when they described wilderness in the Wilderness Act of 1964: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain (355).
As if predetermined by the nature’s earliest conflicts in meaning, the use of the term wilderness entails two possible and by now familiar options. One option, laid bare in the above quote, encompasses an empirical quantification of a given quality – here, land “untouched by man” – in a given system “to which we can refer as if we were not involved in its construction” – in this example, the “landscape” or “natural environment” that is, for most conservationists, accurately rendered by science. The other involves a very questioning of the valid existence of the system of “nature” as we know it, as in the constructivist appraisal of nature (355). While social constructivists would likely see themselves as upholding phusis’ concern with the dynamic (and, they would argue, predominantly social) “process by which it [our conceptualization of nature] arose,” many natural scientists and other scholars (who affirm phusis to mean the static, “(completed) realization of becoming”) see constructivists as pursuing a “dangerous flirtation with relativism” (353). A “flirtation,” which many critics assert, only justifies “further exploitative tinkering with what little remains of wildness” (353).

Though their attacks may be justified, Proctor argues, critics who label constructivists as radical relativists who prophesize that “all we can ever perceive about the world are shadows” and then seal our doom by stating we can “never escape our particular biases and fixed historical-cultural position” are misleading in their accusations (358). In fact, as Proctor illuminates in his essay, such divisions between those who champion a world which “really does exist apart from humanity’s perceptions and beliefs about it” and “those who do not” are not only inaccurate but ineffective as they create an “abyss between constructivists and anticonstructivists” that is “simply too large to be productive” (353). And, just as Proctor does, I believe we must, despite
anticonstructivists attacks, “take social constructivism seriously” and find in their arguments about “Nature” (not my definition; substitute for *non-human world*) truths about society.

2. Cronon’s argument

a. Clarifying Cronon’s Intentions

Within the confines of his aforementioned essay, environmental historian and Wilderness Society board Member, William Cronon examines the ways in which wilderness functions as an exceptionally influential concept in contemporary North American environmental ethics and politics. As other social constructivists do, Cronon asserts that though wilderness is idealized as the “one place on earth that stands apart from humanity” it is “quite profoundly a human creation” – and as he later explains, a mirror that reflects “our own unexamined longings and desires” (69). This is why, then, Cronon opens his essay with the authoritative, even prophetic statement about the need to “rethink wilderness,” for, in his view, the creative principle of wilderness lies in this very faculty – thought. But he is, then, quite careful in delineating himself as a social constructivist who does not embrace “radical relativism.” Indeed, Cronon is specific about his desire to remain in the realm of epistemology in his critique of wilderness rather than dabbling seriously in ontology – for, he argues, that the “nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness” while always, in experiential terms, “the creation of very particular human culture” at a “very particular moment in human history,” is, ultimately, far from being “merely our own invention” (69). So though wilderness has not from its own side dictated the changes in meaning that our Euro-American culture has entretained, that hardly means it, flatly, does not exist.
b. The essay: A Western conceptualization of Nature and its function in society

For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness…the best antidote to our human selves (Cronon 69).

In these, the words of his opening paragraph, Cronon reveals the source of what he believes to be the West’s “problematic relationship with the nonhuman world” – namely, the opposition between nature (as non-human world) and civilization (exclusively human world) underlying the West’s engagement with Wilderness (69). And such, in fact, is the groundwork for the information of interest to us, namely, the characterization of the West’s engagement with Nature.

Cronon hereby notes that where the “calls of nature” – to shed menstrual blood or to defecate – once represented a “burden” for a man of society and a sort of pollution of the purity of the body, today, for the West, just the reverse is true (69). It is civilization.

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5. In quotations from sources dating to around the 1300s, the usage of “nature” took on a different guise than those handled in the first section of this paper, concerning itself with more societal concerns. Rather than designate one’s “constitution” itself, the word here commonly designated those functions or facts required by one’s constitution that existed outside the confines of decorum. These activities – namely, the production of “excrement, semen, and menstrual discharge” – were thought of as “nature” in the sense of the “burden of nature” and entailed a sort of internal struggle between what is required of one by society and what is demanded by “nature” (“nature” 1.2.a.).

Perhaps the most telling usage of this sense of the term is in theologian D’Argenteuil’s 1470 French Bible, which makes direct ties between Eve’s “nature” [here, referring to the female genitalia itself] and her original sin. His telling of the Edenic narrative proceeds as follows: “And so the woman…ranne to the tre and bote an apple, and anon…she toke shame and sorou seeng hirselue [herself] so naked and saugh hir freelte [frailty] and nature” (OED). Interestingly, here, Eve’s “nature,” that genitalia which denotes her sex, then, both is the locus of her greatest if darkest strength of seduction, as well as the agent of her most profound weakness.
and his “urban-industrial modernity” that is now the producer of the most potent form of “infecting” and “diseased” pollution (69), while “Wilderness” – now the opposite of a burden – is precisely that place of escape and reprieve from the “too-muchness” of our humanness (69).

Importantly, then, in functioning as the antidote to civilization for Westerners, Wilderness also operates in reaction or in opposition to excess (69). As in the common myth of the Frontiersman, Cronon explains, Nature becomes an arena in which we must “pair down” our material “too-muchness” and shed civilization’s trappings – our business clothes, laptops, and electric toothbrushes – in favor of a sort of noble poverty. In casting off the heavy burden of our material accumulation for the span of our day-trip or extended nature-venture we often likewise relieve ourselves of the accompanying burdens of the guilt and responsibility that accumulated with it. In the Frontier fantasy, Cronon explicates, with modern equipment no where to be found, man (yes, the “mythic frontier individualist” was almost always masculine in gender) could finally be left to be a “real man” with nothing to do but make his “primitive weapons” – bow and arrow, atlatl, knife, sharp rock – and freely flex his “Paleolithic muscles” without the “feminizing tendencies of civilization” and its constant call to duty (83). Indeed, the Frontiersman regarded any working of the land an acculturation of it and so he would insist for the land around him to be equally free of civilization’s burden; too many trails, signs, facilities, maps, guides, even rescue centers and suddenly he was no longer in the part of Nature, wilderness, he liked best (77; 83). Interestingly, then, in the

For the lengthy history of the term, I’d wager that “nature” still holds the weight of this profound hubris – and the subsequent dialectic between what is imposed, “culture” and what is inherent, “nature” that arises from it.
Frontiersman’s fleeing from the ethical and moral obligations of society, he only enters himself into a new, even more restraining ethical system in which any conduct outside of that of the “primitive man” is “wrong.” Beneath this Frontier fantasy of Wilderness, then, we find the “rugged man” – free, perhaps from the marital duties of his “old maid” at home – is now trapped on “virgin lands” he cannot change or touch, degraded to the intellectual equivalent of an animal (77). Instead of the rules of Civilization monitoring his conduct, the Frontiersman operates in an arena where, effectively, Nature does so – where any action outside the “primitive natural” is forbidden. Unexamined by its greatest fans, however, the Frontier Fantasy and its “pairing down” seems still a luxurious “escape from burden” rather than a return to it.

And this longing to “pair down” physically is not far, in my mind, from that desire to “pair down” morally – to return to the nude-ness, the purity, and the innocence of the original humans before their original sin. Here then, the Wilderness becomes an arena not simply for shedding the “contaminating taint of civilization” and its material aspect, but also for shedding a sort of moral pollution (69). In his essay, Cronon carefully traces the development of the concept of Wilderness to its present form as the sacred, “pristine sanctuary” of Eden, where the “very last remnant” of an “untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature” can still be encountered, and in doing so reveals that before the turn of the 20th century, Wilderness hardly represented a stronghold of moral purity (71). Traditional Biblical associations, Cronon tells us, pin Wilderness as the very home of the devil – the place where the people of Moses in desperate confusion worshiped a false, golden idol; where Christ had himself struggled with the devil’s temptations; and where Adam and Eve were thought to have been banned
when first driven from the Garden (71). But due to the effects of the concept of the sublime – propounded by writers like Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke – and of what Cronon calls the “post-frontier ideology,” Satan’s Wilderness, around the first decade of the 20th century, became “God’s Own Temple” (71). Cronon cites the writings by the Scottish-born American Naturalist John Muir in defense of the Tuolumne River in Hetchy Hetchy Valley from dam construction, representing one of the first spokesmen for the preservation of Wilderness as a mainstay of moral purity (71). Of the dam’s defenders he writes, “Their arguments are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden – so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water and scenery going to waste” (71). The ideas of the sublime and the Frontier’s creation of a new, positively-emboldened version of Wilderness served, then, as the foundation for Wilderness’ association with some of the “deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it” -- therein, given the West’s ethical preoccupations, becoming sacred (72).

In short, that Wilderness was “a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface,” was long instilled in the Western culture, but that it might be, via its access-point to the sacred-divine was a powerful new idea that continues to shape the West’s engagement with Nature (72). Thus, though God was always thought to be able to expose majesty in any situation he “chose,” he now would most often be found “in those vast, powerful landscapes” free from marks of society, because it was in these environments that man could, so the idea goes, shed his egoism and assume his proper relationship with God – one in which feelings of insignificance were forcibly imposed on the viewer, reminding him also of his powerlessness in the face of his own mortality (72).
The best identifier of such places – despite a number of aesthetic clues – was the feeling of the sublime – a feeling, “far from being a pleasurable experience,” closely resembled terror. English Romantic Poet William Wordsworth, one of the most famous articulators of this deeply profound feeling gives us some idea of its dimensions in his description of his adventures into “the immeasurable height/ Of woods decaying, never to be decayed” and those by “the raving stream” as being “a sick sight,” whose elements were the “features of the same face” – God’s, of course – in “the characters of the great Apocalypse” (73). But even more explicit was the American phenomenon Henry David Thoreau’s account of his climb of Mount Katahdin, in Maine: “It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone that you can imagine…Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty” (73). Here, man finds himself in an environment in which he is beyond utterly “alone” at the mercy of “Vast, Titanic Nature” itself (73). In this important model of Nature reminiscent of the Last Judgment, Wilderness is an arena in which man must endure the great pain of retribution in a sort of ritualistic, even masochistic purification in which man receives “what he deserves” for the sins he committed via his participation in the “more pollution” of civilization (75).

If the restraining shackles placed on the Western man when he engages with Nature was not clear in the Frontier Myth, it could here not be more plain. As Muir himself states, “Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask” and “with unresting effort that lies at the door of hope…humbly prostrate [myself] before the vast display of God’s power” – “eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with
eternal \textit{toil} to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript” (75). Historically embodying societal doom and then the home of the devil, Nature now becomes an arena of degradation necessary to man’s personal salvation: “Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul” – the “place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives” (78). Pretense of freedom now discarded, man enters Nature not as an (falsely) emboldened Frontiersman (ethically-restrained though he is) but as a sort cowering, prostrated, lowly figure who bears the mark of civilization in shame as upon his shoulders alone.

And that Wilderness is touted as the “\textit{last} remaining place” – signifier singular – untouched by civilization should not be overlooked, for such a designation denotes a specifically singular entity – One last place – which renders Nature a singular noun, analogized easily with the One God, the “Vast” singularity who must by accessed by a similarly singular, “utterly alone” human pioneer.

Finally, then the culture-nature divide, the separation between man and the natural environment that follows from the above understand of Wilderness, is fully understood -- the evaluation of man in nature by God or by the singular Nature of just how “civilized/feminized” or how “morally polluted” he is must be an individual undertaking. Rather than interact with the dynamic community that surely exists within our natural environments, man engages here with Nature, with Wilderness in a way that is concerned only with confronting a singular Other, an other rather at odds with complex interdependence.
Cronon ends with this the central paradox of the Western conceptualization of Nature: “Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural - a paradox which - if we allow to be true, means that our very presence in nature represents its fall” (84). Here, Cronon finds final success in articulating the social constructivist dilemma that motivates his academic work, and we find a framework, with a number of access points by which we may assess the observed engagement with Nature presented in the next section.

The key notes on the Western conceptualization of Nature, listed for simplification, are as follows:

- Framework for Ethical Model –
  - Man engages with Nature in a way that, for the false promise of freedom from the physical “pollution of civilization” or for that of the purification of the moral “pollution of civilization,” subjugates him, forces him to prostrate, alone before either Nature (in the material, Frontier model) or God (in the Nature as “God’s Temple” one) and subsequently reinforces the Nature-Culture divide by removing in his paralyzed, degraded singularity from the dynamic community of non-human entities.

- Characteristics –
  - Nature as the antidote to civilization; Nature as an arena to confront One Nature, One Other, One God not community.

- Nature as an arena for a material “pairing down” or “shedding” from which emerges the falsely emboldened “rugged-ness” of the Frontiersman, whose
“rugged-ness,” despite its claims to the opposite, entails the restraint of man’s conduct until it matches that of primitive or animal uniformity and survival.

- Nature as untouched, “virgin” lands, where another form of restraint is placed on man’s civilizing/feminizing tendency to work the land.
- Nature as an arena for moral retribution, with an emphasis on man’s degradation and prostration before the “vast,” ensuing a proper subjugation through pain and fear.

B. Presentation of Ethnographic Research

1. Identifying a particular engagement with Nature

   It will be best for me to start with a full narrative of my first interview with Anila’s well respected and learned classmate, Geshe-la Kun-chuk Wang-dun, for his conception of Nature was atypical of the group of individuals I interviewed. This was so because at certain moments in his interview, he exemplified an engagement with his surroundings reminiscent of the Western one propounded in Cronon, and in others, he exhibited the characteristics of what I came to associate with a different, explicitly non-Western engagement with Nature common among all of the ethnic Tibetans I interviewed in Ladakh. In this narrative, I hope for those elements of Geshe’s answers that exhibit the unique engagement with Nature which I am most interested in documenting to stand in stark contrast to those elements of his answers that represent for me something more familiar to the Western conceptualization of Nature. After this narrative, I will proceed in a less expository fashion to support with examples the characteristics of the unique engagement with Nature here illuminated.

   a. Narrative of interview with Geshe-la Kun-chuk Wang-dun
Prior to this, my first interview, Ms. Tawni Tidwell, who had spent a considerable amount of time in Li-kir a rural locality near Leh, enthusiastically explained to me the vibrancy of the spirit practice she had witnessed during her time in Ladakh. And, having taken note during Ani-la’s introduction of the Geshe-la at Elysium House of his upbringing in Ladakh, I eagerly approached this interview as an opportunity to encounter the mystical understanding of Nature I assumed had been planted in every Ladakhi child and that would have remained untouched in the Geshe-la despite his many years away from home. “How lucky!” I thought, to have an academic such as the Geshe speak directly to the conceptual function of Nature in his society and, with so precise a translator as Ani-la. With these expectations, I earnestly put forth my first question about the Geshe’s “deep connection to the land,” asking especially for a focus on his experiences with the lu.

Rather immediately, though, when Ani-la asked me to clarify just what I meant when inquiring about Geshe’s “deep spiritual connection to the land,” I understood that my questions were not to be answered in the conceptual language they hoped to provoke. Indeed, my inquiries, more than understandably, were taken perfectly literally. Geshe dealt out his “connection to the land of Ladakh” in concrete, logical, objective, universally/scientifically verifiable examples. He spoke of the quality of the Ladakhi sun that prompted the mind to “stay fresh and alert” and that made solar heaters an “effective energy solution” as well as of the purity of the air – “free of dust-particles” – that allowed one to see far into space – “like a telescope where you can see the moon” (1). There was also, he explained, a safety in Ladakh that meant one need not “be near civilization to feel safe” (1).
To my dismay, the Geshe’s mention of purity was hardly that of an idealized “pristine garden,” neither was his mention of freshness that of a moral reinvigoration, or safety that of a refuge from the excesses of civilization. And though he did do comparative work between the effects of the natural environment on European and Ladakhi people—he did so, in effect, only to draw causal connections between the frequency of overcast days and incidence of depression: “More sun,” he said, “means people are just jollier and more happy and more outgoing” (1).

The failure of my vague, abstract questions to garner answers of like kind was clearly the result of my unskillful approach. But what felt genuinely troubling, though, was his reaction to my concern with the lu practices. After offering answers delivered like those rational, step-by-step responses wielded in a monastic debate, Ani-la translated the following of his thoughts in response my next question regarding the difference in his experience of nature in Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh:

“So according to his feeling toward nature in Dharamsala…the main point of difference [between his experience of “nature” in Ladakh and in Himachal Pradesh], is his feeling [that the natural environment in Ladakh] is conducive to your practice. But coming to the [question of] local sorts of spirits, if you like, he’s not very interested in any of that because basically not all of these spirits are good which require human sacrifice and animal sacrifice basically. So this has been stopped now, this has been forbidden – to make animal sacrifice and so forth. However, this is what some of those spirits are basically requiring. [They are] not necessarily benevolent spirits, so Gen-la says he’s not very interested in any of this kind of spirits” (1).

How the lu was to serve as a lens by which I might make affirmative statements about the an ethnically Tibetan interaction with the world around them when my interviewees were “not interested” in them, even ethically opposed to “any of that” worried me deeply.
Indeed what surprised me the most was the injection of what felt like a strong, over-riding and rather unexpected ethical system restraining his connection to his natural surroundings, not at all unlike the ethical system I found to restrain Westerners in their various engagements with Nature. For it was not that his interest in such spirits waned because the spirits did not exist, but, instead, because interaction with them was wrong. In fact, it seemed to me that they did very much exist for Geshe-la, perhaps with even more potency than the solar heaters and clear-air if only for the fact that they were so strictly “forbidden” – which is why his claim that he was not “interested in any of this kind of spirits” struck me as not only as troubling but as disingenuous (1).

Geshe’s handling of his natural surroundings above was, firstly, as an empirical quantifier (in his observations of this and this degree of clarity of sun, of air, etc.) and, secondly, as a devoted student who valued nature for the benefit it presented to his practice. Such a single-minded albeit self-less (only for the Dharma) pursuit, though, was peppered with hints of a fear, it seemed, not even so much concerning the consequences of interacting with such spirits (the danger of the spirits seemed less important), but of potential accusations of disloyalty to his practice if he did engage with these “lesser” worldly gods.

For if the interaction with the spirits or their demand of sacrifices is forbidden, just who, I wondered, is doing the forbidding? For a Buddhist religious system that, unlike the Christianity at the center of Cronon’s argument, conceives of no creator god, there seemed an over-bearing singular figure – very much like the exacting God in the Western conceptualization of Nature – who was monitoring the Geshe’s action and whose judgment demanded a sacrifice of its own – if not of human or animal lives, than
at least of one’s stated “interest” in spirit practice (as if interest were equated with the act of sacrificing itself). These seemed the words of one whose reasoning was governed by more absolute, ethical boundaries rather than personally evaluated and affirmed ones.

And then there was what seemed to me a rather interesting exchange between Ani-la and him in her continued translation. I told Geshe that I was “interested in one’s feeling of completeness when in the natural landscape of one’s homeland, and how one might then feel somehow incomplete when not in one’s homeland.” I told him, through Ani-la, that I wanted to know, “Does that sense of being cut-off or incomplete ever manifest in the feeling of Buddhism here?” In one of his first moments of vulnerability, Geshe-la, replied in saying that “he is also like a refugee, if you like, because his home is in Ladakh” and he “hardly goes these so he spends more time in an area that is not his home.” “So he is saying,” Ani-la told me, “that even though Ladakh is actually poorer…lacking in terms of facilities, nevertheless, things are kind of better there.” And here is where the interesting exchange comes. She then said and I transcribed the following:

“So I kind of double-checked and like asked him so do you think your practice would be better here or better there and he actually said…well…[there is pause, she turns to him and triple-checks in Tibetan]….oh I guess I was misunderstanding, Gen-la is actually saying that the facilities are poorer there and actually he’s in a different place now, and so actually the whole world is his home, in a sense. It’s not like he’s totally removed where he’s from because he’s still, you know, on this planet.”

The above proved rather fascinating to me in retrospect as it seemed Geshe was in the process of articulating a sort of emotional trajectory – about the difficulties of living as a “refugee” away from his home – when he was then called upon by Ani-la to stand by
this admittance. At this moment on the recording, there is a pause during which he seems to make an effective change of mind-set from a subjective to an objective perspective – or, better put, from one whose focus was on the local – a focus on his particular experience in this particular city, Dharamsala – to one whose focus was on the universal which entailed an intellectual reconsideration of his feelings given the vast expanse of the “whole world.” Metaphorically, he seemed to move from a sort of decentralized perspective in which his individual experience was of importance to a more centralized one that sacrificed the particulars of his feelings for a sort of absolute maxim of what one “should feel” if you’re still “on this planet.” This deferral of one’s personal feelings to that of the ethical universal seemed to me strikingly analogous to Muir’s desire to “humbly prostrate [himself] before the vast display of God’s power” (Cronon 75). But even more than the deferral of the personal for the “vast” universal, it was the notion of prostration, of becoming “stripped-down” that came to represent for me the key difference between the Western and what I consider Tibetan conceptualization of Nature, a difference which seemed grounded in the aims – ethical versus, as we shall see, pragmatic – of the man encountering Nature.

But perhaps what proved the most interesting part of the interview was when Geshe, without my prompt, returned, as Ani-la told me, to “the other part of your question” about the spirits “or what he’s calling ‘celestial beings’ that you find in Ladakh” (2). And here is when he underwent another rather drastic change in tone. What had been before been an exceedingly rationalistic approach to describing phenomena in Ladakh, now gave way to a much more enthusiastic, narrative voice. Though, of course, he was keen to begin with a number of qualifications: “So he’s saying he doesn’t believe
that they [the spirits] themselves can actually have a benefit on the practitioners in 
Ladakh” and she repeats once again, “Yes, he’s not saying that they can directly have a 
benefit for you,” but then she proceeds, “however, just seeing their existence for example 
possessing someone…” (2).

The possession story that followed is marked by what seems to me a different 
tone, liberated from the restraint of his previous fear about moral conduct (10). Ani-la 
states the following:

“So someone who is possessed by a spirit – previously they 
spoke Ladakhi dialect, now they can speak perfect Tibetan 
which is like totally impossible if you think scientifically, 
like a person not having learned that language nevertheless 
being able to speak with perfect Tibetan when they are 
possessed – so that is a proof, for him that is proof, like 
seeing that, that there is other beings, that there is past and 
future lives and so forth.”

Again, what is so wonderfully surprising about these words, for me, was the underlying 
sense of awe – that perhaps spirit interaction which is unseen can effect what is seen, can 
expand what is known as possible, can reveal something “hidden” seemed to animate 
Geshe. But more importantly, it proved to be a sort of lesson for him, for, as Ani-la 
translated, “these beings have helped him to foster his faith in the Buddhist ideas, in the 
Buddhist concepts” (2). Here, then, spirit practice, rather than separating Geshe from his 
devotion as a student of the Dharma, instead reimburses his practice, invigorates his 
Bodhi aspirations. Hopefully, the words printed above carry the excitement and 
enthusiasm which was markedly absent in the first portion of the interview – and more 
than a sort of “jolliness,” it seemed his talk of the “unknown” part of his natural 
surroundings, of Nature in its fullness sparked a creative empowerment – one that led 
him to embolden and embellish his own particular, local experience rather than defer to a
sort of standardized explanation of how he should feel or act. In the latter half of the
interview, Geshe’s words invoked rather than the Western “pairing down” of one’s
material and moral reality, instead a sort of “dressing up” of one’s experience – with the
embellishment of vivid details, a palpable sense of the lived experience of the observer,
etc.

At the beginning of his interview, Gen-la’s speech was marked by (1) an
expressed “lack of interest” in spirit practice for the ethical dilemma their pragmatic
rather than religious benefit causes (2) by concrete, logical points so objective they
simply could not be disputed, and (3) by an appeal to a universal mentality perhaps best
invoked in his statement that the “whole world is his home.” These elements came to
represent for me, a caricature of the Western engagement with Nature – not because so
much because they exactly paralleled the characteristics Cronon assigns to the West but
because they exhibit a commonly-held restraint of conduct or moral “pairing-down” (1),
a “prostration” of one’s own language, feelings, or experience before a “centralized,”
singular “Vast” Other of a universal sort (2,3).

Towards the end, though, Gen-la displays a number of elements that suggest his
empowerment in the face of Nature – they may be seen as “equal but opposite” to the
Westernized elements – they are (1) a disregard for ethical qualms in embracing the lu,
and a more enthusiastic embrace for the pragmatic function of the lu (2) a rejection of
mere objective facts in describing one’s relation to Nature, in favor of a more creatively-
empowered, “dressed-up” Narrative voice, and (3) and the embodiment of a
decentralized, empowered scheme of power – all of which flies in the face of a
centralized “prostration” before the “One” scheme. But what I’d like to point out is not
simply that the individuals I interviewed represent a different, less ethically restrained engagement with Nature in comparison to the Western model, but also that they represent a more effective engagement with Nature in so far as their approach allows them to actually gain greater access to Nature, in its fullest potential – as a window to “more fundamental aspect of reality.”

b. Making the Case

Let us start then, with the aforementioned disregard for ethical qualms in embracing the lu. Though many of my interviewees often adopted an enthusiastic interest in spirits for pragmatic ends with no pretense of right or wrong conduct, rather than be overcome by the greed or selfishness generally assigned by ethics to the open pursuit of prosperity over that of salvation, they instead seemed to gain from their empowered choice a deeper understanding of the true nature of their reality, and a more responsible, humbled place in it than those who would have been restrained from interaction with the lowly spirits for fear of moral conduct.

One of the most potent examples of this aspect of the unique engagement with Nature came from the interview I conducted directly following mine with Geshe-la, which was that with Tsering Yangkey, Director of TESI, who was also in Dharamsala, before I left for Ladakh. Like the Geshe, Tsering was also born and raised in Ladakh, though in Choklamsar and her family is ethnically Tibetan and has only been in India for two generations. Because of her participation in the Bon religion whose spirit practice has, at least in the context of the exile community, been less overshadowed by its clerical counterpart than that of the Buddhist community, I moved my attention more specifically
to the domain of the *lu* from my general handling of mediums and possessions with
Geshe-la.

Unlike Geshe-la’s initial reticence to admit his interest in spirit practice or
“anything like that,” Mrs. Yangkey was incredibly knowledgeable about the *lu* and very
comfortable elaborating upon her surprisingly intimate relationship with them. Indeed,
from the beginning of the interview, she was clear about the potential benefits of
befriending the *lu*, stating, “If you make friends with *lu*, you are supposed to get very
wealthy; that is the concept. If you are farmer, if you make friends with *lu* – then you are
going to get good crops, before sowing seasons. Nomads to have rain, good snow, they
also make friends.” And, again, later in the interview, she again elaborated, “And we
believe lus are very rich, the empire very rich, very wealthy, lots of precious stones, lots
of wealth. So they get disturbed very fast, but if you know how to appease them then you
can get rich and beautiful – without pimples, without skin disease.”

Far from ashamed or fearful of her interaction with the *lu*, Mrs. Yangkey was, in
fact, rather embarrassed for only having read two of the three parts of a massive volume
of the Bon scripture giving the most complete account of the *lu* – what they are, why they
get upset, what happens when they get upset, how then to make them happy again, etc. –
called the *Lu-Bum-kar-nat-ta-sum*, literally book of the *lu* that are white, black, grey.
The volume details how to appease and mollify these spirits, and how, in Tsering’s
words, “to make friends with them” with instructions explaining what prayers to say,
what offerings to give, and when according to the astrological calendar and where. She
emphasized that for her and for almost all of the monastic and lay practitioners in
Ladakh, this book was where the formal, ritualistic education on the *lu* begins. And that
that is just how, she seemed to express, one’s aims for happiness needed to be handled –
with an education in the pragmatic not an imprisonment in the ethical.

And though there is, in certain parts of Tibet, antagonism between the Bon and
Buddhist traditions despite their contemporary forms being relatively complimentary, she
says that what is interesting about Ladakh is that even though the Ladakhi population is
Buddhist, they also traditionally read this scripture. She told of a Mr. Paljor in a village
called Stakna in Ladakh who was a Buddhist in her family. When he one day visited her
family home with the Bon scripture, her entire family was so surprised. All asked, “Are
you Bon now?” – and Mr. Paljor emphatically stated, “No, I’m a Buddhist! I’m a
Buddhist! But then we read this scripture just to have a good crop.” The underlying
principle for her and others’ enthusiastic interest in the lu – as she put it: no one “wants to
be enemies with that spirit world.”

While an ethical point of view might name one so concerned with the pragmatic
inappropriate in their conduct – exhibiting, for example, selfishness or egoism, this could
not be farther from the truth. Her desire to read the Bon scripture is hardly based on
greed, but based instead on an acknowledged fact of the reality of the vast Tibetan
Cosmological Scheme that “spirits are very much a part of our lives ‘cause… we don’t
just have anthropocentric beliefs” and that “the earth is not just for human beings and it’s
not just human beings trying to achieve enlightenment – everybody is.” Given the ethical
schema initially propounded by Geshe-la, interaction with worldly spirits might seem to
distant one from their “devotion to the Three Jewels,” but in the framework in which
Mrs. Yangkey is operating, such interaction in fact strengthens one’s practice of
interdependence. In this framework, Geshe-la’s ethical system only separates him from
the opportunity to engage with his own natural surroundings fully. In fact, she stated, “People [in exile] are reluctant, thinking the spirits are evil, not good to interact with. Buddhism, you know came later [to Tibet], and when they came, they came as a philosophy but the ritual part stayed on. But then people who think that they are really Buddhist, they tend not to say anything about spirit because they said they have ‘transcended that.’”

And then, the result of Mrs. Yangkey’s enthusiasm is a transformation of the fear of the potentially “dangerous demands of the spirits” into something quite different. When I asked her “Is there a fear of the spirits? Or is it a sort of symbiotic relationship?” she replied, “Symbiotic. If you are good to them, they help you. If you are bad to them. It is like your neighbors…so there’s like you know the interdependent nature of everything.” Like the Geshe, Mrs. Yangkey’s enthusiastic engagement with the non-human world around her represented an expansion of her knowledge beyond the visible, or immediately knowable and, in addition, reanimated the ideals of interdependence and the intrinsic value of everybody.

And just as Mrs. Yangkey had suggested, the enthusiasm and frankness of interest in the pragmatic benefits of interacting with the lu was nearly ubiquitous. Some of the more interesting interpretations of how this enthusiasm might be expressed came from a series of interviews with the residents of a village near Leh called Gangless. The first was with a female elder, the grandmother of my kind translator in Ladakh, Rinchen Dolkar of the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh. She spoke predominantly of the “traditional system” and what she said about how her generation handled their “faith” in the lu was very telling. With the materially and morally “paired-down” image of the Western
frontiers man in mind and Geshe’s “not very interested” still ringing in my ears, I was surprised by the excitement with which Rinchen’s grandmother described the whole community’s attendance at the annual Gangless celebration and tantric ceremony to appease the lu, called the lu-stor. In stark contrast to the restraining “pairing-down” of the frontier, the women of the village took great pleasure in donning their finest wear to the celebration. Rinchen translated the following: “It was very important to be in the proper place,” she said. “When they used to go to stor to bring some flowers, all the women used to have wrist bracklets, white in color, made from a conch shell – tung-lok – and they used to dress up with perag (head-dress).” These pains to beautify were to show respect for the lu, of course, but as perags are an explicit sign of wealth (represented in the number of lines of turquoise and coral sewn onto the strip of leather) as well as a reminder of the marriage ceremony in which they are most commonly used, such “pairing-up” was perhaps even more explicitly a celebration of one’s own monetary and marital success, appropriate for the occasions because this success would have been at least was in part attributed to the favor of the lu.

Where the ethically inclined might see a flurry of ostentation and mark it offensive, the pragmatically minded regard such events as opportunities to rather than escape from society, as the Western man’s ethical guilt prompts him to, instead enter it more fully and, for Sonam Yangzom, current Director of Women’s Alliance of Ladakh, strengthen its ties. She states of the task of creating and maintaining a lu-bang, the man-made house built as a sort of castle for the lu, “Right now grandparents are looking after the lu, but tomorrow they have to transport the power to the grandchildren. Whatever she is doing right now, tomorrow her children have to do. So this is a family kind-of
lineage.” The message, again, seemed clear: rather than a restraint or separation of one’s self from the world around one for fear of misconduct, such enthusiasm of interest only brings the enthusiast closer to the interdependent reality in which one lives. Sonam states, “There is nothing to fear of the lu. So if you will keep them clean…there is nothing to worry, nothing to fear. They are like brothers and sisters – a part of one’s family, a part of one’s like that has to be kept.”

To me then, it seems, that when one interacts with the natural environment in an ethical way, one is concerned first and foremost with correct conduct and so one’s attempt to understand the Nature of the situation in full is restrained and stunted. Such an attempt to understand Nature may then be stunted not only for a fear of misconduct, though this is heavily present, but also for the inevitable separation that comes from “not being interested,” not even engaging with the portion of our reality that is known. Conversely, when one interacts with the natural environment in a way that is predominated by an enthusiasm for pragmatism over ethics – for empowerment over restraint, one is even more intrinsically interested about understanding a given situation as fully as possible, so as to best utilize the circumstances at hand for one’s own purposes. But, again, far from greedy, such an operation entails, ultimately, a careful assessment not only of one’s own needs, but also of the needs of the other parties involved. Such produces an unrestrained enthusiasm, then, yeilds a deeply lived experience of interdependence and union rather than an escape from (Western) or avoidance of (element of Geshe) the fullness of one’s reality and all its inhabitants -- with Nature in full.
Now that we have a sense for just what the unique characteristic “enthusiasm for the pragmatic” means, let us move on to the next characteristic of this empowered interaction with the *lu* that I witnessed in Ladakh. Standing in opposition to Geshe’s initial tendency to empirically quantify the world around him, is that impulse to reject the “paired-down” objective in favor of the narrative voice that “dresses up” a depiction of a given reality with imagination. Here, again, we will start with Mrs. Yangkey, whose narrative voice was especially rich and captivating. Though she told me many stories featuring the *lu*, my favorite of all her stories was one her grandmother told her about the daily story-time in her childhood house. “In evening time,” she told me, “they [would always] tell a story. and my grandmother would tell a story that sometimes the *tzen* and *nyen* would want to hear so they would come over and sit on people’s noses and listen to the stories.” She stopped for a minute, “You know there are some people with power, yeah? – gifted power – they can see spirits.” (“Yeah!” I said wishing I did know this). “Well, one time, one of my grandmother’s uncles was laughing, laughing because [he saw that] one spirit was sitting on the story-teller’s nose and he was dozing off!” The uncle, laughing, screamed, “Oh, your story must be so boring because the spirit just fell off!”

Just as the marked difference in the Geshe’s tone changed remarkably from the beginning to the end of his interview, here Mrs. Yangkey’s tone also stands in such stark contrast to the seriousness, fear, even self-loathing of the romantic writers Cronon cites. Mrs. Yangkey’s tone also stands in contrast to what one imagines is the absolute absence of words taken on by the “rugged individual” with only his tools, muscles, and perhaps his virgin lands to speak with (though I doubt the reply is satisfying). Where the Geshe’s
initial diction and the Frontier man’s silence represent a restraint of the individual’s impulse to communicate and articulate, Mrs. Yangkey’s humor and gaiety of tone represent an empowerment of this impulse. Indeed, if the first characteristic of the empowered engagement entails a rejection of the ethical man’s subjugation of personal interest before a fear of misconduct, this second characteristic disallows a subjugation of the subjective, first-person voice below the language of the universally accepted and universally verifiable. As I mentioned in the very introduction to this paper – a full notion of nature encompasses both what is known and what is not known and thus engages faculties both of rationality and imagination. To limit one’s self to the use of such pure rationality, then, is to confine one’s self only to the realm of what is know and to again stunt or restrain one’s engagement with Nature via his/her restrained verbal interaction with the natural world itself or an articulation of it.

We find another example of such a narrative voice in an interview with Rinchen Dolkar’s Great Aunt and Sister-in-law. A particularly colorful pair, the two spent much of their interview recounting stories of the lu and other spirits, one of my favorites of

6 Rinchen Dolkar had not been back to her Great Aunt’s house since her marriage, perhaps 8 years ago, and so was made to look at various photo albums of family pictures and pertinent events. The Great Aunt had since won recognition from the India State Gov’t for her act of bravery when she rescued a rail-way patrol scout taken down the mountain-side by an avalanche. She was doing a routine clean-up of the area (which she performed as part of her state-employed maintenance work) when the avalanche knocked a patrol unconscious and carried him down the side of the mountain. She promptly left what she was tending to and, with unbelievable strength given her petite stature, secured him from under the snow, and called for help to the aid of his resuscitation. For this she received two medals, a plot of land, and numerous letters of recognition from high officers and administrators of the Indian army and government which she happily presented to us over butter tea and biscuits. We took an hour before the interview filling through albums of photographs and clippings concerning this event. Rinchen even interviewed her on public television about the event. She was incredibly humble about the matter.
which concerned “the Great Bakalar Rinpoche from Spituk Monastery, who died four or five years ago and whose reincarnation has recently been recognized in Nubra Valley.”

“Once,” the Great Aunt told us, the Rinpoche apparently “performed a great service to the people of Leh during the lu-stor he performed” when “nearby Tso, a precious lake, the people invited the Rinpoche to perform the ritual because there was a shortage of water in the season.” Such was not out of the ordinary, but, after he performed the initial part of the puja, the Rinpoche “told the others to please ‘let me be alone for a little,’” at which point he “a lot of lu and many other types of spirits – lha and man-mo” came forth when, suddenly, he vanished into thin-air! “Disappeared!” she said. When I asked Rinchen if she had seen the spectacle herself, she replied, “No, this was 30-35 years ago – at that time they were only children, but their parents were there to witness it.”

“Really?” I exclaimed incredulously. “Yes, yes,” Rinchen said, “the parents and grandparents always tell stories about it, saying it happened like this and this.”

And here too we see the incredible power of the empowered narrative voice to connect individuals – for, as with the ritual maintenance of the lu-bang, here the use of narrative voice also prompts the passing on of stories from generation to generation, creating bonds in unbroken lineages of an oral tradition. But perhaps even more so, we see the way in which the faculty of imagination, coupled with that of reasoning more honestly and humbly embraces a reality that is composed both of what is know and of what is not know. It is this capability of the imaginative, “dressed-up” narrative voice to place its users in touch with a more fundamental reality, quite outside the realm of everyday existence, that leads me again to conclude that if one is to properly engage with Nature, in its fullest sense, one must do so, rather than restrained to the non-subjective,
all-verifiable language of the rational, precisely with the unrestrained and empowered language of one who rejects prostrating before a falsely “vast” universe of a moral absolutes.

Finally, then, let us look to the third characteristic of a unique interaction with the natural environment – namely, that which involves an individual’s bold concern for their own personal, local feelings rather deferring, submissively if intellectually, to those of the universal. More broadly, this characteristic concerns itself with a sort of decentralized system of empowerment in which each individual’s experiences, feelings, and wishes need not answer to any over-riding, centralized maxim of expression. The expression of this characteristic can take many forms, but, for the first example, I have chosen to return to our two aunts, who began their interview by telling me the prayer they say to the lu during their cultivation or plowing of the land. “When we would ask the lu to give us some space for cultivation, we should say the prayer, ‘a-khana-mi-kane; a-chilli-mandali-so-ah’” which they told me translates as “Please keep aside; Please give space when we plow.” Here the power-structure we might normally think of creating insurmountable barriers between the invisible and the visible is absent, allowing even two girls, when they were very young and plowing the land, to address the lu, appeal to them for permission directly.

Mrs. Yangkey spoke of something very similar. “My grandmother always taught,” she told me, that “before you pee [on the ground, or in a bush where a lu might be making residence] you don’t say prayers… I don’t remember prayers but you say… ‘May my pee not dirty the lives there, spirits there’…that kind of thing” – and again with the appeal to the necessity of the situation, “may I not disturb the spirits here, this is
natural, I have to, but may I not disturb.” Even “the moment they [a family] moves to a new home, they have to offer incense, sages to make friends with the spirits…and when you leave you offer prayers in your hearth, your oven, in the place where you cook food and then you say a special prayer there because you don’t want to disturb them [with your departure].” Her stories - of how she touches trees in passing to offer a greeting to the lu and of how her friend’s and not her bike was stolen because she asked the lu to keep it on the tree instead of using a bike lock – all speak, more-or-less, to the same phenomenon – a personal empowerment in the interaction with spirits, a focus on the local, many rather than the ultimate or One (like the One God the Western Man confronts in the Wilderness) all of which seems to offer – beyond a simple sense of empowerment – a real involvement in the uncovering of the mystery of the invisible and the unknown, real, full engagement with Nature. Indeed, when Chunzin Nangmo Guru speaks of noticing a sign of the lu one day when there is a small stream of water trickling down the side of the oven or knowing a lu in a snake if the snake is wrapping around sandalwood, or in, as Sonam Yangzom says, “an all-white or all-black lizard” that creeps across your path, there is, one recognizes, an enlivening attention to the particulars of life’s experience, not unlike the animating effect of adding rich, idiosyncratic details to a story

III. A Brief Conclusion

Perhaps the argument of my Ethnographic section is already clear, but I will properly review. In the opening of my paper, I established a notion of nature that entailed a dual and dynamic assessment of its object of inquiry – one that took to heart not only that information about the object which was known, but that which also was “hidden.” I then proposed that when individuals or a group of them acknowledged and desired to
explore these dual qualities – both what is known and what is unknown – in the world around them that such an interaction would certainly be significant and revealing in that it would prompt the individuals or group to engage with questions not only of what there is, but what there might be – and thus to explore a reality more fundamental that than of their everyday experience. I then explained how the Tibetan interaction with spirits, especially, with the lu, provided just such a situation – a situation in which Tibetans were forced to engage with the lu not only as entities which existed predictably in their everyday, conventional world, but also as entities which were “symbolic representations” of unpredictable chaos and disorder.

In preparing to embark upon my presentation of the Tibetan interaction with the lu that I observed, I presented William Cronon’s observations of the Western man’s interaction with Wilderness, a concept like mine of nature which represented the known as well as the uncertain or “wild” aspects of the nonhuman world. Through Cronon’s argument, I presented a model of engagement with this nonhuman world that was marked by an ethically-motivated “prostration” of man in his surroundings that led only to, rather than a responsible engagement between man and the fullness of Nature, an insurmountable divide between them, the “great antagonism,” as Cronon puts it, between civilization and Nature. In contrast to the Cronon model, I presented a different model of engagement with Nature based on my own observations of ethnically Tibetan individuals. Rather than characterized by ethical preoccupations that led to the Western man’s “prostration” before his surroundings, this Tibetan engagement with Nature was marked by an empowerment (of pragmatic over ethical pursuits, of a creative narration of the one’s understanding of the lu, and of a validation rather than a dismissal of one’s
localized experiences with them) all of which, I argued, placed the Tibetan “engager” in closer connection to and, through unrestrained activity, more in touch with the fundamental reality of their surroundings.

At the close of my “Groundwork for Observations” Section, I stated that an analysis of a group or individual’s engagement (or attempted engagement) with Nature and the significance they place on it would offer important, revealing information about that group. Just how this information would be of either importance or revelation, though, I did not say. For though it is clear that certain notions, even “facts” of a group can be gleaned from the significance they place on their interaction with the natural environment, a static appraisal of this or that instance of engagement with Nature does little justice to what I believe is the magnitude of the interaction transpiring between the group and their understanding of reality.

In fact, I would wager, convenient as it may sound coming from an author released from a potential task of justification, the significance of one’s interaction with nature is not so much unlike Nature itself – able to grasped at, perhaps, sufficiently acknowledged, but, ultimately, always defying the entrapment of words, hiding parts of itself away from the analyst, forcing him or her to confront their discomfort with the unknown. If the exploration of one’s engagement with nature is to be confined to the page, as is attempted so imperfectly in this paper, but also not completely suffocated, flattened, or vulgarly caricaturized, perhaps it need be realized in part, at least, in the language of the imagination, empowered in tone but humbled and honest in its admittance of subjectivity, of not fully knowing except for in the particulars of one’s own feelings and expression of it as such. With a playful smirk, then, I hereby recant my
apology for adopting the melodic “literary voice I know best” in the confines of what perhaps was expected to be a scholarly endeavor of a straighter line, for in the placing down one mask, I only took up another, tying it more secure still – appearing as vulgarly ostentatious to some, offensively dramatic to others – but perhaps approaching my subject, Nature, on its terms, which, then, are my own.
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**Interviews**


Ethnographic Observation


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