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Emergent Digital Cultures

A Sensible Materialism: Storytelling, Paganism and “Staying with the Trouble”

Sound has the capability to construct worlds and identities, particularly when mobilized in a charged space embodying what Heidegger calls the fourfold, the meeting between mortals, gods/the dead, earth, and sky.[[1]](#footnote-1) Places exuding or possessing this “fourfold phenomena” are also conducive to the development of the feeling of dwelling. Underlying the concepts of dwelling and the fourfold are the concepts of attunement and the idea of various media working on human subjects and being worked on by human subjects.[[2]](#footnote-2) With this in mind, one may consider the ideas of immersion and embodiment and its relation to not only captured sound but the accomplishment of a new way of being, sympoeisis in which mutual becoming, living and dying with nature is paramount. In addition to constructing identities and space, sound, particularly that which conveys pagan histories, sensibilities, and ways of being with nature, may be mobilized for the purpose of constructing sympoeitic communities. By continuous immersion into this pagan soundscape, it may be understood that subjects will begin to embody these earth-centered sensibilities, histories, and ways of being so that they may “stay with the trouble” and create a community which consciously co-lives and co-dies with the earth and all the co-actants within the environment surrounding humanity.

Harnessing the Affective Environment

Within *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway constructs for us a path for which to somewhat assuage the destruction caused by patriarchal capitalist systems and those systems’ extractive environmental abuse, quite literally staying with the trouble being caused. A large part of this destruction and ignorance she places squarely on not only the propagation of extractive economic systems, but the ignorance of humans, or “humus” as she claims we ought to be called.[[3]](#footnote-3) This ignorance pertains to the importance of kin making, “co-becoming”, sympoeiesis found in nature within the relationships of all beings which constitute the great strands of the life web we find ourselves in.[[4]](#footnote-4) She illustrates this adeptly with many metaphors and stories, as stories to her are effective tools for the coming age, the chthulucene where the messy, dirty, multi-appendaged critters have the truth of the matter.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This truth to be re-learned by the humus is much more than just “co-living”, as that phrase doesn’t do much justice to the call being made, humus must do more than co-exist or co-live, they must be conscious of the intricate web of life systems and realize that even within their own bodies they co-live with critters, and this co-living hinges on the very well being of the humus subjects, as they must become something beyond human, as human itself is an othering title to Haraway, one involving the divine sensibilities and assumptions of sky gods rather than earth gods. There must be a construction of what Karen Barad calls agency, although this agency is not hinged on a singular subject, it is about acting, or rather, intra-acting to accomplish sympoeisis and address power imbalances.[[6]](#footnote-6) One must note further that co-living involves co-dying, not just as the natural order of things but serving as mourners for those kin that have gone before us. This co-dying, this being with loss is necessary as “mourning is about dwelling with loss and so coming to appreciate what it means, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Additionally, it may be said that “human beings must grieve with, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Environmental Ambience

This expansive “being-project” is no easy task, though there are methodologies through which to carry this out. One such method involves the usage of elaborate storytelling and myth making and acknowledgement of the fact that nature, existence itself is affective. The environments in which they find themselves be they urban or rural work on the humus subjects as they in turn work on their surroundings. Scholar Thomas Rickert discussions such things in his book *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013)in which he explores the phenomenon of the same name. This Rhetoric is pervasive and is described as a “discourse that transcends and trumps materiality”.[[9]](#footnote-9) This phenomenon is exuded by the environment around us and all the actants within seen and unseen. The external actants, the things of the world are already integral to what we mean by human being”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Through our senses, we construct the world and furthermore, this perception of the world is worked upon by the media with which we interact and allows we human subjects to not only define ourselves in opposition to this world and said media, but to create meaning infused with space. Space, or the background through which resonates ambient rhetoric, is accessed through human engagement.[[11]](#footnote-11) Such ways of engagement can be understood to be learned through storytelling, a key facet of human life for ages and one that is replicated in the sensible materialisms of the world.

Sensible Materialism: Animism and Paganism

Haraway utilizes stories to convey her message, citing stories to be an effective tool in staying with the trouble, creating narratives to address such issues. Stories help to establish reality, becoming another factor in the continuous co-constitution of various environmental factors and humus subjects.[[12]](#footnote-12) As such, storytelling is an important aspect of human reality as it is constructed by said stories, many of which find their homes in a religious or spiritual context that serve to inform the mode of being of a group. Haraway addresses this matter in a variety of ways, one of which she reaches to Native American traditions, not necessarily religions as that implies a colonialist lens, but life encompassing traditions of the sort that inform an entire group’s holistic and beneficial relationship with their surrounding environment with emphasis on “sympoeisis”, a concept of “making-with”, co-producing existence with kin species.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Referencing the Inuit and the Navajo nations, she leaves us a bread crumb trail off into the wilds by describing a contemporary storytelling process and a continued way of being respectively that allow for the establishment and dissemination of modes of thought constituent to a sympoeitic way of being. The first, a video game produced with involvement from the Inuit community is titled “Kisima Ingitchuna”, translated in English as “Never Alone”.[[14]](#footnote-14) The game, narrated in Inupiaq, presents an endeavor in which indigenous world building and storytelling have been incorporated into modern technology, allowing an individual to “play” a story, a new story with traditional themes, themes of sympoeisis and co-becoming with the surrounding environment and our kin which dwell there both seen and unseen.[[15]](#footnote-15) The primary actants in this active story are Nuna, an Inuit girl and a fox, the two set out to discover the source of an eternal supernatural blizzard and work with kin both seen and unseen, critters and spirits, to reach their goal.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Continuing within the indigenous cultural landscape, Haraway points to an event that occurred on the Navajo nation, mainly the wholesale slaughter of churro sheep and goats utilized by the Navajo and with no repatriation. Haraway paints a picture of recovering from structural violence and re-establishing animal populations in accordance with the Navajo concept of “hozho”. Hozho is a multifaceted Navajo word that bears similarity to the English word balance, although it is more than that. Hozho is somewhat akin to carrying capacity, referring to the balance necessary to existential harmony in a given environment. The word balance implies a static status quo, whereas Hozho does not have anything to do with stasis, “both carrying capacity and Hozho are not fixed, deterministic concepts; both are relational, contextual, tuned to some ways of living and dying and not with others”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

From two indigenous instances, Haraway points toward an all-encompassing way of being held by many indigenous groups around the world, animism. In her description, Haraway quotes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who wrote “Animism is the only sensible version of materialism”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Animism to Haraway is no mere religion, as religion and the notion of belief are concepts “too mired in the internecine and colonizing disputes of Christianity”, “belief is tied to doctrine, profession, confession, and taxonomies of errors”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Animism as materialism is necessary because of its emphasis on “material semiotics”, lived practices of worlding and sympoeisis, a “sensible materialism of involuntary momentum” contrasting stagnant “secular modernisms”.[[20]](#footnote-20) A sensible materialism, a way of being rife with the potential of material semiotics may be inferred to be found not only within indigenous practices, but also reconstructed pagan ways of being, particularly those originating within Scandinavia.

But what exactly is paganism? Michael Strmiska, an established scholar of European pagan movements does not shy away from the trouble of defining the movement(s) and the tribalism that has haunted various iterations of paganism from the nineteenth century that saw the utilization of Greco-Roman as well as Germanic pagan narratives to establish nationalist movements in various European countries to the present day. Strmiska wrestles with various definitions of paganism but lands on the definition provided by scholar Ethan Doyle Wright who proposes that “the contemporary pagan milieu be viewed as a ‘family’ of related religious, spiritual, magical, and esoteric movements, all of which are self-consciously inspired by those belief systems of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East which were not Abrahamic but which existed prior to the Abrahamic religions’ rise to dominance”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Haraway makes mention of the fact that within indigenous traditions there exists differing incarnations of the sensible materialism of animism. Pagan traditions can be considered of the same ilk but can paganism be understood as a sort of European indigenous religion? The matter of language is important to address here as the end goal is to ascertain whether paganism can help us stay with the trouble as far as an active materialist way of being is concerned. To Strmiska, while it is easy to think of Paganism as indigenous European religions, the term “indigenous” refers to groups having experienced the brunt of colonialism. As such, Paganism cannot be considered an indigenous European religion, though by its nomenclature as Paganism, all iterations of pre-Christian religion in the sense of Ethan Doyle Wright’s definition, can still be considered an effective materialism through which to stay with the trouble. Paganism may be understood as possessing the potentiality of a sensible materialism, particularly due to contemporary groups’ desires to not only distance themselves from Christian hegemony, but also their actions against capitalistic extraction and defilement of the environment.

Haraway calls for stories as helpers in staying with the trouble, and the varieties of Paganism, particularly the Norse variant, is awash in tales of divine making, striving, and dying that may aid one in such a task. While gods such as Odin, Thor, and Frey are certainly fixtures in the Scandinavian body of myth, much importance is placed on the spirits of the land, vættir, who come in many forms and are honored alongside the gods at ceremonies such as the blot, a communal feast punctuated by the offering of either blood or alcohol.[[22]](#footnote-22) There are many other nature spirits demonized by the coming of Christianity that dwell within the natural features of the land such as trees, forests, and stones whose tales consist of how they may be respected and dwelt with despite their fierce aspects. Though dire, it is no stretch of the imagination to see these entities and their tales as cautionary sagas of staying with the trouble in the Norse environment, tales that are being disseminated through songs of purposefully Pagan composition and content within a tide of artistry hailing from Scandinavia that seeks to spread knowledge of ancient folkways of being.

Sonic Iconography

In the realm religious, that which is iconographic must convey aspects of the associated belief system such as cosmology, history, or ways of being and mobilizing the body to the subject experiencing the iconography. Icons “enshrine values and meanings but also engender sensations, feelings, and experiences that are difficult to put into words”[[23]](#footnote-23) Though fleeting, sound too, may be considered as iconographic in nature. Religious materialist David Morgan in his piece *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (2005) argues that sound possesses iconic status because it’s utilization, like other examples of iconic materiality, has the potential to convey notions of a given divinity or a sentiment related to a divinity or larger religious system[[24]](#footnote-24). Morgan continues that “sound is a powerful icon when it turns into the very thing it represents: the voice of the divine. Whether spoken, sung heard, or seen, sacred forms of representation are performances that transform sounds and images into the things they signify”[[25]](#footnote-25).

The reason sound can affect human subjects so thoroughly is that it must be filtered through the media of the senses, through which said subjects construct all aspects of their reality and give it meaning.[[26]](#footnote-26) S. Brent Plate, who explores these notions of both meaning and world construction through sensual interaction with sacred objects states in a chapter of his book, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* (2014), dedicated to the drum that sonic vibrations permeate all existence and are crucial to both the mundane and mystical experience.[[27]](#footnote-27) In line with Plate and other theorists such as Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska is Frances Dyson, who hints towards human beings as these sensing subjects that exist in a co-affective relationship with he physical world around them. “We are all transistors in a literal sense…a human being is always bombarded with cosmic rays which have a very specific rhythm and structure, and they transform his atomic structure and by that his whole system”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

For Haraway’s errand of staying with the trouble, she suggests not a religion of sky gods but one of earth gods and for a break with the term religion, opting rather for a holistic, sensible materialism such as that found in Paganism. Norse paganism, while possessing both sky and earth gods, places an emphasis on the relationship with the land and its inhabitant spirits as they are encountered in the day to day and dwell with humanity. This Norse variety of sensible materialism, of living, being, and dying with possesses contemporary sonic iconography in the form of many folk and metal artists, but few approach their task as seriously as the folk musical project Wardruna.

Wardruna

Wardruna, founded by ex-members of the black metal band Gorgoroth, is a methodology of exploring Norse spirituality according to one of the founders Einar Selvik.[[29]](#footnote-29) The project’s songs are for the most part named after the characters of the runic alphabet, each one associated with an aspect of nature and possessing an accompanying rune poem. Wardruna utilizes many natural materials associated with what each rune represents in each rune’s associated song. For example, Wardruna utilized percussion made from the rhythmic striking of ice cores taken from a glacier in a Norwegian national park close to where Wardruna records for their song about the rune Isa, which is associated with ice and the stillness of frost.[[30]](#footnote-30) All the runes are associated with an aspect of nature, though some of their performances deal with older ways of being associating with these forces. One performance piece is called Helvegen, “the way to Hel” and is a contemporary creation drawn from the old practice of singing away the dying.[[31]](#footnote-31) The song details many mythological aspects relating to death such as Odin, the chief deity associated with death and magic gleaned from the secrets of the long dead, in addition to “singing the dying across the bridge connecting life and death” that leads to the realm of the death goddess Hel.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Wardruna’s body of runic inspired work utilizes appropriate aspects of nature according to each song. The certain ambience and mood their individual songs create allows for them to truly give a primal feeling perhaps reflecting the awe in nature the group themselves see. Additionally they portray a reflection of Norse folk esotericism that carries with it a reverence for natural forces. This work either recorded or performed live seemingly maintains its aura, though this may be due to the fact that Wardruna performances are often done out in nature, at a focal point in reality, a fourfold manifestation of earth, sky, mortals, and the gods meet. This liminal area already beckons human subjects, but these places may be memorialized by ritual, insuring their recognition in the consciousness of the subjective milieu witnessing such an event, even those who were not physically there. Wardruna’s particular performance possesses no doubt a potent aura, an echo of its authority when it was acted into existence by the human subjects making up the band. Despite Benjamin’s discussion of films and readily reproducible pieces of art, a solemn performance of song may be considered iconographic in that it disseminates moods and motivations in the Geertzian sense and ritualistically allows meaning to be granted to a situation and an environment.[[33]](#footnote-33) Wardruna performance undertaken in an area possessing the fourfold such as a cathedral like cave in a cliff at the Træna Festival where a recent performance was held act upon each other to create a piece of multimedia iconography that affects observers.[[34]](#footnote-34) This affectation could be understood as immersion; through frequent ritual repetition or observation said participants could eventually embody the history and spiritualism that Wardruna is trying to convey through sharing of mythic metaphors and runic archetypes. Subjects could be inferred to mobilize these metaphors, told through a storytelling iconography, into waking reality and enable human subjects to better interact with nature in manners of sympoesis and kin making.

Sonic Iconography and Immersion

This possibility is due to the fact that through constant exposure to a given environment be it physical or spiritual, immersion, human subjects are able to adapt to these surroundings in kind. Through consistent immersion in a frequently repeated ritualistic fashion, the subjects may begin to embody traits to help them better exist in said environment. In *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (2009) Frances Dyson explores this phenomena through visual art and sound and in so doing illustrates to the audience how such concepts, particularly relating to sound, affect the human subject and can allow it to access new modes of being through change in consciousness brought on by immersion and embodiment.

Immersion is based on subjective perception which itself has boundaries, particularly relating to visual art. “Immersion is the lack of distance from an artwork to the point aht it can no longer be viewed as an object”.[[35]](#footnote-35) This comes from a viewpoint privileging sight, the author going so far as to initially state that the body is a “seeing apparatus” but in reality, particularly when the author’s later statements are taken into account, Dyson means something more along the lines of a sensing apparatus, one that has the capacity for fluidity and malleability.[[36]](#footnote-36) The notion of immersion applies to that which can be sensed by the subject, and that which is sensed may be “fully understood” but only if the notion of dualism is abandoned, allowing the subject to somehow co-be with that which is being sensed, that being said, there are limits, particularly related to the notion of the true essence of a phenomena, “the thing in itself”. Referencing Heraclitus, Dyson elaborates that “perception forecloses the possibility of apprehending the thing in itself” yet continues saying that “complete certainty, apprehension, implies the evacuation of embodied subjectivity”, a type of pure becoming.[[37]](#footnote-37)

For many forms of artistic expression, there is this perceptional barrier, yet with sound, this barrier begins to crumble. Sound “is both heard and felt simultaneously, dissolving subject and object”, a fact that points to it being an effective media for immersion and the altering of perceptions and motivations.[[38]](#footnote-38) However for this phenomena to occur, a suspension or “surrender of volition (doing this to that, maintaining the notion of duality) is required for it to take greatest effect.[[39]](#footnote-39) With this knowledge, it is no stretch of the imagination to postulate that if a group of subjects were to be willingly exposed to and immersed in a performance of iconographic music either live or recorded, music disseminating beneficial ways of living, being, and dying, music disseminating the tenets of a type of sensible materialism, then those subjects would be open to embody these messages, but Benjamin’s notion of aura comes to mind, particularly relating to how said performance is mediated and if any of the Benjaminian aura is diminished.

Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, discusses the movement of art from a fascist art form of occultation to an easily accessible phenomena lending itself to a socialist society yet at the same time highlighting the mobilization of easily mechanically reproduced art and film to serve the ends of regimes. In his discussion he mentions that one of the casualties of quickly reproducible art is that its aura is diminished. The aura is a piece’s authority and it is based on an art work’s fixed location in space and time in addition to whether or not the piece can be reproduced and disseminated easily or not.[[40]](#footnote-40) The Aura, the essence, the authority of a piece is dismantled the more commonplace and disseminated it becomes, however, can the same be said of sound?

Dyson states that “sound can be collected, stored, and infinitely repeated” and that it “can function as an icon, an aural logo read by culture” (Dyson, 136).[[41]](#footnote-41) In light of a recorded live performance of sound or music, Dyson goes on to explain that “recorded sound can’t claim the authenticity of a direct, live transmission, since the recording is no longer anchored in space”.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, the author also takes into account the fact that the human subject still feels sound in conjunction with hearing it and as such “what is lost through mediation can be restored”, at least to an extent.[[43]](#footnote-43) What this implies is that while the Aura of a performance may be diminished, it is not completely obliterated due to the fact that a subject can both feel and hear it, enter a degree of immersion with it as the sound permeates their being.

Pagan Sympoeisis

To accomplish Donna Haraway’s mission of staying with the trouble, she calls for a sensible materialism. This sensible materialism, while in her work refers to animism and indigenous religion, can also be understood and seen within reconstructed Pagan movements. These sensible materialisms teach ways of sympoeisis and kin making, ways of co-living, co-becoming, and co-dying that re-enmesh the human element back into nature. The tenets and metaphors of these sensible materialisms are spread through the telling of stories, stories mediated in new ways such as through video games and the mobilization of captured musical performance be it strictly audio or audio visual.

Despite being captured, the aura of a performance whether solely audio or audio visual is not totally diminished, and it is this aura that gives the performance weight. When experiencing these storytelling performances, the human subject can be considered to be immersed to a degree as sound is both heard and felt. However, the immersion must be conscious, the subject must be willing to let themselves be immersed and to interpret, feel the messages of the stories conveyed through the soundwaves in order for those messages to eventually become embodied. Willful self-exposure to sound creates the conditions necessary for immersion to a degree, but how the performances are mediated to the subject can affect the experience, though some of the affects will still be felt regardless as sound is both heard and felt, it penetrates the subject.

When a subject is continuously immersed, in an environment in which iconographic sound is experienced, changes are made to that subject’s consciousness and way of being. This continuous immersion leads to the embodiment of that sound. In the case of staying with the trouble and a sensible, Pagan materialism, this can be accomplished by experiencing performances of Pagan art or musical groups such as Wardruna, whose work conveys stories of staying with the trouble, co-becoming with nature in a Norse context. Through immersion in such Pagan sonic iconography, subjects can eventually embody these Norse flavored ways of staying with the trouble and can be understood to be capable of accomplishing the sympoeisis and kin making called for by Haraway.

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