Aborphilia and Sacred Rebellion

Bron Taylor

2013

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree...

—Joyce Kilmer

While human perceptions of trees are variable, arborphilia—friendly or loving feelings toward trees—is common.[1] Sometimes such fellow feeling precipitates rebellion.

Shortly before finalizing this issue of the *JSRNC,* some citizens in Turkey provided an example of arborphilia. Approximately fifty of the country's environmental activists led a protest against the Islamist government's plans to raze one of Istanbul's few tree-populated green spaces, Gezi Park, which is adjacent to Taksim Square. A brutal police suppression of the protest drew widespread local and international attention, contributing to the rapid growth of the protests, as many other grievances against the regime drew people to the streets in Istanbul and other cities.

The protests reminded me of resistance to so-called 'development' projects in another place where trees and green spaces were to be destroyed: Nairobi's Uhuru National Park in Kenya. Between 1989 and 1992, Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement she founded led a courageous, violently suppressed, but ultimately victorious battle to save this green space. Although the movement is best known for dramatically promoting environmental protection throughout the country and elsewhere in Africa, its agenda was as much a struggle to reduce poverty and increase food security, while promoting democracy and human rights (Taylor 2013).

These are but two examples of how, in an increasingly urbanized world, citizen movements continue to break out, resisting commercial projects that threaten trees, whether in urban green spaces or forest ecosystems. Often, the campaigns incorporate other grievances, obscuring the role that many variables play in the causal chains that shape and constitute eco/social systems. What can be glimpsed in these campaigns is that the love of trees, green spaces, and forests is a variable that scholars should take seriously when seeking to understand the spiritual connections and ethical obligations many people feel toward the living environments they inhabit.[2]

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[1] This playful neologism fuses the Latin words *arbor,* which in English is rendered tree, with the Greek root *philia,* which means friendly, affectionate, and loving. A synonym would be dendrophilia, which may have been coined by Larry Buell (1995:500 n. 92) when referring to Thoreau's love of trees. I thought arborphilia might be a more accessible term. I am grateful to Assistant Editor Joy Greenberg when reviewing a draft of my ruminations here for pointing out Buell's mention of dendrophilia, which I did not remember from my reading of his important book. Various non-scholarly websites define dendrophilia and arborphilia as having to do with erotic attraction to or sex with trees. That is not the working definition I am using here.

[2] Here I was inspired by the notions of biophilia and chlorophilia. The biophilia hypothesis was first articulated by E.O. Wilson (1984) and later expanded upon in a volume edited with Stephen Kellert (Kellert and Wilson 1993). Put simply, the notion suggests that there is an innate aesthetic affection for life because these are ecologically adaptive traits (1984). David Lee subsequently offered a complementary suggestion that the love of the color green (which he dubbed 'chlorophilia') may also be a universal human trait (Lee 2007). I learned about Lee's work from Jonathan Benthall, who has done

Emotionally-charged notions of paradise and desecration, utopia and dystopia, harmony and imbalance, health and disease, opportunity and danger, sin and redemption, have long been associated with trees. Such notions have in various cultures included sacred 'trees of life', as well as sacred forests and groves.[3] Love and even reverence for trees and forests (as well as relatively intact ecosystems) is often expressed in the arts beyond the so-called world religions. The blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009) provides but one recent example, wherein the film's producer/director James Cameron could depend on the human affection for trees in two critical ways: first to demonize the desecrating invaders while evoking in audiences emotional horror at the obliteration of the ultimate old growth, 'Hometree'; second, by depicting a Tree of Souls as the most holy of all places where the final stand for all that is good would be made. This tree was, moreover, a powerful metaphor for a Gaian spirituality in which the interconnection and mutual dependence of all life provides spiritual and ethical guidance for a live-and-let-live biosphere ethics (Taylor 2010, 2013). The filmmaker even hoped that his film would help galvanize resistance to the ongoing destruction of Earth's biological and cultural diversity.

The love of trees was hardly innovative in *Avatar,* of course, but has been a common refrain both in the mainstreams of the world's predominant religions and at their mystical and countercultural margins. The epigraph provided above, for example, was drawn from the initial lines of 'Tree', a poem written by Joyce Kilmer in 1913. A Roman Catholic, Kilmer concluded his poem by connecting the love of trees with a theistic appreciation of a creator God: 'Poems are made by fools like me / But only God can make a tree'. In contrast and illustrating that the affection for trees can take many forms, the radical environmental balladeer Robert Hoyt in 1995 set Kilmer's poem to music. After singing it Kilmer's way, however, he offered a revised version in which he changed the word God to Gaia and the last two lines to advance an environmentalist message: 'Trees are cut by fools like me / But only Gaia can make a tree'.

Although I first heard this song around a campfire at a radical environmental gathering in the early 1990s, this was far from the only time I have heard tree-venerating songs woven into activist performances in ritual, or found such veneration in novels depicting trees as intelligent, special, and even sacred, thus becoming a resource for eco-spiritual activism (Taylor 2002; see also Lyons 2002, 2005). Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* novels by J.R.R. Tolkien—and especially the tree-like forest guardians known as the Ents, who eventually became so riled-up- angry that they uprooted themselves and marched off to battle the forces of destruction (and deforestation)—have been just such a resource for many nature-venerating environmentalists.

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much to illuminate what he has called the 'religiod' and 'parareligious' dimensions of contemporary social phenomena and movements (2008).

[3] For example, see Sponsel 2005 and the cross references found there; Harrison 1992; Jones and Cloke 2002; Rival 1998; Sheridan and Nyamweru 2008; Haberman 2013; see also in the *JSRNC* these special issues: 'Forests of Belonging: The Contested Meaning of Trees and Forests in Indian Hinduism' 4.2 (2010) and 'African Sacred Ecologies' 2.3 (2008).

Such examples suggest that, given their deep roots in human history, it is no cultural accident that trees, groves, and forests continue to occupy an important place in the human mind and heart. Indeed, they have long been central to the spiritual and moral imagination of our species. And it appears that, even though we have dramatically reduced the number and diversity of trees on planet Earth, for many of us they remain important affectively, spiritually, politically, and ethically. Nevertheless and unfortunately, their role in human spiritual and moral life remains insufficiently appreciated, investigated, and theorized. Indeed, perhaps even their agency in human spiritual and moral life has seemed so far beyond our analytic ken that we have failed to consider the possibility that such agency might take place through their relationships with us, as mediated by our own perceptual apparatus and imagination.

I think the time has come for a more concerted effort to understand the roots and nature of arborphilia and its influence, past, present, and future, on nature-human relations. I would certainly welcome submissions, as well as special issue proposals, that would explore the ways in which trees, groves, and forests entwine with the affective, spiritual, and moral dimensions of human perception and practice.

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