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Rewilding Hearts and Habits in the Ancestral Skills Movement

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Abstract: This ethnographic study of the ancestral skills movement focuses on the ways that participants use tools in practices such as fire making and bow hunting to ritualize relationships with the more-than-human natural world. Ethnographic methods were supplemented with Internet research on the websites of teachers, schools, and organizations of this movement that emerged in North America in the 1980s and has recently experienced rapid growth. At ancestral skills gatherings, ritual activities among attendees, as well as between people and plants, nonhuman animals, stone, clay, and fire helped create a sense of a common way of life. I place ancestral skills practitioners in the context of other antimodernist movements focusing on tools, crafts, self-reliance, and the pursuit of a simpler way of life. The ancestral skills movement has a clear message about what the good life should consist of: Deep knowledge about the places we live, the ability to make and use tools out of rocks, plants, and nonhuman animals, and the ability to use these tools to live a simpler life. Their vision of the future is one in which humans feel more at home in the wild and contribute to preserving wild places and the skills to live in them.

Keywords: religion and ecology; ritual; nature; social movements

Introduction

At a morning circle at Earthskills 2014 Falling Leaves Rendezvous, Steven “Snow Bear” Taylor, co-founder of the gathering, told us that ancestral skills communities address a “poverty of the soul.” Throughout the week, participants addressed this poverty of the soul as they bonded over a shared interest in learning skills, acquiring knowledge from elders in the community, and connecting with what Snow Bear called their “collective ancestors.” Not long after the Fall Equinox, I traveled to the rural southeast corner of South Carolina to attend Falling Leaves. Falling Leaves was my first ancestral skills event, although I had been introduced to similar techniques and ideas at an environmentalist gathering the year before. After setting up camp, I found my way to an open meadow of tented workshop areas. Wandering from one workshop to another, I watched people carving wooden bowls with knives, learning to shoot with bows, weaving willow baskets, and making buckskin moccasins. The five-day gathering also included workshops on making corn husk dolls, kudzu bale houses, friction fire, and woven mats and slings, as well as walks to identify trees, edible and medicinal plants, animal tracks, and mushrooms.

Primitive skills, ancestral skills, wilderness survival skills, Stone Age living, or bushcraft (more common in the UK) are common labels for this growing movement.¹ Teacher Ray Mears,

¹ My ethnographic research focuses on North American expressions of the movement and is supplemented by research on Internet materials by and about the many teachers and organizations I encountered during my fieldwork. While there are varying views on which label is correct, I’ve chosen to use “ancestral” to avoid negative connotations of “primitive,” just as many participants do. “Primitive skills” however, is the older terminology in the U. S. and as of 2018 still the most common.

founder of Woodlore, Britain's first school of "Wilderness Bushcraft," defines "bushcraft" as "a deeper knowledge of the wild and of nature. It is a huge tree that branches out in many directions to botany, zoology, craft work, outdoors leadership and countless other divisions. At its root, though, is reliance upon oneself and on nature" (Woodsmoke USA n.d.). In a similar fashion, Tim Smith, founder of the Jack Mountain Bushcraft School in Maine, observes that the ancestral skills movement "has no political agenda or worldview, isn't about preparing for the end of the world, and isn't an "ism." It is made up of people of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds who share a love for being active outdoors" (Woodsmoke USA n.d.). That love for the outdoors is expressed through skills that are the focus of this movement. Using and learning these skills involves constructing intimate relationships with the nonhuman natural world through objects and tools. Tools, more than anything else, embody and express a way of life that is important and meaningful to diverse participants in the ancestral skills movement.

Ritualized actions involving tools and the skills needed to use them properly are central to the movement. In this essay, I understand ritualization as a distinctive way of enacting and constituting relationships among humans, as well as between humans and nonhuman animals, plants, rocks, and so on (Houseman 2006). The ritualized relationships that are expressed in and emerge from learning and practicing ancestral skills call into question the lines dividing us from other species and things. In this way, ritualized actions negotiate and express ancestral skills practitioners' orientation to the world.

While they share a focus on skills and tools, participants in ancestral skills gatherings like Falling Leaves come from varied backgrounds and their religious worldviews range from atheist to Christian. Peter Michael Bauer, who runs a blog on "rewilding" called "Urban Scout," observes that at many gatherings, "you may find yourself between a Mormon and a Rainbow child." At Falling Leaves I met a Protestant Christian software engineer, a Catholic, and a member of the Foursquare Gospel Church. At Winter Count I met a Mormon, a Daoist, and a Pagan. At one communal meal, I sat across from a U.S. Army veteran who told me with a laugh, "I've never been around so many hippies before."

Some influences are derived from Pagan and New Age worlds, such as the goddess song I heard at a Falling Leaves circle: "She Changes Everything She Touches." In order to create a sense of community among such a disparate group, Falling Leaves included opening and closing ceremonies as well as a procession of "earth spirits" (children and adults dressed as ogres and fairies) around a bonfire. Each day of the gathering began with a morning circle and this was also the case at the two other gatherings I attended during my fieldwork. At Falling Leaves we also sang the Pagan song "Angels Singing," that captures most ancestral skills practitioners' orientation towards the world: "River, sea, redwood tree/Spirit of the wind will set us free/Angels singing, angels singing in my soul/ wood, stone, feather and bone/Spirit of the Earth will call us home." Throughout the gatherings I attended, ritual activities that created relationships among the attendees, as well as between people and plants, nonhuman animals, stone, clay, and fire helped create a sense of a common way of life, not identified with a particular religious tradition.

This partial list of workshops at Falling Leaves and Winter Count gives a sense of the diverse interests served by these gatherings: Weaving Cattail Mats; Kudzu and Pine Needle Baskets; Moccasin Making; Rawhide Baskets; Stalking, Hunting, "Getting Closer to Animals"; Fishing with Nets; Natural Disaster Preparedness; Healing Masculinities, Including Ancestral Wounds; 5 Ways to Make a Compass and Other Orienteering; Processing Plants: Making Infusions and Teas; Fork-Making; Spoon-Making; Dutch Oven Cooking; Sacred Activism; Moon Lodge Ceremony; Kundalini Yoga; Desert Knowledge; Facing Death; Medicinal Teas; Kids Yoga; Stone Axes; Make a Leather Knife Sheath; Human Ecology of the Nervous System; Desert Foraging, Pueblo Traditional Bow (when Native American practices are taught they tend to be culturally specific); Make a Dulcimer; Yurt Building; Bow Making for Kids; Using Animal Carcasses; Horsehair Braiding; Barktanning Salmon Skin; Venus Figurines; Duck Processing; Broom Craft; Gourd Craft; Looped String Neck Pouch; Blowgun and Thistledown Fletched Darts; Earthenware Teapots; Restore Willpower: Ancient Knowledge; Dakota Stove and Friction Fire for Old Women; Tribes of the Southwest;

Clairvoyant Healing; Self-worth Workshop for Men; Pine Needle Basket Making; Paleotechnic Tent; and 12-Step Meeting. These topics suggest the mix of therapeutic or transformational practices, tool and object making, and skill development that together change participants' worldviews, express their commitments, and confirm their chosen way of life.

These re-skilling Americans are part of a diverse movement that complements the rewilding visions of writers and activists like Dave Foreman, founder of the Rewilding Institute and George Monbiot, author of "A Manifesto for Rewilding the World," who promote mass restoration of lost wild food chains and wildlife corridors, especially through the reintroduction of carnivores.² Many participants in ancestral skills gatherings want to undo domestication and rewild humans by establishing a deep connection to other species through teaching and learning ancestral skills. In promotional materials for a "Women's Rewilding Weekend," the organizers suggest that, "Rewilding is about integration, not about going back in time. It's about making space for the ancient, undomesticated part of ourselves to come forward, even in the modern world" ([Rewilding for Women n.d.](#)). These rewilders hope to adapt ancient skills like metal-working, hide-tanning, hunting, and gathering wild foods to contemporary life, "creating new cultures inspired by ancestral lifeways" ([Rewild.com](#)). Many participants in the ancestral skills movement aim to live with the smallest possible environmental footprint, treating the forest like a garden and learning skills their distant ancestors practiced before industrialization. Their ancestral models vary from Paleolithic cave dwellers and Native American basket-makers to medieval blacksmiths. In this movement, the wild is not a fearful place of chaos and danger, but a place where humans can come to feel at home through knowledge and skills.

For participants in ancestral skills gatherings across the U. S., whether they are Pagan or Mormon, this way of life, these skills, and the relationships they enable are "about what matters," according to one of the ancestral skills elders who spoke up during Winter Count's closing circle. As Cat, a participant in Rabbitstick, put it, "it's about 'what's important in society' beyond just primitive skills; it's about "where we're at as a culture right now and what we think is important for humans" ([Backtracks LLC 2014](#)). The goal, according to the organizers of Rabbitstick, one of the largest and longest running ancestral skills gatherings, is "not just to survive but to live well, even thrive, in the wilderness through the use of traditional techniques from around the world" ([Backtracks LLC 2014](#)). The main emphasis of ancestral skills gatherings is on making things and working with tools to enable participants to "live well" in the nonhuman natural world.

The objects and tools created and used by those involved with ancestral skills take on a sacred quality or "vibrancy" to borrow political scientist [Bennett \(2010\)](#) term, by mediating the relationships that matter most to their users. The ancestral skills movement is characterized by an embodied worldview inscribed through ritual practices in which *relationships* to tools are as important as *beliefs* or *worldviews*. Ancestral skills practitioners' approach to life is expressed through relationships with specific practices and is embodied by specific objects. These objects and the practices around them, such as fire-making and basket-weaving within primitive skills communities become what philosopher Albert Borgmann refers to as *focal things*. For Borgmann, a focal thing, such as an old-fashioned hearth ("hearth," Borgmann tells us, is the meaning of the Latin word *focus*), "the culture of the table," gardening, or running, "gathers" and focuses meaning; it "restores us to the depth of the world and to the wholeness of our being" ([Borgmann 1984](#), p. 206). Borgmann describes a festive meal as a focal event because preparing the food and serving it takes place within a broader context of drawing together friends and family for convivial occasions that include conversation and the enactment of relationships among humans and between humans and food in a particular locale. He contrasts the culture of the table with a fast food meal. For Borgmann, modern life works against and makes

² The idea and scientific approach of *rewilding* was developed by Michael Soulé in the mid-1990s. Rewilding is "the scientific argument for restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators," ([Soulé and Noss 1998](#)).

rarer, focal things and focal events, creating alienation and disengagement from the world around us. Primitive skills gatherings aim to re-engage us, by drawing people together to make a fire from pieces of wood, or edible “ash cakes” from cattails gathered from a marsh and processed by hand. Above all, it is relationships enacted through focal practices like fire making and with things like knives and stones that constitute ancestral skills practitioners’ way of life.

Historical Antecedents of the Ancestral Skills Movement

With their emphasis on particular relationships with objects and tools, ancestral skills practitioners can be situated in the context of a long American tradition of self-reliance and pursuit of a simpler way of life made possible by hard work with one’s hands in harmony with the natural world. This tradition is in part a reaction against modern technologies that disengage us from each other and the world around us. I grew up in Kentucky during the late 1960s and 1970s, when my parents and their peers were influenced by the counterculture and its related back-to-the land movement (Brown 2011). The *Foxfire* books that covered pioneer history and living traditions of Appalachia were in my house and at my school. The first *Foxfire* volume (published in 1972) included articles on soap-making, basket-weaving, snake lore, and hunting tales. My parents also owned a copy of the first *Whole Earth Catalog: Access to Tools and Ideas* (published regularly by Stewart Brand from 1968 to 1972). As a young adult in the 1980s, I became an ardent subscriber to *Co-Evolution Quarterly* (1974–1985) and the *Whole Earth Review: Access to Tools and Ideas* (1985–2003), periodicals that continued the legacy of the catalogs, including reviews of tools and books. *Foxfire* and the *Whole Earth Catalog* emerged from the 1960s and early 1970s counterculture and back-to-the-land movement, though the *Catalog* promoted new as well as old technologies, including tools for self-sufficiency (Whole Earth n.d.). The 1968 *Catalog* was divided into seven broad sections, most of which resonate with the ancestral skills movement’s interests: Understanding Whole Systems; Shelter and Land Use, Industry and Craft; Communications; Community; Nomadics; and Learning.

Although I was not living off the land nor involved with any activities that required the tools described in the pages of *Foxfire* and the *Whole Earth Catalog*, I was intrigued by the ways of being in the world revealed in their pages. During my college years, I met many people who were living off the grid or who were involved with Outward Bound and other wilderness skills activities.³ When I came across the ancestral skills movement at an environmentalist gathering some thirty-five years later, the world that workshops on foraging and pine needle basket making belonged to was familiar and I knew that it was nothing new.

The ancestral skills movement in the U. S. may be countercultural, but it is also quintessentially American with its Emersonian emphasis on self-reliance and its Thoreauvian return to nature. The movement draws on a long tradition that includes European settlers and Mormon pioneers, self-sufficient communal movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century such as the Shakers (The United Society of True Believers), and the early twentieth-century Arts and Crafts and Woodcraft movements, to name just a few examples. The Shakers’ expression of spiritual commitment through the material life of farming and building, creation of beautiful and useful objects such as chairs and brooms, and emphasis on living simply, even in an industrializing context in their later years, set the stage for subsequent movements (Stein 1994). These movements share a focus on vibrant tools and objects that are meaningful in themselves and for the values they signify.

Like the Shakers, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Arts and Crafts movement was characterized by an antimodernist desire for a simpler life and an appreciation of handmade items. According to historian T. Jackson Lears, the American tradition of antimodernism

³ Outward Bound was founded by Kurt Hahn in Wales during World War Two and emphasized “an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence” (Outward Bound n.d.).

included the desire for intense and authentic experiences through manual labor and the “restoration of wholeness by living a hard but satisfying life on the land” (Lears 1981, p. 96). For Lears, this antimodernist tradition “longed to rekindle possibilities for authentic experience, physical and spiritual—possibilities they felt had existed once before, long ago” (Lears 1981, p. 57). During the early twentieth century, such antimodernist aspirations were best expressed by the Arts and Crafts movement on the one hand and Ernest Thompson Seton’s Woodcraft movement on the other. They had in common with the ancestral skills movement an aspiration to preserve hands-on modes of creation with simple tools. They were a reaction against technological changes that distanced us from the production of goods and brought about what Albert Borgmann describes as “the machinery of the device . . . that makes no demands on our skill, strength, or attention” (Borgmann 1984, p. 42). As ancestral skills practitioners would do in the late twentieth century, the Arts and Crafts movement looked to earlier ways of focusing on physical engagement with materials and honing skills, thus experiencing the world through the body’s sensibilities. In this way, skills become “intensive and refined world engagement” (Borgmann 1984, p. 42) in contrast to the disengagement and absence of skill and attention that characterizes our use of mass-produced goods.

The Arts and Crafts movement came to the U.S. from Britain where it was initiated by art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) and socialist writer and artist William Morris (1834–1896), who emphasized “nature and simplicity of form” (Obniski 2018). The American Arts and Crafts movement took shape around the turn of the century and included woodwork, pottery, textiles, and metalwork. In the same way that many ancestral skills practices mimic Native American techniques, Native American influences also shaped the Arts and Crafts movement, especially Native techniques for basket-making and textiles. The American Arts and Crafts movement did not last in popularity during the onslaught of mass production and increased urbanization: “By the 1920s, machine-age modernity and the pursuit of a national identity had captured the attention of designers and consumers, bringing an end to the handcrafted nature of the Arts and Crafts movement in America” (Obniski 2018).

In some ways the contemporary ancestral skills movement is the offspring of the Arts and Crafts movement and the Woodcraft Movement, which was also reacting to industrializing, urbanizing America and nostalgic for past ways of being in the world. The Woodcraft movement was created by Ernest Thompson Seton around 1902, popularized by Horace Kephart’s book *Woodcraft* (1906), and fundamentally shaped the Boy Scouts of America (Chalmers and Dancer 2008). Before the Scouts, Woodcraft was an educational and recreational program for young people that focused on camping and outdoors skills. Two ancestral skills teachers made their debt to this movement explicit by taking “a pilgrimage” to Wyndygoul, Seton’s old home site. They paid homage to “a lone sentinel that . . . marked the birthplace of scouting, Medicine Rock” (Master Woodsman 2016).⁴ Ancestral skills schools and gatherings are the contemporary version of children’s summer camps and the Scouts, but for people of all ages.

In addition to the counterculture and back to the landers, later twentieth-century influences on the ancestral skills movement included the field of experimental archaeology that emerged in the 1970s and the wilderness skills movement of wilderness guides (<https://www.wildernessguidescouncil.org>), Outward Bound (the first American course was offered in 1961), and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS was founded in 1965) (Outward Bound n.d.).⁵ Joshua Sage, a Winter Count gathering

⁴ In addition to the Scouts, a number of movements in the U. K. and Europe carried on the legacy of the Woodcraft Movement: the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry (1916); the Kindred of Kibbo Kift; the Woodcraft Folk; and the Forest Schools. Most of these organizations were focused on children and families, with the underlying assumption that children should not lose the skills involved with camping and outdoors living, even if they were living in cities.

⁵ An example of this influence is a regular class on the origins and evolution of humanity held at Rabbitstick gathering that drew on archaeological findings. Popular ancestral skills teacher Steve Watts, who died in 2016, is a good example of someone situated within the field of archaeology. Among other things, he directed Aboriginal Studies and Traditional Outdoors Skills Programs at the Schiele Museum in North Carolina and ran workshops for museum professionals. He made museum quality replicas of prehistoric tools and weapons (Master Woodsman 2016) and held “knap-ins” where he taught a variety of different cultural flint knapping technologies.

organizer, exemplifies the ways in which ancestral skills practitioners have been shaped by these different cultural initiatives focused on the outdoors.

During high school, Sage attended Colorado Rocky Mountain School in Carbondale, CO, a boarding school that was focused on wilderness trips and outdoors skills. Founded by John and Anne Holden in 1953 as “an antidote to modern, easy living,” the school was inspired by educator John Dewey and Outward Bound founder Kurt Hahn ([Colorado Rocky Mountain School History n.d.](#)). After graduating from CRMS, Sage took a National Outdoor Leadership course and became an instructor there. But he was not satisfied with the NOLS approach because they carry a lot of equipment into the wilderness. Even though they “endorse” a “leave no trace” approach, the problem is, according to Sage, “you don’t leave a trace where you are but what are the impacts of all the nylon/equipment that are made in other parts of the world?” His quest “for doing more with less” took him to Tom Brown, Jr.’s Tracker School (founded in 1978 and based in New Jersey), one of the only ancestral skills schools in the early 1980s (now there are many similar programs and schools throughout North America) ([Tom Brown, Jr.’s Tracker School n.d.](#)).⁶ Sage then went on to take courses at the Boulder Outdoor Survival School (BOSS). BOSS was founded in 1968 by Larry Dean Olsen, a Brigham Young University professor, and one of its core tenets is “know more, carry less” ([Boulder Outdoor Survival School n.d.](#)), which was a better fit for Sage.

As the ancestral skills movement grew over the late decades of the twentieth century, it overlapped with other cultural phenomena such as reality television survival shows like *Survivor* (which some ancestral skills teachers have participated in and which premiered in 2000), and the Paleo (or Stone Age) diet craze that was popularized by Loren Cordain’s book, *The Paleo Diet* (2002), even though other writers had advocated similar eating habits dating back to Kellogg in the nineteenth century ([Fitzgerald 2014](#)). These entertainment and diet trends suggest that a large number of early twentieth-first century Americans turned to the past because of their disenchantment with many aspects of contemporary North American lifestyles: Highly processed foods, mass produced goods, sedentary habits, a lack of basic knowledge of their own physical limits and potential, and a disconnection from nature.

A similar dissatisfaction is evident in the growth of the maker movement of the early 2000s, another early twenty-first century example of the rejection of mass-produced, post-industrial American middle-class lifestyles and the desire to make things by hand. The maker movement recalls both the early twentieth-century Arts and Crafts movement and the late twentieth-century *Whole Earth Catalog*. In an article on an intentional community in Missouri, journalist Emily Eakin muses on the larger movement that community had spun off from: “The dual processes of the environmental crisis and the economic recession have yielded a population for whom ‘homegrown’ and ‘handmade’ can suggest both a moral philosophy and an avocation. ‘D.I.Y’-do-it-yourself- has become a synonym for virtue” ([Eakin 2013](#)). Like their historical antecedents, both the ancestral skills and maker movements identify making things by hand as a virtuous activity that is essential for living what they consider to be the good life. Handmade things, or focal things, to use Borgmann’s term, mediated particular kinds of relationships to other humans, materials, and place/spaces ([Borgmann 1984](#)). Focal things and practices became meaningful not as means to particular ends, but because they enabled participants to engage in broader networks of relationships with other people, as well as with materials like yarn and wood.

The contemporary maker/crafting movement parallels the growth in popularity of primitive skills in its turn to past skills that were rare in contemporary American middle-class life by 2000. Crafts like knitting and quilting were still practiced throughout the twentieth century, but the upsurge of interest, especially among the young, was central to the new movement. Etsy, an e-commerce

⁶ There are many examples: Outdoor Wilderness Living School; Wilderness Awareness School (WA); Sarquit Outdoor Living School, Wild Abundance (NC), Sticks and Stone Wilderness School (ON); and Wilder Waters (ME).

site for handmade and vintage goods that was launched in 2005, is the most noticeable example of a booming interest in handmade items (Bierut 2018). Additionally, flourishing “maker spaces” in urban neighborhoods and on college campuses offer not just space, but training in skills and tool sharing within a community context. According to British archaeologist and medieval historian Alexander Langlands, who wrote the 2017 book *Craeft* and participates in numerous traditional crafts such as roof thatching, the meaning of “craeft” is best translated as, “a form of knowledge, not just a knowledge of making but a knowledge of being” and it is both these kinds of knowledge that makers and ancestral skills practitioners aspire to (Bierut 2018).

In contrast to the contemporary maker movement, ancestral skills practitioners are more likely to emphasize the tools they use to make things and the usefulness of the items they make, over creativity and products. For them, the skills and the world these skills provide access to are the most important. Organizers of the Boulder Outdoor Survival School explain that they focus on the skills “because we believe that some of the wisdom of ancient cultures can be found in them: There is beauty in a buckskin shirt, simplicity in a friction fire technique, artistry in an obsidian point.” From their perspective, this beauty reflects a particular way of being in the world: “The skills to produce such things require an intimate understanding of the natural world, its materials, its rhythms and its cycles (Boulder Outdoor Survival School n.d.). While many ancestral skills tools and objects are beautiful, the majority of objects that I saw made in workshops or available for sale or barter at gatherings were prized for their functionality, simplicity, and durability rather than any other aesthetic quality.

None of this is to imply that ancestral skills practitioners do not value ornamentation: I noticed baskets with decorative trim, knives with elaborate handles, dye classes for coloring wool, and buckskin clothing bedecked with beads and mother of pearl. A teacher who offered fire-making classes even had little animals carved into her fire-making implements. The ancestral skills movement is about practicing skills and making useful tools like arrowheads and objects like gourd bowls, but more significantly, these skills and objects both constitute and express a way of living on the earth. This way of living and the tools that facilitate it draw from these past and contemporary movements, but they have their own identity in relation to twenty-first century understandings of nature.

Rewilding Communities in Contemporary America

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the generation of those who are now elders in the ancestral skills movement wanted to create communal gatherings and networks that went beyond a focus on individual self-reliance and nurtured a way of life and sense of community. Ancestral skills gatherings and schools that offer workshops and immersive wilderness journeys are the institutional framework of the movement and have been growing since the late 1970s. In the 2010s, some gatherings started selling out and many have had to limit their numbers. Rabbitstick was the earliest gathering (1978), first organized by Larry Dean Olsen and later revived by Dave Wescott in 1988 (Wescott was running the Boulder Outdoor Survival School at the time). Wescott saw a need for BOSS staff to learn from the many teachers scattered around the country in the early days of the ancestral skills movement. In 1988, he invited teachers from across the U. S. to come together and learn from each other. Inspired by Rabbitstick’s success, in the Eastern U. S., Earthskills Rendezvous was founded in 1985 by Robert Slack, Jr., Stephen “Snow Bear” Taylor, and Darry Wood to preserve “indigenous primitive skills like making white oak baskets, foraging for wild food, starting fire by friction and tanning deer skins with brains and smoke.” From these initial gatherings, many more sprouted up around the U. S. In 2017, gatherings were held in California, South Carolina, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Arizona,

Colorado, Texas, British Columbia, Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Maine, and other states.⁷

Ancestral skills gatherings tend to draw a diverse group of participants in terms of religion, politics, geography, age, class background and profession. At Rabbitstick I camped between a retired man with a Ph.D. in biochemistry and an Inuit truck driver. I met ranchers, engineers, househusbands, baristas, nurses, teachers, and counselors. Joshua Sage explained that the “beauty” of gatherings for him is “people coming from diverse backgrounds finding a place of peace with each other through learning, teaching and doing hand work together. In that time that we sit together and craft something, we come to see each other as the person we are and not the ideals we hold”. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, Ancestral Skills gatherings were taking place across North America, though the majority are in the West.

The gatherings I attended (Winter Count, Falling Leaves, and Wild Roots/Feral Futures) had few rules, but those that were in place tended to foster a self-sufficient community, set apart in a number of ways from the world outside. Winter Count and Rabbitstick prohibit drugs and alcohol and do not serve coffee or caffeinated tea with meals, though some people brought their own caffeinated drinks. There is a wide age range at most gatherings: I saw nursing infants and children of all ages (many gatherings have programming for teenagers and younger children), college students, young adults in their twenties, middle-aged people, and numerous participants with grey hair. Many participants I spoke with during the gatherings mentioned the importance of children’s participation and the need to get them away from screens and out into nature. Appearances and especially clothing were also diverse. Some women wore makeup, while others did not. Some men had facial hair and long hair, while others were clean-cut and clean-shaven. There was no common “look”: Participants sported dreadlocks and jeans, Western style shirts and cowboy hats, fleece and quick-drying hiking pants, and buckskin tunics, pants, and skirts.

Men seemed to be slightly in the majority at the gatherings I attended and there were definitely more male teachers, but a number of women fulfilled leadership roles and offered workshops.⁸ Lynx Vilden, one of the few women who has founded ancestral skills schools and who is highly skilled and experienced, stated in an interview that she believes “men are supposed to do most of the killing. Women are supposed to be the ones who create and nurture life” ([Living Wild n.d.](#)). In the area of skills and tool use, workshops did seem to divide a bit more traditionally along expected gender lines, but most of the workshops I encountered included both men and women, except for those that were designated as male only or female only. Men tended to be the ones teaching hunting, trapping, flint knapping, bow making, and wood carving and women were more likely to be teaching basket weaving and felt making. If tools facilitate a way of life, then the gender roles included in that life are also constructed by specific tools and skills that women and men identify with.

In part because of assumptions about women’s relationships with tools, some ancestral skills practitioners believe women are better served in separate spaces. Women-only classes and gatherings are offered by organizations such as Women’s Primitive Skills Gathering in Washington State and Women’s Rewilding Weekend in North Carolina. Firefly Gathering’s founder, Natalie Bogwalker, says that “It’s something fairly central to Firefly . . . Women can be very intimidated by these skills. The ideas of homesteading can be focused toward men. We work on creating a balance of masculine to

⁷ A partial list of 2017 gatherings includes Buckeye Gathering: Ancestral Arts and Technology (CA), Elements: A Village Consciousness Gathering (CA); Earthskills Rivercane Rendezvous (SC); Saskatoon Circle Primitive and Traditional Living Skills Gathering (WA); Rabbitstick Primitive Skills (ID); Wolfwood Primitive Skills Gathering (British Columbia); Earthskills Falling Leaves Rendezvous (SC), Winter Count Primitive Skills Gathering (AZ); Sky Earth (TX); Echoes in Time Ancestral Skills Gathering (OR); Earth Knack Gathering (CO); Whipporwill Festival: Skills for Earth-Friendly Living (KY); Firefly Gathering (NC) The Acorn Gathering (CA); Between the Rivers Gathering (WA); Piedmont Earth Skills Gathering (NC); Slickrock Gathering (UT); Mid Atlantic Primitive Skills Gathering (WV); Dawnland Gathering (ME); Lake Superior Traditional Ways Gathering (WI); and Florida Earthskills Gathering.

⁸ I did not meet any teachers, organizers, or attendees who identified themselves to me as transgender at either Winter Count or Falling Leaves, neither did I see any explicit evidence of transphobia.

feminine energy throughout the skills classes” (Chavez 2017). Given the photos of gatherings from the 1980s and gatherings in 2017, women are a growing, if still smaller, percentage of ancestral skills teachers and students.

While some participants in the ancestral skills movement are simply interested in learning a particular skill, the majority are there because of their dissatisfaction with the direction Western civilization has taken. Rewilder Peter Michael Bauer defines civilization as “an unnatural catastrophe created when a human culture practices full time agriculture causing their population to spiral into a positive feedback loop of growth, social hierarchy, soil depletion and genocidal expansion that leads to an eventual collapse of ecosystems, biological diversity and culture” (Urban Scout n.d.). Many ancestral skills practitioners would like to throw off the mantle of civilization and live in ways that do not contribute to environmental devastation. They may or may not be anti-capitalist or adopt green anarchist principles, although some do.⁹ As hunters and foragers, they are acutely aware of environmental changes: On a plant walk at Winter Count, teacher Peter Bigfoot pointed out to us the damage done to desert plants by free range cattle. Ancestral skills practitioners want to make a place for themselves in the world that involves living more simply and self-reliantly while reducing their negative impact on the nonhuman world. As Lynx Vilden put it in a blog, “Come live wild and help make the world a better place.”

Some do the best they can to spend more time outdoors, use their skills, and still keep working in tech industries or as college students, nurses, small business owners, massage therapists, and the like, while others choose to live a simpler lifestyle full-time on homestead and in eco-villages. A number of participants at the gatherings I attended were involved with sustainability or environmental work. At Winter Count I met permaculture teachers and environmental activists working on carbon neutrality. In this way, the ancestral skills movement is both a reaction to the current state of life on the planet and an opportunity to practice other ways of living on earth, with plants, stones, and nonhuman animals, what teacher David Holladay describes as “how to be here on the land’s terms” (TJack Survival 2017). For ancestral skills practitioners, “living on the land’s terms” means challenging what they see as a legacy of domestication and colonization that has alienated humans from nonhuman nature.

What is wild for ancestral skills participants is the exact opposite of all that is tame, a point that was brought home for me around the storytelling fire at Falling Leaves Rendezvous. A young man named Chris told the tale of a starving wolf who was unable to find any deer one winter. The wolf smelled something good to eat and found some sheep grazing in a field. Approaching the sheep, he met a dog who was there to protect the sheep from predators. The dog regaled the wolf with a seductive description of the easy life of a sheepdog, the shelter and food provided by her master. The wolf noticed how well-fed the dog looked and asked where she got her food. The dog said “you could have all this too, if you just come with me” Then the wolf noticed the dog’s collar and asked what the collar was for. Once the dog explained the collar, the wolf was horrified and wanted to get away as fast and far as possible from that life, even though it meant being hungry, and he headed back into the forest. From this perspective, most Americans live with collars around their necks. Ancestral skills practitioners have chosen to remove their collars.

To go against domestication is to become *feral*, to get in touch with one’s own wild nature. Lynx Vilden describes the transformative experience that comes about when she is out in wild places for many weeks on one of her Stone Age projects, eating only wild foods: “I know that everything that was domesticated or not from the land has been evacuated from my body . . . I am fully nourished by the earth in every sense of the word. There is some kind of a raw animal being that sometimes just touches there . . . moments where I am remembering some true wildness. The rest of it is some

⁹ A political critique of capitalism is much more central to green anarchism or anarcho-primitivism. Two of the most influential anarcho-primitivists are John Zerzan and Kevin Tucker: see Zerzan’s website at <http://www.johnzerzan.net> and the “Black and Green Network” Tucker founded at <http://www.blackandgreenpress.org>. Although I met some anarchists at the ancestral skills gatherings I attended, no political ideology was explicitly part of the gatherings.

kind of half feral, not very civilized.” In this way, practicing ancestral skills is a reversal or undoing of domestication that restores one’s original wild nature.

A kind of paleonostalgia permeates the ancestral skills movement: The desire for a simpler life that we have left behind, but that can be retrieved from the past using the tools of the past. Central to this nostalgia is a sense of loss, which George Monbiot describes in his book *Feral* as “the loss of the wilder life we evolved to lead” (Monbiot 2013, p. 48). For participants in the ancestral skills movement, the past is not entirely gone: we can still access it by re-learning skills we have lost and forgotten. The organizers of “Buckeye Gathering: Ancestral Arts and Technology” in northern California express their longing for a past that they believe we still carry within us and can still access: “We are at a unique juncture in history, with an increased awareness in the possibility of our own extinction from not living responsibly and in harmony. Relearning to tend the land will take patient, imperfect steps . . . Many of us long for the clans and tribes that we know in our bones.” Monbiot calls this lingering genetic memory “a ghost psyche” that was adapted “to a world we no longer inhabit . . . ” For this reason, we are “wired to respond to nature” because the “world lives within us, we live within the world. By damaging the living planet we have diminished our existence” (Monbiot, George n.d.). For ancestral skills practitioners, this ancient sense of correspondence between humans and the rest of the world can be healed and restored through sensual and embodied ways of interacting: Smelling, eating, tasting, touching, and listening to plants, rocks, and other animals.

The Many Meanings of Being Native to Place

In order to practice this kind of restoration and remembering, ancestral skills practitioners are committed to establishing close relationships to the lands and regions where they live, for example, by learning how to process acorns or make tule boats, in the case of my northern California region. But these techniques practiced by local Maidu and other cultures in northern California have been made nearly impossible because of Europeans’ settlement of the land as well as outright massacres and intentional cultural decimation. This historical legacy has sparked debate about the proper role of ancestral skills in regard to Native American communities (Clarke 2016).

While the gatherings I attended included participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds, the majority were of European descent. Ethnic diversity is not typical of most gatherings and for some participants this is a sore point. One older (white male) teacher remarked at a Winter Count circle that we should “chase all the white people into the ocean” because “most of us are invasive species that create monoculture.” Opposition to monoculture, domestication, and colonization was common in discussions at gatherings. The emphasis on undoing and taking apart civilization that permeates these communities can be a wholehearted rejection of contemporary life. More than nostalgia for the past, this is a judgment about the kind of future we should strive for.

Charges of cultural appropriation leveled at the ancestral skills movement are similar to critiques of the New Age movement for “whiteshamanism” and “playing Indian” (Mahal 2013, p. 18). In addition to charges of spiritual appropriation, in the case of the ancestral skills movement there is also the contested issue of access to indigenous lands and traditional skills. Dakota activist Waziyatawin explains the situation as follows: “if colonizers are practicing sugar-bushing or wild-ricing within Dakota homeland while most of our people live in exile, they become just the latest wave of colonizers exploiting Indigenous resources at indigenous expense” (On Stolen Land n.d.). For this and other reasons, the ancestral skills movement sometimes has a fraught relationship with Native Americans (Mahal 2013).

Ancestral skills teachers grapple with what it means to use prehistoric tools and practices to feel at home in the North American wilderness, especially on private lands that Native people do not have access to. Peter Michael Bauer puts it this way: “While we may have deep personal relationships with our place, we do not have a cultural one rooted in 10,000+ years. We are here as a result of empire.” According to Bauer, the problem for those of European descent is that, “There is no ancestral homeland to return to for us. We must grow roots wherever we have landed, and we must

do this with respect to the Native cultures here so that we don't just end up as neo-colonialists ([Unsettling America 2015](#)). Americans from white European backgrounds usually cannot learn survival skills from their great grandparents. In a student testimonial about Lynx Vilden's Stone Age Immersion Program, Bauer explains that what Vilden has accomplished with her programs is to "create inspirational imagery of white people—who have no real life record of indigenous imagery—looking indigenous, without stealing from native cultures" ([Bauer 2012](#)). So what can a European-American do to become native to the land their ancestors stole from indigenous people? This is a dilemma for the ancestral skills movement.

Ancestral skills practitioners tend to be cautious when approaching contemporary Native American communities, given the history of colonialism. They are aware of a troubling slippage in comparisons between Stone Age humans and American Indian cultures, as if the latter only exist in the past. The gatherings I attended included workshops on local indigenous tribes' fire making and pottery practices and sometimes included information about their cultures as well as their skills. I also met Native participants at the gatherings I attended. One lunch-time discussion involved everyone in the circle saying our name, heritage, and whose lands we lived on (Maidu, Navajo, Ute, etc.), in order to raise awareness of our status as "settlers." Many ancestral skills gatherings make an effort to acknowledge the indigenous lands they live and gather on, voice their respect for Native American traditions, and invite Native teachers to give and take classes. The Buckeye Gathering, held in Concow Valley Band of Maidu country in northern California, offers scholarships for People of Color (POC) and Native American youth who want to attend. For Buckeye's organizers, the history of genocide and marginalization of indigenous peoples "makes healing our present relations important." But recognizing the importance and reaching out to Native communities is challenging and not always successful ([Pike 2017](#), pp. 181–83).

One of the most common responses to charges of cultural appropriation is reflected in this quote from Backtracks, the organization behind Rabbitstick and Winter Count gatherings: "Our shared interests reflect a shared heritage. The pursuit of primitive technology unites us in a search for lineage and meaning beyond the superficial." Ancestral skills teacher Thomas Elpel also emphasizes common origins and shared human experience. Elpel suggests that "Every one of our ancestors was a stone age person. It doesn't matter who we are today, what color our skin is, where we live, what we eat or what we do . . . it doesn't matter, we all come from that same root" ([Thomas J. Elpel's Web World Portal n.d.](#)). Echoing George Monbiot's description of a "ghost psyche," Cat, a participant in Rabbitstick gathering, sees primitive skills as a "birthright": "it's in all of us too . . . our lineage; it's in our DNA, dormant for some of us, but it's there" (Rabbitstick). These approaches prioritize similarity over difference and downplay recent history in favor of a distant past of common ancestry.

The sense of a common, embodied heritage and a shared, ancestral way of being in the world is an important aspect of tool-making and skill-learning in the ancestral skills movement. Teacher Steve Watts, who died in 2016, explained it this way: "Primitive skills are our shared inheritance. It is the shared thread which links us to our prehistory and binds us together as human beings" ([Between the Rivers n.d.](#)). This approach stresses connecting with one's own ancestry through tools and skills. Rabbitstick organizers address the issue in a similar fashion: "the learning and practice of primitive skills can help us all get in touch with our own roots—no matter what our particular heritage may be . . . (Rabbitstick). In this sense, ancestral skills, tools, and objects are seen as the very basis for a shared heritage across diverse backgrounds. The hope is that focusing on a common heritage of tool use can avoid the contested politics of race and ethnicity.

Vibrant Tools: Becoming Intimate with Objects and Beings

Tools and objects become vibrant with agency because they are connected to other cultures and earlier eras, and are approached through practices of attunement and what ancestral skills practitioners describe as forms of ritualized respect. For a number of participants in the ancestral skills community, a fascination with Native American cultures went hand in hand with an interest in the skills and

tools of those cultures. In his account of how he was first drawn to ancestral skills, Larry Dean Olsen, the “grandpa of the white revival of stone age living skills,” described his encounter with an object as the origin of his interest (Dumas 2017). Olsen found an arrowhead at age twelve while digging a ditch and that was the beginning of his obsession with learning about earlier cultures’ ways of living on the land. Not long afterwards, he went to a museum, saw more arrowheads, “became Paiute,” and wanted to learn how to “live like they did” (Dumas 2017).

Teacher David Holladay tells a similar story about Clovis points as the origin of his interest in ancestral skills. At the same age—twelve—Holladay saw a review of Olson’s book, *Outdoor Survival Skills* in the *Whole Earth Catalog* and noticed in the review that the book covered how to flint knap. He bought the book and became “a closet aboriginal” (My Journey to Primitive n.d.). For Olsen and Holladay, like others in the movement who were first fascinated by an object, the object is valued for itself as well as for what it signifies about another cultural way of being in the world. Skills like bow making and objects like an arrowhead acquire value and meaning because they are links to a cultural context in which humans are imagined to have had a closer and more sustainable relationship to the land and to other species.

Because some ancestral skills practitioners believe tools and skills offer a common ground beyond the politics of ethnicity, it is no surprise that most of the time and energy at gatherings is spent making things and learning how to use them. Objects like an arrowhead carry multiple meanings for ancestral skills practitioners and tend to acquire what Jane Bennett calls “vibrancy” or “thing-power” as they are formed and used. For Bennett, this power is in how objects draw us to them, as well as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 2010, p. 6). Relationships to things are an intentional focus and concern for ancestral skills practitioners. In his “Elegy to a Fire Drill,” Forager, a participant on PaleoPlanet, a message board for primitive skills, describes his feelings on retiring a trusted tool and his hope to find its “worthy successor”: “it is with a note of sadness that I finally retire the best hand drill I’ve ever employed. Little could I imagine that this opportune Goldenrod stalk from a floodplain would rise above the Mugwort, Mullein, and Yucca . . . in terms of its dependably consistent performance. This stick became my ‘go-to’ rod of fire whenever I truly needed to spin out an ember, particularly when experimental trials with others failed” (PaleoPlanet n.d.). This example suggests that usefulness adds to a tool’s vibrancy, which is why Forager emphasizes the fire drill’s dependability and consistency. That the drill would be treated as having agency is not surprising, given that it is used to *create* fire and fire making is one of the principal rituals of the ancestral skills movement.¹⁰

Tools like the fire drill become focal things and take on meaning beyond their usefulness because they directly connect practitioners to places (the goldenrod from a “flood plain”), other eras, and other cultures. They are similar to objects made and used by indigenous cultures and by humans in the distant past. Their meaning and value derive from their usefulness, as the elegy to the fire drill suggests, and because they mediate between contemporary humans and the lost past they want to retrieve.

Materials like animal skins and wool and tools like knives, fire drills, arrowheads, and hand-carved spoons also acquire power or vibrancy in ancestral skills contexts because of participants’ sensual, ritualized engagement with them. At Winter Count I stopped by a tent to watch a felting (wool) workshop and as I walked around, several students invited me to touch the brown wool they were carding. It was soft and oily, with an earthy smell. I felt the animal skins I walked by, picked up gourd bowls left on a table after a bowl-carving workshop, and tasted a prickly pear cactus that was reminiscent of cucumber. A stone that is shaped by hands (“knapped” by hitting it with another stone or other objects in order to flake off pieces), fibers braided into cord and rope,

¹⁰ Friction fires are an essential skill in the ancestral skills movement and there are many ways to make them. Bow drills, hand drills, and flint and steel are among the possible tools. Hand drills require a drill or spindle, such as a straight piece of a plant stalk—in this case goldenrod—and a board. The best materials for drill and board are widely discussed among ancestral skills practitioners.

all these ritualized actions involve intimacy with materials and require the engagement of the body and senses.

My jaw was beginning to get sore as I bent over a small wooden board trying to make fire. My teeth bit down hard on a piece of wood out of which a spindle rotated in the board held by my knees, while I pulled a strip of rawhide looped around the spindle back and forth. Dark specks of wood accumulated near the hole on the board where the spindle was spinning, and before long, wisps of smoke drifted out of the hole. A tiny coal started to glow. “You have fire!” exclaimed Susan, our instructor at the “Friction Fire for Old Women” class at Winter Count. She helped me make a nest-shaped “tinder bundle” of pine needles around the coals and put a pinch of mugwort and some dried mushrooms on them, then told me to blow gently. More glowing embers appeared and then some flames. I laid the nest with its small fire on the ground and everyone clapped. It was my first time making fire with friction and I had used my entire body in the process: It felt like an accomplishment. There was something about the friction fire, its simplicity and elegance, that made it special, part of an initiation into a new tribe. I wondered if everyone who successfully completed a skill for the first time (tanning a hide, weaving a willow basket) felt something similar: A deep connection to the past and in the case of fire, to millennia of fire making with simple tools from one’s surroundings.

Fire making is one of the most important skills taught in the ancestral skills movement and classes in friction fires were offered at all the gatherings I attended. In some ways, fire can be seen as the central symbol of the movement. The last song at Winter Count’s closing circle included lyrics about making fire and taking its embers out into the world: “Take the love you feel out there, to Walmart, gas station attendant . . . ” “We are firekeepers,” I heard at another occasion and the charge was given: “take it out of here. You have the skills in your body. Remember what’s important as you go back.” In this and other ways, ancestral skills entail a specific role in the world, a unique way of relating to past and future, and of focusing and mediating one’s relationship to nonhuman nature through beautiful and useful objects that stand in opposition to other kinds of objects—mass-produced plastics, for example—in our highly technological society.

Ancestral skills are about changing how one looks *at* the world, a transformation that happens internally. But this transformation can also be worn on the body, in how one looks *to* the world. At a lunchtime conversation, one Winter Count participant encouraged us to wear buckskin clothing “out in the world,” in order to spread the word about the movement. Looking wild is an expression of becoming wild and some ancestral skills practitioners express their feral identity on their bodies by wearing animal hides and bone jewelry. One way they undomesticate themselves is by sloughing off the skin (clothes) bestowed on them by the society they were raised in. At Winter Count many participants wore everyday clothes that would have looked normal outside the gathering. But those who wore their ancestral skills identity were dressed in fringed buckskin tunics with leggings, short belted buckskin skirts, hand-felted wool hats, jewelry made from stones and rawhide, sheepskin coats, moccasins, hand sewn felt pouches, handmade leather knife sheaths, and so on. Clothing, like knives and fire making tools, expresses and constitutes relationships with the more-than-human world and bestows meaning on material things (buckskin that represents being wild and intimacy with nonhuman animals), even within a worldview that in other ways tends to be anti-materialistic.

The matter that matters to ancestral skills practitioners includes plants, fungi, the bodies of nonhuman animals, and rocks. Because foraging is an essential survival skill, as well as a ritualized endeavor, relationships with plants are an important component of the ancestral skills movement. During my fieldwork, I went acorn gathering at Wildroots Homestead, took an edible and medicinal plant walk at Winter Count and a herb walk at Falling Leaves.

Plants tend to be approached in particular ways that are unlike the ways most Americans choose and buy their food in grocery stores. At Falling Leaves, herbalist and storyteller Doug Elliott, a feisty man in his late sixties, told a group of us on his herb walk that we needed to attune to “what plants have to teach us.” We had hardly gone a few feet when Elliott began extolling the virtues of some plantain growing next to a footpath through the workshop meadow. A few yards beyond the plantain,

Elliott spotted some oxalis or wood sorrel, good for mouth sores and sore throats, and next to it the bright red flowers of *lobelia cardinalis*, an emetic, to cause vomiting. On the walks I participated in, the teachers' focus was not simply on identifying plants, but becoming attuned to both the plants and one's surroundings—the plants' world with us in it.

The ancestral skills movement practices various kinds of attunement to the more-than-human natural world. Ancestral skills teachers I encountered approached plants as active members of living systems. They advocated conscientious foraging by only taking ten percent of a patch of plants, and encouraged students to learn how to respect what plants could teach them. Lynx Vilden suggested that the names of species are less important than "hearing directly from the things in our environment, what they have to teach us" ([Lynx Vilden: The Call of the Wild n.d.](#)). Tuning into the land around us was mentioned by a number of people at the gatherings I attended. For instance, I overheard a parent say to her child: "You can feel in your heart that this land is happy" and several people mentioned to me that they talked to plants. In this way, landscapes, plants, and nonhuman animals are treated as actors and agents in the world who speak to us and teach us what we need to know, if we just learn how to listen.

Becoming attuned to what plants need and listening to what they want to tell us is an important skill that teachers try to impart to their students. The notion of "ethical harvesting," for example, expresses a specific kind of relationship to plants. Tom Brown, Jr. describes the nature of the relationship as an attentive care: "whenever you gather a plant, whenever you use a material, the Earth is put back as we found it but better." For Brown, Jr., the attitude of "leave no trace" is like "passing somebody wounded in the woods, saying hello and leaving." Brown, Jr. suggests that instead of passing by a nonhuman person, we should "bandage the wounds. Fix what ails them," before moving on ([Thomas J. Elpel's Web World Portal n.d.](#)). Peter Michael Bauer, who forages in urban areas as well as wilder places, insists that foraging can be done carefully, on a large scale, without damage. However, in his book, *Rewild or Die*, he reminds readers that it is not enough to learn skills outside of an ecological context: "Know what plants to eat? Great. Eat them. But do you know the most ecologically beneficial time of year to harvest them? You made a bow and some arrows? Cool. But do you know which deer to kill to strengthen the herd? You can't separate ecology from handmade tools." Tools can only be effective and meaningful if their meaning and use are shaped by the ecological context in which they are used, and this is particularly important when it comes to hunting and killing nonhuman animals.

Appropriate interactions with nonhuman animals—hunting, killing, processing, eating—are among the most important ritualized relationships facilitated by tools in the ancestral skills movement. The gatherings I attended had both vegetarian and meat choices and I heard little comment from one group on the other; they seemed to coexist, if uncomfortably at times. Some ancestral skills teachers who now hunt and slaughter animals for food and tools were once vegetarians. Natalie Bogwalker, organizer of Firefly Gathering and founder of the Wild Abundance primitive skills and permaculture school in North Carolina, was a vegetarian for many years. In 2016, the "Let Live Coalition," an animal rights campaign, targeted Bogwalker's "sacred and humane" slaughter workshop and challenged the idea of "humane meat" ([Burrows 2016](#)). In response, Wild Abundance started a petition asking the campaign to stop harassing Natalie, in which they emphasized the mission of the school to "connect students with . . . the sacred process of taking animal life to provide meat for one's family and community." The emphasis on killing nonhuman animals in a sacred way is common in the ancestral skills movement, which tends to contrast their small-scale practices to wasteful and inhumane large-scale animal agriculture.

Ethical approaches to eating nonhuman animals emphasize respect and using as much of the animal as possible. Ancestral skills practitioners scorn the wastefulness of most Americans when it comes to food. For instance, eating and processing road kill is a topic that came up in my conversations with ancestral skills practitioners. When Doug Hill, who runs Gone Feral School of Primitive and Traditional Outdoor Skills, passes any road kill, he may stop, get out of his car, and investigate whether

the meat is fresh enough to take home. His preferred method of preserving the meat is freezing, but he also appreciates canning to save energy, or he will smoke it in a “primitive setting,” using the bone for tools and the brain for tanning hides. Citing the “Native American way,” Hill says that the whole animal should be used and that materials can always be repurposed, by making bones into tools, for example. Hill sees this as a good way to “bring the primitive mindset into the modern era,” where road kill is a tragic reminder of the cost of contemporary lifestyles (Van Deventer 2015).

Like eating road kill, hunting and killing other animals are seen as necessary survival skills because it is not possible to live well in the wild on plants alone. Lynx Vilden teaches students to hunt and kill other animals in her immersive workshops. Yet she does not relish killing: “I don’t enjoy killing but it is a necessary skill that I keep working on . . . I do not want to kill the deer, I want to BE the deer,” she says. Like other ancestral skills teachers, she emphasizes intimacy and identification with other animals and the ritualized process of hunting: “there is something magical about gliding through the forest, all senses tuned with a hand made weapon poised for that moment of expectation. Sublime” (Living Wild n.d.). Here the handmade weapon is what facilitates and inspires the hunt: Without it no eating would be possible.

Vilden says prayers when hunting and killing other animals. She speaks to the deer: “Deer People I thank you. I would that your flesh be my own. Is there one amongst you willing to sacrifice your life, your body? I ask with humility, ready to accept your answer, whatever it may be.” She observes that killing an animal is “life-changing . . . To hold a warm, living, breathing animal in your hands, to pull back its fur or feathers prior to slitting its throat . . . it’s very humbling. It really commands your attention, too—the realization that another being is going to give its life so that you can eat.” She claims that in her way of life, the animals she kills also have a story, so that their deaths are not going unnoticed: “The story of the sheep you killed, and ate, and wear, and made tools from, is a much richer and more durable story than the story of the piece of meat wrapped in cellophane that you bought from the grocery store and knew nothing else about” (Lynx Vilden: The Call of the Wild). From Vilden’s perspective, in contrast to shopping at a grocery store, hunting connects us to the forces of life and death and involves a ritualized processing of as much of the animal’s body as possible: “We used the brains for tanning, the hooves and connective tissue for glue, and the bones for tools and jewelry and even musical instruments. Every part of the animal becomes precious” (Lynx Vilden: The Call of the Wild).

Intimacy, respect, sacred slaughter, prayer—these are all ways of expressing and constructing important relationships with other living beings. Hunting and killing nonhuman animals is one of the ways that ancestral skills practitioners participate in what anthropologist Gisli Palsson calls “the ensemble of biosocial relationships;” they become human in the company of a variety of nonhuman others (Palsson 2013, p. 22). However, in the case of ancestral skills, the ensemble of social relationships goes beyond the biological world; inanimate objects such as fire drills and rocks also help make the skilled self.

Rocks can be approached through the same kind of attunement process used with plants and nonhuman animals. Lynx Vilden describes teaching people to “listen to the rocks.” Rocks, like plants, will teach us if we “attune ourselves to them,” she explains: “The rocks have their voices and they’re talking to us.” Vilden begins her basic skills courses by taking students to a river where they “listen to the rocks.” She instructs them to use all their senses in selecting stones they will use for various purposes: “I suggest the students tap on the rocks and get a feel for their density, their hardness, their ability to strike a spark. I ask them to taste them, smell them—experience everything they can about them” (Lynx Vilden: The Call of the Wild n.d.). Experiencing everything about them requires being open to what rocks can communicate about their usefulness as tools, what they can become in and with human hands. In this way, ancestral skills practitioners treat rocks as subjects with their own concerns and agency, as well as important tools that facilitate skills like hunting.

Conclusions

The skills made possible by rocks, plants, and nonhuman animals—making a bow-drill fire, flint knapping, basket waving—are a way of life as well as an avenue into what ancestral skills practitioners say is a “deeper connection.” Two of the most recognized elders in the ancestral skills community, Larry Dean Olsen, a Mormon, and Tom Brown, Jr., whose religious identity is derived from his interpretation of the Apache beliefs and practices of his teacher, met for a conversation in 1998. For Olsen, “It’s not that the skill itself is so important. They’re really pretty simple . . . But it’s what it gives you inside that is spiritual that ties me to the tools. I guess it’s an old Mormon concept that says that all things are spiritual” (Elpel 1998). Olsen articulates a notion that many other participants in ancestral skills, regardless of their religious commitments, would generally agree with: “survival skills, living off the land, being close to Mother Earth and feeling that Spirit is as much a part of my religion and my spiritual upbringing as anything I can think of.” Brown, Jr. agrees: “Larry’s right. To me I look at the wilderness as God’s temple, the Great Spirit’s temple. We’re always attached to the Earth. The umbilical cord is always there” (Elpel 1998). This is an attachment that has been lost or forgotten, but can be restored with skills and tools approached and used in the appropriate ways. Boulder Outdoor Survival School’s website expresses the hope to reestablish this connection to the earth: “there is power in the “Old Ways” of walking lightly through the wilderness, and we believe that power is accessible to everyone . . . ” (BOSS).

To express this connection to the power of “walking lightly” on the land, Winter Count gathering participants did not relate passively to the Sonoran Desert surrounding them; they participated in it and during the gathering’s closing circle, they thanked the land. They experienced the rocks and plants with their senses and used tools to shape them with their hands. Attachment and connection to the more-than-human world does not mean leaving it alone. A central aspect of ancestral skills is using tools to transform wild things—plants and animals—by consuming them or making them into objects.” The process of transforming raw materials into tools like a fire drill or useful goods like baskets is how ancestral skills practitioners express their connection to the land around them.

The ancestral skills movement has a clear message about what the good life should consist of: Deep knowledge about the places we live, the ability to make and use tools out of rocks, plants, and nonhuman animals, and the ability to use these tools to live as simply as possible. Their vision of the future is one in which humans feel more at home in the wild and contribute to preserving wild places and the skills to live in them. But it is not only living well that they value. Some also identify what a good death would mean. At Winter Count, a teacher named Dani offered several workshops on death, including “Living with knowledge of death, skills for the good life.” Practicing ancestral skills does not end with the end of life: A good life requires a good death as well. Peter Michael Bauer argues that death rituals need to be rewilded too. He would be perfectly happy to have his body consumed by vultures, just as he has consumed other animals: “When I die, I would like my body buried in the ground, not burnt, not in a coffin, and without any gross fluids injected into it. I don’t want to be in a cemetery. I don’t want a headstone. I want a tree to be planted in my honor . . . If that is not possible, I would like a “sky burial.” I would like my body to be placed high atop a mountain and eaten by vultures.” Even in ultimate matters of life and death, ancestral skills practitioners want to reverse, redo, and reject the assumptions of civilized society and return to past ways of ritualizing relationships to the more-than-human world. During my fieldwork I heard a song called, “Ode to the Neanderthal” that captures what a good death and burial might mean to ancestral skills practitioners who value so highly their relationship to tools: “Bury me with flowers, send me on my way with tools for my journey, tools for my day.”

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