

# The Complexity of Simplicity

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## ABSTRACT

In this post-industrial age the move "back to nature" need not be overly romantic in the sense of rejecting either all machines or all other people. If like Thoreau we want to live in an isolated cabin in the woods then it will be much more "natural" (as human beings) to live with our families and in a community of like-minded people; we can also hang onto our computers, TVs, and even our cars without abandoning ourselves to mindless consumerism. This is the notion of "simplicity with complexity": to simplify our lives (following Thoreau's famous admonition to "Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!") within a complex human social network which, extended further, includes the ecosystem in which our community is situated. This may look like a return to the traditional life of people in the past, especially in smaller villages and countryside areas. But the argument here, presented through a brief reading of several recently-published books, is that this is also a necessary direction for us to move in now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in our post-industrial, postcolonial, postmodernist societies filled with industrial and technological waste, corporate greed and corruption, blind consumerism, social and familial fragmentation, individual loneliness, confusion and despair. The return to lives of "complex simplicity," where we need not sacrifice all of our high-tech advancements but rather need to use them wisely, and where the focus is on human intimacy within the family and community, is also the return to a more highly developed ecological (supra-individual, ultimately supra-anthropocentric) awareness.

## KEY WORDS

ecocentric worldview

Native American women poets

*Walden*

*The Perfection of the Morning*

nature-oriented literature

voluntary simplicity

David Henry Thoreau

Sharon Butala

*Totem Salmon*



It would often seem that the technological “world is too much with us” these days when we find ourselves surrounded by people with telephones coming out of their ears wherever we go; or when an American commercial creates the illusion that people can have more freedom to enjoy the great outdoors if they take along various digital devices that enable them to surf the web while fishing and to fax reports from their palmtops while watching the sun set behind palm trees. And as Americans’ typical rate of savings dips below zero with more and more people owing more than they earn and declaring bankruptcy almost as frequently as divorcing, cries can be heard across the nation calling for “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.”

These cries take many forms. Some are radical in the extreme as people in the desert prepare for their electricity to run out as quickly as their aquirers will run dry. Others are quite mild and aimed at urban professionals, such as Elaine St. James’s *Simplify Your Life*, or any of her other books on simplifying holidays, child raising, and the like. Such an approach appeals to both ex-urbanites and inner urbanites engaged in gentrification (the restoration of older, once upscale neighborhoods that suffered urban decay after World War II).

Certainly, the idea of simplicity is not new, even in terms of notions of its being a choice rather than a necessity. In the early 1800s a host of utopian groups from England, Germany, and other European countries settled in various parts of the United States, particularly Pennsylvania, in order to establish communities usually unified by a religious vision and organized around simple living, shared work, and communal property. Many of these communities expected the imminent second coming of Christ, not anticipating a lifetime commitment, much less a multi-generational one. Others have maintained multi-

generational, religiously based simplicity practices, such as the Amish. Their strong separatism and anti-technology orientation, however, have resulted in little knowledge or interest in their way of life on the part of other Americans, and the association of that way of life with a specific religious affiliation has made it seem even more exclusive and unattractive.

Generally, the nineteenth-century movements saw simplicity in terms of religious purification and an other-worldly orientation. The idea that simplicity should be more *this-worldly*—a response to consumerism, industrialization, and the concomitant destruction of the earth—has arisen mainly in recent decades (see, e.g., Berry). One prominent manifestation of this trend is the development of Simplicity Circles, promoted by such writers and activists as Duane Elgin and Cecile Andrews. Their approach seems to avoid the pitfalls of extremism in any direction and is based, as the title of Elgin's book *Voluntary Simplicity* indicates, on people making unlegislated and personal choices about simplicity and the degree and kind of simplification to be practiced. They do advocate significant scaling down, but with a margin for joy, entertainment, and pleasure rather than sackcloth and apocalyptic penance on the one hand or draconian legislation on the other. As Andrews explains, "Elgin sees it as a movement that leads people from a life of materialism to a life of inner joy. Giving up our obsession with consumption will give us time to explore our inner potential" (27).

Given that Andrews was writing in the late 1990s, it is perhaps no surprise that she calls for the adoption of an "ecocentric worldview," building on the writing of Carolyn Merchant in *Radical Ecology*, and claims that "The day to day expression of the ecocentric ethic is the life of voluntary simplicity" (22). Nor is it surprising that she looks back in time by quoting an early twentieth-century Quaker, Richard Gregg, and by invoking Thoreau as part of her process of defining voluntary simplicity. In many spheres of American life, then, there are people seeking to make their lives less complicated who have embarked on a variety of paths for realizing their diverse conceptions of simplicity. In addition, some of these paths have been articulated in the arts.

A formidable body of literature currently exists that addresses this idea of *simplicity* from a variety of angles. This essay will treat some of the diverse styles and positions such literature embodies, and discuss the ways in which such literature responds to the still widely read American classic of the ideal simple life, Thoreau's *Walden*. I do this for several reasons: one, much has been made of trying to moor American Nature Writing to *Walden*'s dock (see, e.g., Buell); two, a significant number of contemporary writers who advocate a return to, or a discovery of a new type of, simplicity often allude to, meditate on, or argue with, Thoreau and his text; three, the illusory kind of simplicity that Thoreau promotes, or at least is used by others to promote, has generated an anti-utopian backlash today perhaps even stronger than its supposed positive effect, that of inspiring us to develop a realistic and livable simplicity.

Why? Because largely through omission, Thoreau fails to educate his readers into the actual complexity that a livable simplicity would have required in his day and certainly requires in ours. Further, he promotes an individualistic isolationism that precludes the possibility of widespread social transformation—something which we desperately need. Those of us engaged in teaching and critiquing literature who do intend to encourage social transformation in this direction need to provide models and sources that seem flexibly realizable by many, rather than only a few, of our students.

I don't want to spend much time on Thoreau himself, except to observe that *Walden* omits some crucial details that must be taken into account in seeking to navigate the complex interrelationships that any effort at simplicity will require. One, Thoreau omits his continued relationship with his parents and their business. Two, Thoreau omits his regular friendship with the Emersons, and their being a frequent source for his caloric intake. Three, Thoreau downplays the degree to which even his idealized ascetic lifestyle required interdependence on a variety of people, such as nail makers. Four, Thoreau downplays the extensive degree to which the area around Walden Pond had already been the scene of human intervention, as Kent Ryden has pointed out. Five, Thoreau acts as if the only real human beings are men and that there is

nothing essential about the human species being sexually dimorphic.

As the Harvard comparatist and feminist deconstructionist, Barbara Johnson, noted in 1987,

The association of deliberateness with human agency has a long (and very American) history. It is deliberateness, for instance, that underlies that epic of separation and self-reliant autonomy, Thoreau's *Walden*. "I went to the woods," writes Thoreau, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." Clearly, for Thoreau, pregnancy was not an essential fact of life. Yet for him as well as for every human being that has yet existed, someone else's pregnancy is the very *first* fact of life. How might the plot of human subjectivity be reconceived (so to speak) if pregnancy rather than autonomy is what raises the question of deliberateness? (190)

In line with Johnson's emphasis, I believe that environmental writing and ecological understanding require a fundamental grounding not in autonomy or self-reliance but in interdependence and mutual aid.

As a result, simplicity can and should be *uncomplicated*; but, on the other hand, achieving an uncomplicated way of life requires a *complex* set of interactions. By *complicated* here I mean loaded down with unnecessary social burdens, overwhelming daily details, government paperwork, excessive logistic convolutions, enslaving consumer habits, disease causing personal production practices, work anxiety induced illnesses and addictions, and the like. By *complex* I mean the necessarily multifaceted features of material interdependence, psychologically healthy and gratifying social structures, mind-body-spirit interanimation, and the like. And among these necessarily complex human and environmental interactions, we need to foreground those aspects ignored or downplayed in *Walden*, such as pregnancy, family, friends, and community.

Further, the retreat to the woods ideally rendered in *Walden* should be understood in its subordinate role as a *retreat*, i.e., a period of

withdrawal, in the complex process of simple living. That is to say, the singular dwelling of an individual in extreme circumstances is a temporary moment, a pause for reflection, to facilitate his or her return to the fulfillment of living socially among other human beings. Too often in efforts by professors to develop a canon of nature writing or selection of readings for courses, these individual retreats from the rest of human society and culture are treated as permanent, even when temporary, and emphasized over more community-oriented retreats and ways of living. And these can be the case whether the writers selected are men or women. I have in mind here the ways in which writings by such authors as Annie Dillard, Ann LaBastille, John Hanson Mitchell, and John Muir, have been used.

For my first three main examples, I want to use a set of recently published cabin-based retreat narratives, all of which make explicit reference to Thoreau, but in fundamental ways depart from the vision projected by him and the dominant ways in which he is interpreted. These texts are Charles Siebert's *Wickerby*, Charles Gaines's *A Family Place*, and Nancy Lord's *Fishcamp*.

Siebert subtitles his 1998 book, *Wickerby, An Urban Pastoral*. It depicts his five-month retreat from Brooklyn to a Canadian border cabin with an emphasis on how much he appreciates and feels at home in his Brooklyn neighborhood. Siebert invokes Thoreau when he remarks about his plumbing, electricity, phone, car, radio and TV that

Some might consider such devices gross impurities in the context of a place like *Wickerby*, but then I hadn't left Brooklyn to achieve some Thoreauvian ideal, to shed all inventions and conventions by way of arriving at a more essential self. Such endeavors—a modern man playing at primitivism—tend to be far more encumbered by self-consciousness and pretense than any truly plain existence is by its inherent hardships. (54-55)

Interestingly enough, Siebert's trip to *Wickerby* is a retreat brought about by two circumstances: his girlfriend has left for an extended stay

filming a nomadic African people and urban renewal has rendered the street in front of his apartment building unnavigable. His solitude is, then, to a large degree externally rather than self-imposed. And throughout his solitary stay at Wickerby he is drawn into relationships with the few individuals in the area and the animals that inhabit the locale and his cabin. These in turn cause him to reflect on the animals and people of his Brooklyn neighborhood.

In the end, Siebert has gained a greater appreciation for the wild nature to be found in relatively wild areas—mainly second growth abandoned farmland—and a greater appreciation for the wild nature that inhabits his urban locale and inhabits every human being, such as the mumblers who raise pigeons on rooftops. As he realizes near the book's end, "I see everything here that I had at Wickerby except that it's all in the margins. . . . At Wickerby, I was the marginal, the excerpted one" (214). And he hopes to return the following summer with his girlfriend, Bex, to continue to work through the dialectics of rural and urban, wild and cultured, as they manifest themselves in both locations. His desire to return with Bex is significant on two counts. First, he wishes to share the experience of retreat, not making it always a solitary discovery. Two, Wickerby actually belongs to Bex's family, not Siebert's, and his desire for them to return as a couple reminds the reader of Siebert's detailing how the cabin has a history of family involvement and historical continuity.

There are several crucial aspects to Siebert's understanding recorded in *Wickerby*. One, human beings are by their nature a communal species. Two, human beings are animals and like other animals build homes for themselves; and as a result of being communal, generally build homes in order to live either together or in close proximity to one another. Three, as a result of urbanites' living closely packed together, they long for, need, and ought to have the opportunity to experience, solitude on an occasional basis *in order to be able to continue to live together*. Four, such living together will benefit from a rural appreciation of walking, of open space, of wild plants and animals made possible by the original 1870 plan for Siebert's Brooklyn parkway neighborhood to be "a kind of urban-pastoral weave wherein appointed pave-

ment keeps giving way to a provided pause" (23). And that word *neighborhood* is key because Siebert can long to return to his blighted portion of Brooklyn precisely because it is a neighborhood with neighbors and friends and face-to-face human contact, with not only the marginal and the eccentric but also the mainstream and the common. The simple life, accepting of the complexities of human interaction, can be achieved, suggests Siebert, in Brooklyn as well as anywhere else.

While Siebert would like to make Wickerby a family experience once again, Charles Gaines in his 1994 *A Family Place: A Man Returns to the Center of His Life* tells the reader about a cabin that is literally built as a family experience, with a photo of it on the dust jacket of the hardback edition. A significant portion of Gaines's book actually details how he and his family gradually lost the simple life that had marked the early years of their marriage. Over nearly seventeen years, financial success made their lives increasingly complicated and eventually unmanageable, until their marriage came completely unraveled. Their marriage was breaking apart, but they refused to let it float downstream; instead they undertook a retreat into simplicity on the coast of Nova Scotia, which would provide the framework and the shelter for re-simplifying their lives. Such re-simplifying has enabled Gaines to return to family as the center of his life, with a clear recognition that it is not so much where you live but how you live there that determines your familial, communal, and natural relationships.

Gaines declares of their place in Nova Scotia that "the dominating feature of our dream for the place was the creation of an environment where, for a few weeks each year, we could reconstitute our family life with our children through daily, self-contained living together. We wanted the place to be not so much a "getaway" as a "get back to," a place for reclaiming intimacy" (39). The cabin in the wild here means acting out "simplicity" for improving the physical and psychological health of each individual as a member of the family, and not conjuring the illusion of individual autonomy. Gaines, too, alludes directly to Thoreau and *Walden*. In comparing Thoreau's cabin with the one he and his wife intend to build, Gaines notes that "Patricia and I too wanted to reorganize our lives around a new place in order to live more

simply (though neither of us was much interested in meager), but together with our kids, we found, we have a good many more needs to meet than did Thoreau" (44). And in detailing the various luxury items that Gaines includes in his plans, he remarks that "Rather than feeling ashamed of all that dispensable recreational equipment, I liked imagining Thoreau having some of it at Walden Pond and secretly enjoying it—indulging a secret playfulness that no one in Concord could suspect in the stern and parsimonious author" (45).

But more than gadgets, what the Gaineses find generating the greatest pleasure in their leisure moments in Nova Scotia is the opportunity and practice of spending those moments with family members and friends. Without the ability to project the possibilities for joy and companionship, hard work and leisure in a communal environment, we are going to persuade few people to embrace simplicity. Only when most people realize that through simplicity they can save themselves will they be also willing to practice simplicity in order to save the wild world around them.

Additionally, only when people appreciate, as Charles Gaines does, that in reconstituting themselves in relative simplicity are they gaining such things as balance, fulfillment, peace of mind, and mutually reliant love rather than giving up status, business success, and gadget acquisition competition, will their spirits truly open up to preserving, conserving, and maintaining. As Gaines notes,

With a national divorce rate of 50 percent, and the American landscape littered with child abuse, welfare dependency, crime, drug use, learning disabilities, and all the other maimings of exploded families; with high-riding greed and materialism having turned consumerism into our most sacred and celebrated national ritual; with millions of us having chased the chimera of personal freedom into an existential black hole of loneliness and longing . . . more than a few other Americans wanted to . . . find a new way of living.  
(124-25)

He and his wife were able to look at the histories of their own families “for an historical model of how life can be lived short on individual license but long on loving involvement with other people, delightedly sacrificing independence for ties, and lived that way religiously, as a daily joyous discipline” (125). In outlining such a life, Gaines turns to the image of the hearth—“the place where life originated and was sustained and where the skills and values of living were passed along from elders to children” (131), and that hearth is missing from Thoreau.

Such a hearth can, however, be found in a rather unlikely cabin: the fishcamp that Nancy Lord and her husband, Ken, call home for the four months they spend commercially fishing for salmon in Alaska. Lord published *Fishcamp: Life on an Alaskan Shore* in 1997, sharing the details of a salmon fishing season. She and Ken do not retreat to the cabin and the wild inlet on which it rests, but rather live there for as long as the weather and the work allow each year, and define it as their hearth. To the degree that their life includes a retreat it is to the “roaded side of the inlet” where others like them who live permanently in Alaska ride out the winter (253).

Thus, unlike the cabins of Thoreau, Siebert, and Gaines, Lord’s cabin is not a place for surcease but one of intense physical labor; it is the base for their economic livelihood. And yet, at the same time, life becomes more simplified for them there because they become so singularly focused. Lord relates the why of their continued commitment to fishing in this particular place:

Stubbornly, we stay because making a living is less important to us than living where we want to be, in an environment where what we do for work fits comfortably into the overall life of the place. We live with fish and with others who live with fish—not just our human neighbors but also seals, bears, magpies, wind and waves, tides, boats, stories of the past, dreams and wishes and fears: all those things animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, that make up the community in which we find ourselves at home. (xiii-xiv)

If one listens to these words he or she can hear Lord's ecological sense of the web of the world in which she and her husband are interwoven, a complex location, grounded in a simple life, catching and selling fish.

As with Lord's recognition of the ecological web of their lives, her book also documents and examines the ways in which human beings have altered and continue to alter the natural world in which they live with an attention not found in Siebert and Gaines. Siebert is more concerned with seeing the wild and the natural world in his urban surroundings, while Gaines is more intent on the continuing bucolic character of Nova Scotia. Lord, for instance, writes about cutting down a nearby tree to make space for their airplane—the means of access to the fishcamp: "One tree—a necessity. I am, perhaps, defensive. . . . People come to paradise and then they cut trees, they kill things, they change the land and what grows on it and can be sustained by it. Then it isn't paradise anymore. . . . We don't pretend to leave no marks on this land, but we don't leave many" (28).

And perhaps it is her defensiveness that causes her to turn her father's attention on the next few pages to the activities of beavers in the area, cutting down in a season far more trees than the Lords will remove in a lifetime—just as busy building habitats as the creatures Siebert observes at Wickerby. And from here, Lord goes on to critique Thoreau's "grim assessment," as she calls it, of the eastern forests, pointing out that along with human restoration efforts, "wood-product economics and the resilience of natural systems . . . today's eastern woods again shelter the missing creatures on Thoreau's list" (32). In other words, as with Gaines's book, Lord's *Fishcamp* emphasizes the dynamic nature of life, emphasizing in greater detail and clarity that not only have people destroyed their environments, but they have also lived in dynamic balance with them, and in various places are acting to restore environments—not freezing nature in some museum tableau, but generating new environments, new habitats.

Lord's book is not some romantic elegy; it includes the realities of economics as they impinge on the Lords' deliberate efforts at living simply, practicing a vocation enmeshed in international trade and global markets. Their simple commercial activity involves a complex

set of activities, not only at the fishcamp where they must take care of nets, boats, loading scows, cabin, neighbors' needs, competition with other creatures, and accommodation with the elements, but also at their winter home where they study market developments, participate in grassroots political campaigns, involve themselves in the lives of neighbors and relatives, and earn extra income as they can. Through it all, Lord observes:

The world does all connect. We know these sacred truths, east and west, in our bones: everything has a life of its own, but nothing lives by itself. And there's no picking out any one thing without finding it hitched to absolutely everything else. For the eight months we live away from fishcamp, we never cease knowing it as home. . . . making it a habit, the custom and everyday practice of our lives. (256)

To commune intimately with wild nature and to pursue simplicity, however, does not necessarily even require retreating to, or living in the wilderness, although it does require a willingness to engage, as Siebert demonstrates, whatever nonhuman nature exists in the place that a person calls home.

Two additional authors and their recently published books suggest other avenues to pursue beyond the cabin in the woods: Freeman House does so through discussing river restoration in *Totem Salmon* and Sharon Butala through meditating upon homesteading on a Canadian cattle ranch in *The Perfection of the Morning*. Like Nancy Lord, Freeman House is concerned with the life and continued existence of wild salmon. Unlike her, he has for twenty years been engaged, not in catching salmon for food, but in facilitating the breeding of Mattole King salmon. He has done so through a grassroots spawning support group and a watershed restoration process. Both are intended to improve the ecological sustainability of the Mattole River watershed in which these King salmon are born and in turn give birth. Also, situated in northern California, House's habitat is blessed with weather that enables him to remain in one place year round and live in a much more

populated rural locale than can Lord.

Although House and his family may be said to have fled the city to the woods, they did not move to Petrolia, California, as a retreat from anything so much as a going toward something. In this case, it is a general lifelong commitment to the then newly emerging bioregional vision of the San Francisco based Planet Drum Foundation and a specific commitment to salmon and watershed restoration in and with an established community—twenty years of which is recorded in *Totem Salmon*.

While the choice of salmon seems very much a fortuitous one for Nancy Lord and her husband, it is quite calculated for Freeman House and his cohorts. He remarks that

It seems that in this part of the world, salmon have always been experienced by humans very directly as food, and food as relationship. . . . Given the abundance and regularity of the provision, one can imagine a relationship perceived as being between the feeder and the fed rather than between hunted and hunter. . . . The food swims up the stream each year at much the same time and gives itself, alive and generous. (10)

And, in a sense quite similar to Lord's feelings at the end of her book, House also notes that

Salmon were also experienced as *connection*. At the time of year when the salmon come back, drawn up the rivers by spring freshets or fall rains, everyone in the old village must have gained a renewal of their immediate personal knowledge of why the village was located where it was, of how tightly the lives of the people were tied to the lives of the salmon. (11)

From the beginning, then, House emphasizes connection, interrelationship, and community, already inclusive of both human and other crea-

turally participants. Further, House repeatedly reminds his reader that this participation is a multi-generational one, working itself out in geological rather than human-based temporal cycles (44).

Just as Siebert takes aim at pseudo-primitive posturing, House also clarifies his vision of watershed restoration, ecological equilibrium, and human balance as contemporary and realistic rather than nostalgic and romantic. He does so at one point by speaking of a friend's understanding of their restoration work:

Machines and other technologies have become part of the modern human psyche and social fabric, he realized; there is no turning back. . . .

But perhaps there were signposts that led forward to a different set of relationships among lives in what had come to be called . . . the *postindustrial* age.

. . . It doesn't take an expert in the manipulation of statistics to understand that the survival of the entire human species depends on a sustainable relationship to the local expression of the processes of the biosphere. (48-49)

Such a sustainable relationship cannot be achieved by a single individual acting in isolation. From the beginning of his involvement with the salmon, House recognized that his relationship with wild nature was an engaged, activist one requiring cooperation and participation of numerous individuals working together for a common cause. At first, when he was only doing salmon spawning support, the number of people was relatively small: "We knew that there was enough interest among local people of every persuasion that we could locate stream-side incubators in the yards of volunteers. Backyard passion would supply the level of volunteerism needed for the daily maintenance of the little household hatcheries we envisioned," he remarks (129).

But as the recognition evolved that saving this subspecies of salmon from extinction and reinvigorating its presence in the Mattole River would require not just salmon support but also watershed resto-

ration, the number of people in the Mattole watershed who needed to participate in this project in some way grew to become virtually all of its human inhabitants. In other words, restoration of habitat to facilitate the flourishing of one wild species required that the domestic, cultured dimensions of creaturely inhabitation of the watershed be revised, rethought and reintegrated into the wild cycles that predated human, particularly Euro-American, settlement. As House came to understand it, for any creature to survive in the long run, nature and culture had to be consciously integrated in people's daily lives, not seen as separate and distinct (153). And most importantly, human culture had to be understood as interdependent with, rather than independent, autonomous, or dominant over, wild nature. As House explains it in the course of defining the world "wild," "if the word is fastidiously defined to describe a homeostatic, self-organized relationship that does not require management from outside itself, then it can provide us with a meditation large enough to occupy a lifetime" (133).

In understanding this definition, it is important to recognize that House's bioregional vision perceives human beings as having the potential to become inhabitory people who affect nature from the inside rather than the outside of a locally situated wild system, and hence can become part of a "self-organized relationship." As far as the human community in which House lived that meant "a community sensitive enough to understand and adjust itself to the opportunities and constraints of an even larger whole in our case a riverine watershed of three hundred square miles" (157), which, by the way, contained about 2,000 people.

One of the beauties of this type of orientation for House's community was the realization through scientific study and consensual discussion and planning that no individual's livelihood was in any greater need of extinction than that of any local species. Logging practices would need to change to stop the erosion that damaged the river, but timber harvesting could continue without clear cutting. Further, a careful mapping of the region showed that "over 70 percent of the large erosion problems in the watershed were related to poorly designed roads. Most [Mattole Restoration] Council members believed that the

survival of the ranching tradition was a necessary element in any dream of maintaining the wild" (187). If the diversity of species is to be appreciated, the diversity of human activity also has to be accommodated in developing a consensual place-based politics that can have as great a degree of inclusiveness as possible with the longest multi-generational vision of dynamic interaction that is perceivable. House concludes *Totem Salmon* with these words: "As we engage directly the recovery of our shared habitats, we find ourselves in the embrace of the expansive community that offers the best hope of realizing ourselves as fully human. There is no separate life" (218).

Freeman House and many of his early compatriots, as well as numerous later allies in the Mattole Watershed, are people who led relatively simple lives compared to their urban American counterparts in terms of their occupations. But in addition, they were often people who had already adopted some individually designed form of voluntary simplicity. Yet, as House shows his readers, once these people began to perceive themselves as part and parcel of a larger world of nature and culture intertwined, the realization of their initially modest goal of helping one type of salmon to spawn became increasingly complex as larger and larger circles of connection, domestic and wild, were consciously interworked toward specific local goals. As Nancy Lord and others have recognized, everything is hitched to everything else, and the simple living of sustainable local fishing, ranching, and logging in Mattole requires a complex and interanimating vision of ecological process.

In many ways, however, Freeman House's experience and visionary practice represented in *Totem Salmon* is an extreme case. It serves as an example of just how complex one's life can become in taking up an activist simplicity aimed essentially at remaking contemporary American society. Sharon Butala's experience is more narrowly proscribed and, like Siebert's time at Wickerby, is one that most readers can find more possible to emulate than the genuinely heroic life commitment that House has made.

In *The Perfection of the Morning*, published in 1994, Butala records her personal apprenticeship in nature that begins at the age of 36.

She did not retreat into the wilds, but rather married into the life of cattle ranching in southwestern Saskatchewan just north of the Montana border. Certainly, Butala expected her life to become simpler as she left urban life behind, but she did not anticipate she would slowly begin “to realize how life for all of us in the West is informed and shaped by Nature in ways we don’t even realize, much less notice consciously” (xv). In seeking a certain simplicity, Sharon Butala had the opportunity to observe the ways in which human life is governed by a complex set of processes vast in geological scope and temporal sweep, and in *Perfection* she records her seventeen-year journey to that awareness. That journey begins with an appreciation for the qualities that persuaded her to marry her second husband, Peter Butala, of whom she notes: “[H]e didn’t nourish in secret bitterness unfulfilled dreams about another, better life. . . . And, too, he was secure in his community. . . . Maybe it was his calmness, engendered by the deep sense of security stemming from a life lived all in one place, and of his sense of the rightness of his life that attracted me . . . but also the greenness and beauty of the landscape” (2).

It turned out, however, that Butala really had no idea how much of a new life she would need to adopt to remain married on a Saskatchewan ranch, particularly through the terribly harsh winters. And yet, something quite magical happened to her. Writing of having to forage for kindling to get the wood stove going on a day when the temperature had fallen to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit the night before, she focuses not on the difficulties, but on the numinous quality of basic experience:

It was a world where things were what they seemed to be; where they were clear and simple and made a kind of sense so elemental that I didn’t have to learn them and I didn’t have to think at all with my mind. I thought instead with my bones and my muscles, with some deeply human place in my gut. (53)

She notes that while she “was doing hard physical labor,” she was also “moving in beauty” (54). Here Butala expresses the same kind of bone

weary satisfaction with simple living that House depicts in the opening chapters of *Totem Salmon*.

Also, over a long period of difficult adjustment to the relative isolation from more varied human companionship that ranch life generally requires, she came to an understanding about rural people in contrast to urban ones: "It is one thing to come from the city and be overwhelmed by the beauty of Nature and to speak of it, and another thing entirely to have lived in it so long that it has seeped into your bones and your blood and is inseparable from your own being . . ." (89). And from that Butala was able to reconceive the development of human cultures in terms of a rather simple, yet complex, and uncomplicated approach: conform local human cultures to the land in which they live (100). American and Canadian urban cultures have become so complicated, because they generate a system whereby everything organic is made to fit a self-perpetuating artificial system of production and consumption. This system has been set in motion with no strategic ground as the measure of its integrity or "congruence"—to use a term that Butala finds quite powerful for her own understanding.

While Butala expresses the feeling that she did not become integrated into the already well established community of rural women in her area because she was such a newcomer, nevertheless, she felt that she had understood enough of her life and their lives after a decade of ranching to write a novel titled *Luna* about such women. She remarks of her thinking about this novel that:

It began to seem clear to me that if women had gained in personal freedom and self-determination by abandoning or being forced off the land, for one reason or another, and out of that traditional life, they had lost some valuable things too, the chief one being a stable support system in which to raise their children in peace and security, a terrible loss from which society, I believe, has not yet begun to feel the full and awful effects. (183)

These words take me back to Charles Gaines's remarks about the

American culture in a pell-mell rush toward self destruction, for which he sought an alternative in taking the family to Nova Scotia to build their cabin. That is not to say that Butala observes the continuation of aspects of traditional rural life uncritically in terms of women's oppression. But rather, as she critiques the patriarchal deformities of such life, she recognizes the possibility that the positive aspects need not be abandoned. Rather, she argues for gender differences to become part of the complexity of simple living.

But at the end of the 1980s a series of natural and commercial factors intersected that threatened every manifestation of traditional life in southwestern Saskatchewan as its agricultural economy collapsed. And with that Butala saw the threat of the end of the kind of existence integrated with nature in her locale that Freeman House and his friends were so successfully realizing in theirs. With that insight, Butala writes toward the end of *The Perfection of the Morning* that "If we abandon farms and farmers as we have known them for the last ten thousand years, we abandon our best hope for redefining ourselves as children of Nature and for reclaiming our lost souls, for what other sizable body of people exists in North America with their knowledge?" (203). Why? Because, she observes that they embody the following: "tightly knit extended families and small communities . . . where interdependence is clear and cooperation thus a way of life. . . . Country people understand how the world was built" (203-04). And in that understanding lies hope for the dominant postindustrial cultures and countries of the world to learn to be at home once again in the world.

Paul Shepard makes the point that "Belonging is the pivot of life, the point at which selfhood becomes possible—not just belonging in general, but in particular. One belongs to a universe of order and purpose that must initially be realized as a particular community of certain species in a terrain of unique geology" (qtd. in House 158). Appropriate as a conclusion to Butala's remarks it is certainly not surprising that Freeman House finds these words eminently quotable in *Totem Salmon*, words to which my first three authors no doubt would also consent.

Consideration of works such as *Totem Salmon* and *The Perfection of the Morning*, along with other books like *Fishcamp*, are crucial for

coming to an understanding of the complexity of simplicity as it refers not just to retreats into the woods or the wilds of arid plains, but also as it refers to working in those and more settled places on this earth. If simplicity is to become a lifelong practice, then conceptions and representations of it have to include ways by which people can earn a living within the money economies in which they are immersed. I think we all stand to gain from an increased attention to a writing that emphasizes family and community efforts to relate to and become integrated with the natural world.

In that vein, it is important to keep in mind that there are many more works that a critic can use to approach the complexity of simplicity through nature-oriented literature. Certainly, there is a need to extend and intensify attention to other agrarian and ranching writings, such as those of Wendell Berry, Jane Brox, Linda Hasselstrom, Wes Jackson, David Mas Masumoto, and Dori Sanders. Such a group would enable critics to look more clearly at regional and ethnic differences among authors. And Ana Castillo's depiction of the development of a community-based agricultural cooperative in *So Far From God* could be added to the mix. Her work would enable critics to think about the relationship of the environmental justice she depicts and the ecological restoration that *Totem Salmon* treats.

And critics could look at other homesteading and community nature activism, as in the prose of Amy Blackmarr, Annick Smith, and Gary Snyder, for instance. And add to these Sallyann Murphey's *Bean Blossom Dreams*, about a Chicago family who moves to the Indiana countryside in order to simplify their lives and participate in growing their food. Many of these writers also invoke Thoreau at some point in their writing and do so in a variety of ways. But invariably, their experiences are not depicted in nearly as isolated, individualistic, or independent a manner as Thoreau represented his experiment to be. These works that integrate family, community, and environment hold out greater hope for inspiring a variety of people to undertake a diverse array of acts of beneficial simplification.

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