

Earthly Motives

Recent theories challenge our view of the world's constitution

Suddenly everyone's talking about the Earth. The so-called new world order, the global environmental crisis and the opening of international trade have put our planet back in the centre of our thoughts. But, David Black asks, just what is the Earth?

Two competing theories offer an explanation. Globalist theories say the Earth is one big market; more recently, the Gaia hypothesis compares the planet to a single living organism. As Black observes, neither view is completely down to Earth.

by J. David Black

Nanabush, the mischievous bird spirit and star of Canadian playwright Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, is a character as old as drama itself. As a trickster figure, the Ojibway Nanabush represents the raw power of nature, gently mocking the women of the reservation for their obsessive bingo-playing.

Tension between "nature" and "culture" is, like waiting for a jackpot, a fundamental part of the human experience. With our customs, institutions and technologies, however, North Americans make life less of a gamble today than it has been in thousands of years here. Not until an earthquake rattles our windows or our drinking water is poisoned by pesticide run-off does nature enter our lives as forcefully as Nanabush did the first peoples'.

Not surprisingly, their cultural response to nature has been different both in degree and in kind. Living

closer to the land, first peoples historically have used weather patterns, landscape features and animals — Nanabush is alternatively a saucy seagull and a spectral nighthawk — as symbolic media for their most important cultural messages.

Christian mythology, to contrast, begins with a symbolic rejection of nature — the Fall from the Garden of Eden. Small wonder that, with the bitter taste of the deadly fruit in their mouths, missionaries declared aboriginal spirituality a heresy, and classified people who claimed spiritual kinship with bears and owls to be less than human themselves.

Where we try to "naturalize" culture, the first peoples "enculturated" nature. That is, instead of borrowing images and objects from nature and informing them with culture, we are far enough from our hunting and gathering past that we fabricate things in culture which, ironically, depend for their credibility on claims to being "natural."

Among these things are some of the goods, images and fabled technological advances that make our times (recalling the famous Chinese curse) "interesting" ones in which to live: Mickey Mouse, all-natural foods, artificial intelligence and, the latest, computer-generated virtual reality.

"Mouse," "foods," "intelligence" and "reality" all suggest natural or commonsense sources. But the content of these phenomena is not of the same order as the cave paintings of deer left by early American peoples.

We are kept at a 'civilized' distance from nature by one metaphor, one economic system: the market — that idealized network of producers, distributors and consumers in self-regulating exchange.

There is a world view called "globalism" which extends that network and its homogenous consumer tastes and advertising images to the entire world. Not only does it separate our 'culture' from nature; globalism also *defines* our relationship with nature in a rather costly manner: the welfare of the market is equated with the welfare of the people it serves. Terms like "deficit," "competitiveness" and "Gross National Product" carry as much influence on how we understand and act in the 'natural' world as do "democracy," "freedom" or "social responsibility."

Opposing the globalist philosophy is one which views the world first as a green and blue whole, and only secondarily as a network of fruit and spring water franchises.

The Gaia hypothesis, named after the classical Greek earth goddess, envisions the Earth not as a web of factories, banks and shopping malls but as a single, living organism.

Drawing heavily on Native American spirituality, the Gaian view assumes the world lives not by competition alone, but by co-operation at a bio-chemical and an almost spiritual level. Many species do compete with each other for resources, but evidence suggests that some species have supported each other over the eons in making the atmosphere hospitable and the soil fertile. In other words, life plays an active role in making the planet cozy for itself, rather than being merely a Darwinian accident of the remote past.

Whether we regard the planet primarily as a market or a commons has direct consequences for our everyday attitudes, and for our work toward a better culture — a culture which respects its roots in the Latin word meaning "to till" the land.

We need to assess the globalist and Gaia world views and their organizing principles in order to bring these lofty theories down to earth. We have to ask ourselves whether these theories offer practical solutions to global environmental problems. And we have to ask ourselves: what are the concrete consequences of failing to dream big?

