

# **Researching Folk Rhetoric: The Case of Apocalyptic Techno-Gaianism on the World-Wide Web**

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## **Ethics of Folk Rhetorical Ethnography**

One of the most important things Franz Boas did near the end of the nineteenth century was advocate for better-trained, more thoughtful, and more rigorous fieldwork methods than those employed by the majority of his contemporaries (see Georges and Jones 1995:31–55). E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, and others' failure to go out and talk with the subjects of their anthropological work contributed enormously to their ability to maintain and perpetuate the largely unexamined and coldly racist worldview of their day. Though Boas himself held dubious views on the nature of race by today's standards, he did argue articulately against anthropology's reliance on the kinds of amateurish fieldwork supported by the colonialist presuppositions of his developing discipline:

The descriptions of the state of mind of primitive people, such as are given by most travelers, are too superficial to be used for psychological investigation. . . . The observers who have really entered into the inner life of a people . . . are few in number, and may be counted on one's finger ends. Nevertheless, the bulk of the argument is always based on the statement of hasty and superficial observers. (Boas 1974:236)

The prejudices that infused the work of Boas's generation rarely go unnoticed in ethnographic scholarship today, and Boas's belief that one might "enter into the inner life" of another person now seems rather naive. However, we must recognize that we have inherited many of the same problems that attended the use of even the most reflective ethnographic methods of Boas's era. The tendency to misrepresent the views of our subjects by labeling them as subjective and/or idiosyncratic (and hence imply their untruth) becomes most pronounced when we hold our own views to be unquestionably true. We cling to this attitude most strongly when we feel our views were formed out of objective observations of a given reality.

In grappling with these issues in my work, I seek to respectfully and rigorously examine the real beliefs of certain real individuals within North American culture. In order to do that, I must consciously reject the ethnographic goal of true objectivity as an impossibility while simultaneously seeking to adhere to the high methodological standards set in the early days of folkloristic research.

Contemporary critical studies approaching religious discourse, especially those motivated primarily by political agendas, usually fail to adequately examine the positions of their participating subjects. To represent the voices of the other, we must allow those voices to sound above and beyond our own political aims—however important and valid. As the twentieth-century beneficiaries of Boas's insights, we are today poised to employ the rigorously objectivist methods of ethnography while we continue to advocate for the validity and function of the belief systems we examine because, in the post-modern era, we acknowledge a far more complex notion of truth than was recognized at the beginning of this century.

The need to consciously choose to create respectful relationships with our subjects in studies of electronic communication is as crucial, if not more so, in our examinations of any other form of communicative behavior. While tried-and-true folkloristic approaches to narrative behaviors rely largely on intersubjective evaluations for any given communication, the individual sitting in front of a computer, in the absence of an embodied audience, may be utterly unaware of the very real effects his or her communications may have on the individuals who receive and interpret those communications. In order to fully appreciate the scope of that reception, some kind of overview is required. Unlike ethnographies seeking to reinforce previously-held views, I am committed to validating my subjects' beliefs and experiences by accepting them *first* as true. In this way, I position myself as an ethical observer of contemporary religious expression. Although I later can, and often do, comment on those beliefs which I find to be unpleasant, rude, or even dangerous, I first try to document them as functioning—which is to say, *correct*—beliefs which constitute part of a larger functioning belief system.

In both my virtual (on-line) and real (on the ground) fieldwork, I focus primarily on Christian folk narrative and belief. In the course of doing research via e-mail and on the Internet, I have located, downloaded, and archived hundreds of megabytes of World-Wide Web (WWW) pages, the contents of which are apocalyptic. During the course of my on-line research in apocalypticism, I have repeatedly happened onto something odd. There is a mythic narrative coalescing on the Internet which combines Darwinian evolutionary theory with a view of the Earth as a volitional subject. This is the core of the emergent belief system I am calling Techno-Gaianism.

James Lovelock, the British scientist, first stated his Gaia hypothesis in 1969 at Princeton: “the biosphere [Gaia] is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment” (1979:xii). Though Lovelock is a respected physicist and a long time employee of NASA, he has also become, rather unwittingly, a New Age prophet. Though he specifically denied the spiritual nature of his theory in the second edition to *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, it has become indispensable to any understanding of contemporary Gaian thought. Today, Techno-Gaian apocalypticism represents one belief system that incorporates his accidental religion.

In dealing with these materials, a fair examination and representation of this belief system necessitates a certain level of indeterminacy in the theoretical components of my work—but that is my intention. I have no wish to reduce the polyvocality of my subjects, who are engaged in the emerging sacred discursive matrices examined in the following pages, to ventriloquized puppets speaking in the tongues of psychoanalysis, functionalism, or any well-known scientific belief system. Instead, in combining my training in behavioral folklore ethnography with my training in rhetoric, I hope to present a preliminary behavioral definition of myth based on data gathered from the WWW that have I chosen to call “Techno-Gaianist.”

I have been a participant in a number of WWW communities for more than five years. I have involved myself by becoming a frequent visitor to various sites, by becoming a builder of religiously focused and other websites, and by corresponding with other site builders about our activities. This essay must not be construed as the final word on the emergent mythic narrative matrix it examines. Much fieldwork remains to be done. In addition to offering a behavioral definition of myth, however, I do mean to suggest by example one possible way in which modern ethnographic methods may be productively fused with rhetorical theory. Such a fusion could simultaneously help us to update how we think about what makes narratives sacred in the dawning electronic millennium, and it could allow us to devise new strategies for communicating what we have learned beyond the fields traditionally involved in ethnographic practice.

By utilizing a strongly structuralist approach that assesses relationships among terms in a narrative set, my behavioral-rhetorical perspective can adequately deal with the ethnographic material addressed in this article. Because the narrative set engaged is not yet codified into a canon, a case-by-case analysis of narrative expression is necessary to establish an expression’s relationship to the overall narrative matrix. Any such analysis, however, must itself relate back to a larger understanding of the discursive behavior at hand in order for it to be properly understood.

But first: what is the narrative that comprises Techno-Gaianism?

### The Techno-Gaian Narrative Matrix in Broad Terms

The Techno-Gaian mythic matrix takes on two very big ideological constructs: it describes all of creation as a unified and coherent whole via a theory of biologic adaptation, and it fuses that creation narrative with strong beliefs about the promise of the Internet. More precisely, the narrative describes the progressive-evolutionary history of bio-organisms from their rise on primordial Earth (known to the ancient Greeks as *Gaia* in Hesiod's *Theogony*), to the eventual rise of *Homo sapiens*, to the ultimate assimilation of all bio-organisms into a collective consciousness through electronics.

When Earth-as-Gaia is perceived and described as a single living organism, humans and their ability to think rationally are posited as one more of Her many evolutionary leaps. As we use our rationality to develop technologies such as the Internet, we become, from the Gaian perspective, evolutionary adaptations of the Earth Herself. When humans first traveled above the Earth's atmosphere and transmitted pictures of the blue-green globe back to the ground, Gaia achieved self-consciousness; that is, She recognized Herself as a unified living organism for the first time. Since then, progress toward a singular mind has accelerated. The Techno-Gaian narrative matrix foresees the dawn of a New Age at whose threshold we are already standing. Through Internet and/or satellite communications, Gaia will someday gain a unified consciousness made up of the minds of billions of human beings. This radical shift in Earth-Human consciousness constitutes an apocalypse. That is, in the ancient Greek sense of the term, it contains as part of its discursive process a focus on some future event that will constitute an "unveiling" of something before unknown or unseen: in this case, the "unveiling" of a new consciousness that coincides with a human-divine apotheosis. However, this outcome is not necessarily inevitable. What I call Apocalyptic Techno-Gaianism sees humankind as *choosing* to step out of individual consciousness and into the newly-evolved single Earth-mind.

### Myth in Rhetorical Terms

I am asserting that the Techno-Gaian narrative matrix represents a generalized model of a sacred narrative, a myth, currently held and still being developed by innumerable individuals, in real-time, across unknown distances. In this sense, the myth and the beliefs that it creates, maintains, and re-creates are both locally and globally emergent.

If we hope to gain a better understanding of this belief matrix, we must adjust our terms to include the sorts of narratives in which these beliefs are expressed. Emergent mythic narratives are often fragmentary, perhaps expressed in a brief conversation at the water-cooler or in an exchange of e-mail with an old friend. It is essential to remember that individuals engaged in behaviors informed by the discourse that concerns us here are involved in a mythic narrative on a level integral to the mundane enactment of their lives. A behavioral definition of myth seeks to include such behaviors without prejudice.

Thus, for present purposes, myth includes any sacred narrative behavior. This definition considers “sacred” that which engages “ultimate terms” that are considered unquestionably true (Burke 1961). Ultimate terms are expressions of those concepts that are structurally definitive for a given discourse, i.e., “Grace” within the discourse of Christian paths toward salvation or “motor” in the discourse of motor vehicle repair. The essential components of a myth, then, are that: (1) it is a narrative, and (2) it engages ultimate terms which are sacred.

### **The World-Wide Web in Rhetorical Terms**

In general, the study of individuals within locally defined communities can be adequately addressed by assuming that those individuals comprise a single discourse community with little or no outside influence. However, groups such as these are an increasingly rare phenomenon. Where it has emerged, electronic communication has so radically changed the way human discourse is conducted that new approaches must be developed to address contemporary communicative events of all sorts. A study of Internet-based communicative groups purposefully engages the extreme fringe of newly-forming, non-locally-defined communities. On the Internet, individuals involved in multiple discourse communities simultaneously engage one another on multiple topics informed by potentially unlimited sources of influence. By implication, no two individuals necessarily share all of the same influence communities. However, by defining a single discursive matrix, we can establish if and to what degree a given individual is engaged in a particular discourse. To develop this model, I have turned to terms common in the study of rhetoric—and “discourse community” is primary among them.

Discourse refers to any communicative activity that surrounds specific and observable communicated elements. Individuals who engage in a discourse comprise a discourse community. My term “influence community” expands the communicative domain by referring to individuals who are influenced by a single mass media source without necessarily engaging the

creators and/or disseminators of that source. Discursive communication, then, can be seen as necessitating at least bi-lateral, if not multi-lateral, communicative behavior in which all members of the community are both audience and expressors. Influence communities can be discursive, but do not have to be. Instead, they encompass discourse communities' multi-lateral (two-way or more) communicative characteristic as well as mass media's unilateral (one-way) characteristic. For example, individuals who watch a particular soap opera every day comprise an influence community but not necessarily a discursive one. On the other hand, individuals who watch that same soap opera and also communicate about it in an e-mail discussion group participate in a discourse community based on the single influence of the soap opera.

While the examination of influence communities is highly developed in journalism and mass communication studies (see McQuail 1994:33ff), the study of discourse has long been the purview of rhetoric. Those of us seeking to study the new forms of electronic communication find them to be far more discourse-oriented than the quantitative-analysis models of television or newspaper communication were designed to examine. For this reason, my descriptive rhetorical concept of a "discursive matrix" becomes useful. A discursive matrix refers to a theoretical model of the shared ideas or issues that are necessary to define a given communicative behavior as related to or participating in a given discourse. By using such rhetorical terms, we can consider each individual involved in more than one of these communities as a unique nexus of the various discourses and influences he or she engages in or has been exposed to.

### **A Preliminary Rhetoric of Apocalyptic Techno-Gaianism**

Techno-Gaianism comes in various shapes and hues, but the sort dealt with here is properly called "apocalyptic." As mentioned above, its narrative focuses on some future event that will constitute the "unveiling" of a new consciousness, coinciding with a human-divine apotheosis. Such an event is what we point toward when we use the word "apocalyptic" in common parlance. It refers to the end of time as we know it, or the End Times. A narrative including End-Times events necessarily places those events simultaneously *in* the future and, at least partially, *after* the ending of normal time.

Individuals communicate End-Times narratives on television, in movies, in newspapers, and, of course, on the Internet. Often they include terms like "rapture" and "judgment," which locate their force in close proximity to "God" and "angels" and other terms which appear to index, in some sense, a realm of previously agreed-upon sacred things. However,

traditional definitions of myth, e.g. myth as sacred narrative, generally exclude narratives about things that will happen in the future. This being so, can apocalyptic narratives like St. John's Revelation or Hopi prophecies properly be called mythic?

Both the Big Bang and Genesis are creation stories, i.e., "traditional prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be true accounts of what happened in the remote past" (Bascom 1984:9). William Bascom's often-cited definition of myth as a prose genre of verbal art states that myths (1) are believed to be factual, (2) are set in "the remote past" (3) occur in a "different world; other or earlier," (4) are sacred, and (5) involve non-human characters (Bascom 9). If Techno-Gaian apocalyptic narratives are considered unarguably true by their tellers and audiences, they fulfill the first condition of Bascom's definition of myth. Since they occur in a different world or on a different plane of this world—in this case on a global level—they fulfill his third condition. If the belief attitude held by their tellers and hearers is "sacred," they fulfill Bascom's fourth condition. Their principle character is the Earth itself which is "non-human," and so they fulfill the fifth condition. But set as they are in the distant or near *future*, apocalyptic narratives are excluded from the genre of myth by Bascom, whose second criterion insists upon a narrative setting in the remote *past*. In short, Bascom's definition must exclude Techno-Gaianism.

Techno-Gaian apocalyptic narratives are not about events that occur *before* time, but about events that will occur *after* it or *at* its end—and they may or may not be considered sacred by those who tell them. What then can *make* them sacred? Looking to Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* for clarification of the word, we find: "Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things [are] those to which the interdictions are applied" (1915:56). Durkheim was evidently satisfied with claiming that the sacred is that which is not profane, but, in contexts in which the Earth itself is considered sacred, the distinction may be difficult to make. Here, rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's description of the human activity of naming "ultimate" or "titular" terms serves us well.

On a single page of *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke represents the whole of Christian religious discourse in a fairly simple chart. In this representation, not unlike a diagram of an electric circuit, Burke traces a relational and interactive structure of concepts that begins with "God as Author and Authority" and ends with "eternal life after death" (Burke 1961: 184). Placed within a narrative framework, the first of Burke's elements is equivalent to the god of Genesis "authoring" the world before the beginning of time with his *Logos* (spoken word): "Let there be light." "Eternal life" is

equivalent to the revelatory conclusion of the long biblical sequence in St. John's Apocalypse which describes the entrance of saved souls into the four-cornered New Jerusalem. The story that comprises all of the pages between these two texts is necessitated and validated by at least these two ultimate terms: *God* and *Eternal Life*. In Christian thought, of course, belief in God or in His Grace cannot be questioned. If they are, the rest of the narrative framework falls open to question and unarguable belief in Genesis or Revelation retreats into a discourse *about* belief.

In behavioral terms then, the word "sacred" is limited to describing those beliefs held by a community to be beyond question. What terms are both ultimate and unquestionable within the Techno-Gaian apocalyptic narrative matrix? In trying to observe in narration what terms are ultimate and whether or not those terms are the focus of the behavior, we can, like Burke, attempt to represent the narrative structure underlying the behavior of narration in a schematic form.

As Burke's Ultimate-Terms model implies, not only does the context and belief position of the audience determine if a given behavior is sacred or not, but any actual example of behavior may be placed on a continuum that puts it at a relative distance from an ultimate term. For example, one might ask of the legend of Juan Diego's vision of Our Lady of Guadalupe: "How much is this about a goddess, and how much is it about a guy having a revelatory vision of a Catholic saint?" In such cases, careful interview data and educated scholarly choice will have to, as they always have, prevail in examining narration in terms of its tendency toward sacredness or profanity. In the end, one might ask if considering a particular communicative behavior "sacred" might yield more interesting or fruitful understanding than would considering it "profane." In this sense, sacredness is not so cut-and-dried as Durkheim would have had it. We can say, however, that a communicative behavior moves toward sacredness if at least two conditions are fulfilled: it must engage a term that is ultimate in relation to the discourse in which it appears and that term must be considered unquestionably true by the individuals involved in the discursive behavior.

The sacred or profane nature of narration, under this rubric, can only be determined for a given situation and a particular person on a particular occasion at best. Placing individuals in such contexts always necessitates looking, in one way or another, at the community in which they narrate. All such communities are based, at least, on concepts held in common. These concepts include narrative norms and formulae as well as shared sacred and secular terms. From this perspective, determining the ultimate and/or sacred nature of a given term must be done through a careful contextualization of



that term in the shared knowledge of a given community as its members have exhibited it through behavior. In Clifford Geertz's formulation, shared terms arise in context out of the "local knowledge" held by a community (1983:215). To determine the proximity of a term to ultimate, one must determine at least a rough account of the structural relationships among shared terms in that discourse community. To ethically represent what may or may not be sacred, ethnography must engage its subject within his or her community on the level of daily interaction—through direct contact over a reasonable period of time. In contemporary electronic culture, and Internet research in particular, it may seem that such interaction is less necessary than it was for the anthropologists who lived among locally isolated subjects. However, this is not the case.

### **A Technical Problem**

A close-textual analysis of a cultural document can tell a researcher a great deal about the rhetoric and structure of that particular document. It might even be enough to hypothesize about how it is interpreted by its audiences. However, without actually engaging its spectators and/or auditors, all hypotheses remain conjecture. A document, after all, has no life of its own—at least not until it has entered into the consciousness of real humans (see Primiano 1995 and Howard 1997).

Beyond careful rhetorical analysis, ethnographic detail is necessary to gain as full a contextual picture as possible of any communicative behavior under analysis. In fact, the electronic environment in which many contemporary Americans live needs *more* careful contextualization than other rhetorical fields of analysis. Although there may be many shared influences through mass media or the Internet, maybe even a budding "mono-culture," the sudden availability of widely variant cultural influences confounds the researcher who expects to find coherent, uniform, culturally pre-determined responses to a single communicative event in a discourse community.

In contemporary North American cultures, most people participate in many discourse communities through their radios, televisions, computers, and other electronic devices. We are all part of various folk groups. And we are influenced by all of them. We bring common references from one community and use them, sometimes to ill effect, in other communities. Unlike printed works or unilateral electronic forums such as TV and radio, which are the focus of mass media studies, Internet forums encourage behaviors that are interactive and negotiated.

Television melds together the news, sitcoms, drama, and a plethora of other genres. The Internet community assimilates these, and much more—only to re-inscribe them onto each other's computer screens. Access to many data sources leads to an ability to assimilate many different terms. One can think of these terms as “cross-overs”—terms originating from, ostensibly at least, unrelated data sources. Although a high degree of interconnected communication may imply that individuals involved in them are all influenced by the same mass media sources, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, any single individual may be involved in any number of influence communities simultaneously. The ethnographer must, on an individual-by-individual basis, establish which and to what degree a given individual is involved in the discourse under analysis. This, however, can only be done once a model of the discourse is established.

### **The Model Solution**

The sheer volume of data available on the Internet allows people to harbor an immeasurable number of differing ideas. Hence, it is very difficult to establish fair discursive models of Internet behaviors based on the examination of any single communicative event. In light of the sheer lack of authoritative, unchanging, or even long-remaining WWW sites, the construction of a generalized model of a discursive set becomes more demanding and more urgently needed. However, since there are no authoritative texts to turn to, any schema or narrative I construct in reference to my selected and defined discourse community will have to be tested by others.

Until a blind poet, biblical council, or ethnographer comes to gather the disparate narrative elements and put them down into a single text, the general outlines of an Internet discourse—like oral narrative—may be shared, but the specifics are always somewhat alterable (Lord 1960:59). The oral poet may present his or her story in a multitude of ways—limited only by the audience's ability or willingness to accept his or her innovations. What remains stable, then, are the broadly accepted events. Among those events, some are essential to a given narrative matrix. If an audience is expecting a performer to participate in a particular discourse, some of these event-terms must not be altered if the narration is to conform to expectations of that discourse. These are its basic terms, and locating them can help scholars decide if, and to what degree, a particular narration is participating in one or another discourse. Further, if at least some of its terms are also in some sense sacred, the degree to which a given narration can be categorized as sacred can be reasonably considered.

A single or definitive narrative matrix for apocalyptic Techno-Gaianism is an impossibility. In fact, I chose this somewhat obscure narrative set for a demonstration of a folk rhetorical approach specifically because it is in such flux. The techno-apocalyptic narrative set is, as of yet, still emerging and far from being codified. Among discourse community members, there need be no single narrator who completely agrees with my model. Instead, my diagram offers a relational framework for scholars to get a handle on what terms are in play within the rhetorical moves common to a particular Internet discourse community.

I have found two main schools of thought emerging under the aegis of what I am calling Techno-Apocalypticism. Proponents of the “Invisible Hand” theory see damnation on the horizon. These individuals feel that once all humans are “hived” together through electronic networks, a totalitarian regime will manipulate the masses. This sort of thinking is, however, not the focus of Gaian techno-apocalypticism and is not my subject here.

Taking a more positive view of the future, some contend that the “hiving” of human consciousness through telecommunications will bring a new millennium—an apocalypse in which the self-consciousness of Gaia will manifest. The entire planet will gain sentience through the aggregate of networked thoughts and thus become a single self-aware organism. The human mind will, in a classic example of apotheosis, unite with deity. References to a volitional Earth can be seen throughout history, from Anaxagoras to contemporary Native American thought; “Gaia” as the proper name for the Earth must be considered a definitive belief element in the Gaian belief matrix. What I am calling Techno-Gaianism not only names *Gaia* as a living and volitional subject, it also names the moment that brought Her out of the void: the *Big Bang*.

Figure 1 (see next page) is a graphic image (image-map) from a site on the WWW that unfortunately, as far as I can determine, no longer exists. This image-map is the cross-section of a beehive; it is also a representation of Techno-Apocalyptic Gaianism. Each cell of the hive has a place-name inside. To link to any of the places named on the map, the computer user simply chooses the desired hive-cell with an input device. (The empty cells of the image-map were left that way by the site’s originator.)



*Figure 1: Hive image-map; a click-able set of links embodied in a graphic image from a Gaia's Hive World-Wide Web page*

If one is versed in Gaian discourse, Figure 1 also communicates a complex belief matrix. In computer jargon, “hiving” refers to the use of idle network space to speed up network operations. In Gaian thought, it also represents an accelerated process toward “Emergence,” the moment when the entire planet gains consciousness through the aggregate network of human thoughts. As in St. John’s Apocalypse, mind will unite with deity; in this case, the living, volitional biosphere of Earth: Lovelock’s Gaia.

During 1996, *Millennium Matters* ([www.m-m.org/jz/intro.html](http://www.m-m.org/jz/intro.html)) grew to become one of the largest sites on the Web focused on the coming millennium. It sported hundreds of wildly diverse links. From its home page, one could click onto a Catholic page describing the importance of the Blessed Mother’s appearance at Fatima, link to a Hindu site displaying a Hopi chief’s prophecy, and go through an analysis of the Mesopotamian myth of Inanna and Tammazu for evidence of ancient extra-terrestrial guidance. All this and more, in interlinking, overlapping, and back-looping sites, which in some way relate to a single idea—millennium.

This construction and use of such websites is often termed “research” by my Internet-savvy subjects, and their sites are often attempting to present aesthetically pleasing arguments. If there is not an argument for a particular kind of apocalypticism, then there is an argument for the validity of

apocalyptic debate in general. One informant said of his Internet audience, "I hope they appreciate having concepts that they can relish to disagree with!" Another, the builder of a very popular New Age site, hopes to draw "anyone on a quest" into the open discourse of the Internet. He says this is his goal because he feels that "the Internet is a new extension of the global mind."

Regardless if computer users are the audience to web pages or the builders of extensive websites, regardless of whether they see ideas as competing against them in the discourse or just as healthy diversity, they supply the creative energy that runs through this network of wires. Such human communicative behaviors are, in sum, the discourse that is the Internet. From the Gaian perspective, the human act of communicating is the process by which Gaia thinks, and the Internet has multiplied human communicative possibilities enormously. Whether they are making a clickable link from their own site to a related site or whether they are following a link, Internet users are participating in a behavior that is an individual act—but not the idiosyncratic expression of an individual. Defining myth in the electronic age, a time in which long-held distinctions between science and religion (or, more precisely, between quantum physics and metaphysics) are increasingly blurred, is both facilitated and problematized by the fact that many individuals with radically different backgrounds are communicating electronically with one another. It is precisely because the Internet is an open communicative medium that new narratives arise out of shared, and more and more frequently syncretic, knowledge.

In 1996, I began a systematic examination of the existing non-Christian apocalyptic and Gaian sites. I gained a first-hand familiarity with these sites by cataloguing and documenting them. Then, I followed up on some of the textual works commonly cited and/or excerpted on their pages. Then, taking the ideas I had gathered together, I made a list of those elements so basic as to be necessary to understand the logical sequence of events that individuals believe might cause wide-area-networks to bring on a new Gaian consciousness. I built a hypothetical narrative. This narrative set is representative of the narrative matrix that defines apocalyptic Techno-Gaianism and is represented in Figure 2 below.

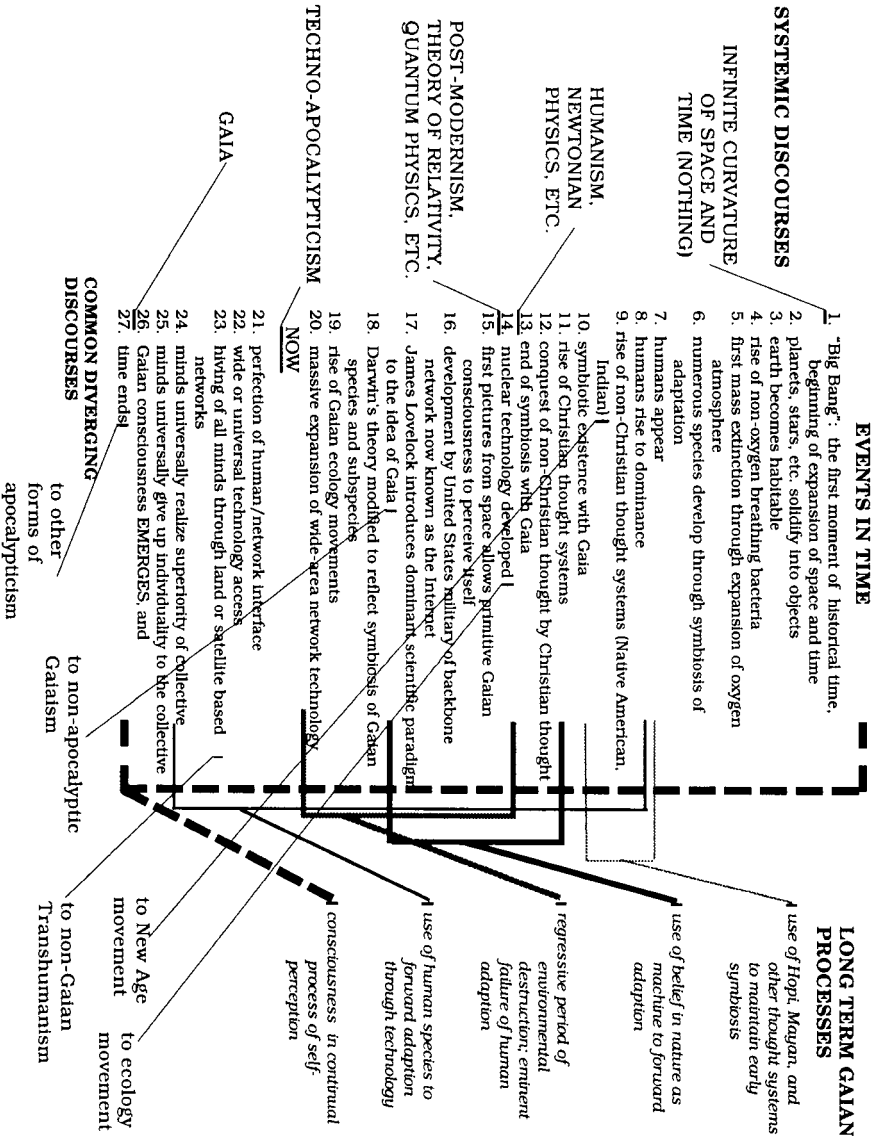


Figure 2: Terms that comprise a hypothetical Techno-Gaian Apocalyptic narrative matrix

The first event on the diagram is not a surprising beginning, except in so far as it is the start of a syncretic religious discourse. The numbered list represents events in the Techno-Gaian Apocalyptic narrative matrix that function as easily observable discursive terms. Together, they comprise a theoretical narrative set because each leads to the next and all the previous events are necessary for the next to occur. On the left side, I have listed some of the major processes Gaia has participated in during this narrative period. On the right, I have shown at which points certain evolutionary processes have begun and ended. Across the bottom, I have listed a number of diverging idea sets which lead to other discourses. Some of the narrative events offer common crossover points between distinct—even competing—discourses. Where the connections were extremely common, I noted them on the diagram. The Techno-Gaian discourse, for instance, can be seen as ending, or diverging, at event 17. An Apocalyptic Techno-Gaian discourse must contain the apocalyptic elements following event 17 as well. Similarly, the idea of the “hiving” of human minds through satellite communication at event 23 is necessary to Techno-Gaianism, but then crosses into the very different belief sets referred to as “Transhumanism.” (Transhumanism does not focus on the Earth as a volitional being in its discourse, therefore it cannot be considered Gaian even if its discursive elements are shared.) Figure 2 is not meant to be a final or closed representation of this emerging mythic narrative matrix.

### Myth on the Web

Roger Penrose proved the “Big Bang,” what I have labeled “event one,” to be mathematically sound: the beginning of time would have been a point of infinite density and infinite curvature of space time (Penrose 1997:8ff). Though, as Stephen Hawking and others have noted, this is not practically possible (Hawking 1988:133). It is, however, the secular creation narrative, the Big Bang. The universe must have proceeded out of nothing. The event must have occurred or nothing would exist, including the narrative. However, it cannot have occurred based on an understanding of the very principles of the nature it begets: matter cannot, exploding outward or otherwise, be generated out of nothing. This paradoxical mathematical event generates the Gaian narrative matrix and the “Big Bang” is the first of its terms. That generative term (equivalent to the *Logos*) must be accepted without question, and yet it resists direct experiential evidence in that it could only be known through direct revelatory knowing or some sort of alchemically arcane mathematics. Thus, this initial narrative event places its following narrative set in the realm of the sacredness: event one, as the first ultimate term in this narrative set, is considered true beyond question by its adherents.

The ideas of Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, his collaborator, dominate beliefs about the events following this initial event. Lovelock contends that the earth is a single living thing. Margulis argues further that evolution has been pushed forward by “symbiosis.” As one informant interpreted it, “[Margulis] says that Darwin’s grand vision was not wrong, only incomplete.” Humans in symbiosis with Gaia are evolving through their own technology—or, to put it another way, humans are the evolutionary adaptations of the planet Earth.

Following these primal events, humans emerged and a number of societies developed thought systems which posit and maintain the Gaia symbiosis. Gaian worshipers express a belief in a coming Golden Age in various ways. On the home page of one website builder, a self-proclaimed New Age priest, we find a poem entitled, “Hymn to Gaia.” The poet chants:

Yes! Yes! to the dance of death,  
 Oh Kali devour me whole,  
 Take me home,  
 Consume my bones,  
 And sing your song to my soul.  
 And Yes! Yes! to the Wheel of Life,  
 Oh Isis restore me anew,  
 Return my breath,  
 To laugh at death,  
 And revel, oh Gaia, in you.

Here Gaia is conflated with two other pre-Christian Goddesses. The poet prepares to “revel” in Gaia after she or he is “devoured” by Kali of ancient India and “restored” by Isis of ancient Egypt. In Gaian belief, pre-Christian ideas represent humans who effectively developed their technologies. They could do this because they were aware that they lived in symbiosis with the Earth. The ancients knew a sentient Gaia—though often by a different name.

The symbiotic period (see Figure 2) lasted from about the emergence of humans to the dominance of Christian ideology—with its tendency toward thinking in terms of linear time. This same sort of thinking, of course, gave rise to Newtonian physics and a mechanistic view of nature. These ideas in turn generated events 14 and 15, nuclear technology (the potential for the annihilation of Gaia) and Gaia’s first glimpses of Herself in pictures from space. The narrative tells us that with that first glimpse of Her totality, the grip of Christianity and pure science began to loosen. People, Gaia’s emergent mind, realized the potential for Earth to become a truly sentient unity for the first time.

The typical Gaian adheres to my narrative model up to this point. That is to say, the ultimate term of Big Bang theory is still functioning to define a sacred attitude toward the Earth. But there are Gaianists who break off from



the narrative at this point and head down a path toward ecology or some other discourse. For those individuals, “Emergence” is not unquestionably true. Emergence does not define, is not ultimate to, non-apocalyptic Gaianism. Such individuals might not even be aware that others harbor Emergence beliefs.

One site that does play into apocalyptic Gaianism features e-mail exchanges between two scholars debating the fine points of Mayan calendar dating. Why do Gaian apocalypticists follow this link? Because the Mayan calendar, in the words of one informant, “predicts the end of the cycle of the linear time illusion.” The Mayan calendar has a set date for the end of time and/or the rise to another level of consciousness, December 24<sup>th</sup>—or maybe December 21<sup>st</sup>—of 2012. The idea is that the ancient Maya were so closely in touch with Gaia that they could accurately predict the moment of a great shift in her consciousness—even prior to the advent of electronic “hived” connectedness.

In light of the terms I have set out above, a linkage of the Internet to ecology and ancient civilizations might take on new meaning for us. People highly involved in Techno-Gaian discourses might come upon certain key terms arising within what seems to be a secular context and interpret them to have sacred or semi-sacred meanings. “MayaQuest,” inaugurated in the spring of 1995, is an annual event sponsored by some large technology companies. While groups of “explorers” travel around the rain forests of Latin America, individuals in the United States communicate with them via the Internet and satellite links, all in the hope of (quoting some electronic junk mail now) discovering how “to learn how the Maya lived symbiotically with their rain forests and what happened when that harmony broke down.”

An individual involved in Gaian discourse might relate this statement to the Mayan calendar and the year 2012. One individual might believe catastrophic destruction awaits on this date, while another might believe that technology is the final link in a return to the Golden Age of symbiosis represented by the idealized Maya. The latter individual continues in my progressive apocalyptic narrative believing that the Maya foresaw the spiritual and cosmological significance of wide-area-networks. In an ironic narrative twist, the destruction of the Golden Age that allowed for the development of electronic connectedness contained within it the potential for humans to advance toward a greater and purer Gaian symbiosis.

Those Gaian apocalypticists who stay my narrative course and become true Techno-Apocalyptic Gaianists believe that network technology is the mechanism that will allow for the moment of Emergence. For them, we must only grasp our upgraded input devices, get our minds on-line, and stay the technological path. We can, by giving up our identities to the collective technology, progress into, as the *Millenium Matters* webpage called it, “Techno-Rapture.”

On a computer systems newsgroup (the sort of “place” in which computer science majors might discuss machine coding), I came across a student claiming that intelligence is part of an “emergence phenomenon.” He wrote, “Intelligence, and especially consciousness, are most probably the result of the connections between many neurons.” We know that this person is involved in an exchange about the Gaian notion of Emergence rather than (or in addition to) a discussion of mere artificial intelligence because he continues, “I’m also a proponent of the Gaia hypothesis.” He outlines the hypothesis, states the possibility of a Gaian super-mind, and then adds, “Any constructive comment welcome!”

This reply was forthcoming: “What we are witnessing is a development such that we have a collective consciousness and a collective unconscious. I also think that the use of myth as an emergent phenomena will play some part: the global brain of Gaia with each human functioning as an individual neuron and how it came to be.” The respondent is implying that part of the Gaian rapture, the moment of Emergence, is an expression of a universal myth of humans-as-individuals. (The notion of a collective unconscious dovetails nicely with Gaian discourse, as it does with many other contemporary comparativist models of myth.) Further, it must be stated that upon *Emergence*, Gaia will believe the myth of Her own human mental genesis. Humans, in accepting this, will make a choice (event 24): they will realize the superiority of the Gaian super-mind. Almost simultaneously, events 25, 26, and 27—apocalypse—will occur.

Burke playfully calls this moment, in its Christian manifestation, “The Great Rounding Out” (1961:191). *Apocalypse*, or *Emergence*, or *Apotheosis* is the Gaian narrative’s second ultimate term. In order to fully believe in the mythic matrix I have set forth, one cannot reject “The Great Rounding Out” and still consider oneself a Techno-Gaian Apocalypticist. Armed with an understanding of the structural significance of the terms expressed in a given narrative behavior, careful interview data must then be sought to establish the degree to which the expression does or does not hold the narrated events to be unquestionably true. Even when there is some doubt as to the actual belief position of the expression, if an individual asserts that humans have stopped evolving physically but continue to evolve otherwise through the Internet, he or she is, at least to some degree, contributing to a Techno-Gaian discourse. If another person asserts that all humans might or might not ascend to Gaian consciousness, that person also participates in this discourse—although the expression might not have a sacred referent.

In order to see, or even predict, how a computer science student might link apocalypse and the Internet, or why he or she might champion a corporate “MayaQuest” marketing venture with religious zeal, we must try to piece

together the Internet's disparate sites into some coherent wholes. Doing so allows us to see how certain connections are, and will be, easily made in the communicative behaviors of individuals. Further, it illustrates in an observable way why a discussion of "emergent consciousness" might smack of the mythic.

At the outset, I stated that I do not intend to establish Techno-Gaianism as anything more than a theoretical matrix of narrative events that seem to occur in close proximity to each other on the WWW. Though these elements seem to push toward ideas of sacredness and the mythic, they also frustrate the traditional conception of what makes sacred narratives sacred. But, having been presented with these problems, are we, as ethnographers, to reject the application of our analytic tools to borderline cases such as this?

It seems to me that the slowly dawning millennium of interactive electronic discourses challenges and complicates the long-held methods of rhetoric and its related text-based methods in literary and other fields of study. I have here attempted to point toward a rhetorical method of discursive analysis that can help to further define and inform the methods, ethics, and assumptions of ethnographic study. It merges, to some degree, text-based descriptive rhetoric with behavioral folkloristics in order to attempt to bridge the gap between folklore studies and other fields in the human sciences. In today's increasingly electronic communication and knowledge-focused environments, we must not allow book-centered scholarship to misunderstand—and then misrepresent—the very malleable, performative nature of Internet discourse. Instead, we must educate ourselves sufficiently to encourage those for whom ethnography cannot exist in silicon-based systems to go on-line with real people with the attitude that those people actually know something and do interesting things with their knowledge. In short, the Internet allied with ethnographic studies might, early in the coming millennium, contribute more fully to the emerging interdisciplinary fields that already inhabit the landscape of post-modern scholarship.

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