

My half-century saturated in semiotics: A spiralling confessional

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The question-words

Ordinarily, a confession would not be a reply to a request or even a response to an invitation; a classic confession precipitates from an inner compulsion. This essay is a confession, even though it was nudged into existence by Kalevi Kull, the “who”, inviting me, the “whom”, to write some nebulous “what”. There was a suggestion of “when” (yet deadlines fortunately never die), and an assumption that I would grasp the “how” and that the “where” would be irrelevant.

Back to the “what”. “What” remains a humongous mystery, as does “why”; precisely, that is my first confession. Yet I picked up the dangled thread, by default exploring via narrative the fusion of semiotics with my very self. These tangled traces also qualify as confessions.

Let me add that the human tool-toy of language has forced these signs of thought and speech and writing, into secondness. Sharing the thirdness weakened into secondness leaves behind the spatiotemporal-free firstness of potential, and the thirdness of habit, drawing on Peirce (cf. CP 1: 356). Consequently, to start, even with an unknown, I must defy the symmetry of ultimate potential. I’ll let Kull do this, with his suggested frame of “50 years”. Let’s round that out to a half-century and allow gravity to take over.

A persisting habit of mine, of leaning forward more than reflecting back, turns out to characterize my whole life. Any process consumes me, while products, or consequences, seem inconsequential, inasmuch as I will have already moved on – figuratively if not actually – to something else. I’ve found various metaphors for this condition, admitting to being a gourmand without pretension of ever becoming a gourmet, a dedicated lumper sidestepping analytical splitting. By analogy, I have been a “goat”; with that pesky goat as a totem, I could browse high and low and all around, fuelled by curiosity, steeled for surprise. From that vantage point, I might consider some conspecifics as “sheep” – somewhat linear and predictable grazers.

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Rather than questing after some grail, I have always been consumed by the means and musements of learning. Learning in my case floats above “facts” and will not necessarily consolidate as “knowledge”; in fact, “belief” I steadfastly eschew, and who can pause for “opinions”, anyway?

This exploratory bent and dedication to curiosity made me a pushover for systems theory and eventually semiotics. At the same time, I regarded traditions of my natal culture not just arbitrary, but on occasion downright embarrassing. The familiar could lead me to blush. I lusted after the strange, whether alien ideas or surprising observations, as invitations to comprehension. From childhood, I could also be compulsive, though, exhausting entire shelves of the library, pursuing an author or a subject matter. Reading was my escape from conventional duties. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* could only be outcompeted by maps and atlases, the more foreign, the better. Moving dozens of times between homes, schools, and states while growing up, I was an anthropologist-in-process from the get-go. I find no starting point other than what Kull has suggested!

Tipping the pen into time and motion

A rough half-century ago, in 1964, I made an about-face, and gingerly returned to academe. I had spent a dozen years in reading, writing, travelling around the globe, and working as an actuary, not realizing that there was a label for my condition: unbeknownst, since 1953, I had qualified as a “drop-out”. A few of my pastimes in the interim did involve study, both systematic and serendipitous, bringing me back into the orbit of formal institutions called college. For example, in 1958–1959 I studied Japanese on my own in Seattle prepping for a trip across the Pacific, and in 1966–1967 I followed that up with courses at the University of Hawaii. There, during concurrent ethnographic research for my bachelor’s thesis on a Japanese ecstatic sect (Anderson 1968), I discovered that I had forgotten more Japanese than I had learned – not a good sign for a linguist, or for a semiotician, or for an anthropologist, but, sobered, I persevered, focusing on contextual behaviour over language, and within language, on the paralinguistic.

While outside academe from 1953 to 1964, I had lived in Seattle, San Francisco, and Pasadena, when not travelling around the world – casually, as was then quite possible. Escaping the U.S.A., I first aimed for the circum-Mediterranean, the foundry for classical “civilization”, where, besides history, I met a number of Beat writers. The buzz around the Beats was exciting, but I had already been infected by other persuasive writers and travellers from, or reflecting on, the 1920s and 1930s up to the Second World War. Most likely the Beats and I were both drawn to that region after encountering the literature from that overlapping generation of free-thinkers,

such as – Lawrence Durrell, Gerald Durrell, Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller, and Anaïs Nin. They all seemed to know how to live, as well as think, perhaps inspired by the same Romantic writers of the previous century I had to read in high school – William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, William Blake, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Charlotte Brontë. Many of these intellectuals from the several generations spanning two centuries had significant roots outside their nations-of-origin. Even back then, they had managed to defy inertia if not gravity. What I took from this literary heritage was to associate ideas with mobility, and vice-versa: motion, time, later realized as semiosis.

The Romantic poets as well as those older contemporaries were adventurous, immune to convention, comfortable with risk; their experiences in the world afforded the substance for thinking and writing. I thought they would be sterling interlocutors, although their compositions expressed rather than argued. I definitely felt a calling to explore the world, not to convert it (or even myself), and consequently I split my early adulthood between saving money and then using it up, in travelling.

Not satisfied just with exploring Western roots in Europe, I took sites on earlier cradles of culture in the Middle East, and eventually explored the Far East, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and a variety of accessible points above the equator. This meant that I failed to experience the Rift Valley in Ethiopia, the cradle for our species. Instead, above the equator, I spent a summer (1960) of quasi-ethnography visiting Kyrgyz nomads around Kabul, Afghanistan; and another summer (1961) of quasi-ethnobotany with the Inuit of Ungava Bay, Quebec. Intervening seasons were devoted to travelling between places not always on maps, including a 1956 unplanned detention in Aleppo, Syria. By the close of my pre-academic wanderings, I could bear witness to monuments of the past now obliterated forever, UNESCO World Heritage sites notwithstanding: Aswan temples and the Buhen fortress sacrificed to the Aswan High Dam; the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and the temples of Palmyra, Syria, gobbled and toppled by wanton terrorism.

Once more, I discovered this tangled path would label me, this time as a “hippie” and “WT”, or “world traveller”. Belatedly, in 1969, I even attended the infamous several-day Woodstock rock music festival... but not its 25th anniversary resurrection on 13 August 1994, as I could recruit no playmates willing to celebrate my own 60th birthday in New York State, everyone herding me instead back to the Pacific Northwest. On my 80th birthday, I isolated myself aloft at 30,000 feet, rather than commit to any particular congeries of friends.

Dropout and hippie, perhaps, but labels don't stick that well on me, perhaps because I'm always moving on, centripetally, centrifugally, and most of all, in Brownian fashion.

Stumbling onto semiotics

While giving in to the lure of exploring the world delayed my return to academe, I was encountering ever more thinkers and ideas in print that tugged me back into place. Before and while tentatively resuming my academic career in Pasadena in 1964, I also attended every public lecture by R. Buckminster Fuller, however philosophically vague, and every one by Louis Leakey, however evolutionarily concrete. Upon discovering Kenneth E. Boulding (cf. Boulding 1964, 1978), though, it seemed imperative to infuse “spaceship earth” with “peace”, now that the markedness of “war” brought the very notion of “peace” into light. I even wrote an essay on this revelation; alas, “which came first, war or peace” has never been published, and will not appear in the already growing bibliography to this confessional.

These encounters appear logical enough, but they were initially sheer accidents... a flyer about a free lecture was all it took. Other accidents occurred in libraries, where a single unstable book could drop on a toe, and precipitate a fresh line of forensics; an example would be William F. Ogburn’s 1922 volume, the relatively heavy *Social Change with Respect to Culture and Original Nature*, that led me to discover his 1964 selected papers, and also the surprising 1922 article with Dorothy Thomas, “Are inventions inevitable? A note on social evolution”. Another broken-toe incident awarded me Arthur Lovejoy’s classic on the great chain of being (Lovejoy 1936). Or how about Ashley Montague’s *Growing Young* (1981), after which I had many encounters with this prolific scholar “not institutionally committed”, as he liked to assert. The takeaway message: falling books will never disappoint.

Other discoveries led me into minds I could follow for a half-century. Paramount among these serendipitous thrills was Christopher Alexander’s *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1971[1964]); then, in 1977 as I became established in academe, there was his *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (written with Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, and others). In 2003–2004 Alexander rolled out four hefty tomes under the all-encompassing rubric, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe*. The built environment can be choreographed with a good bit of soul. I am even a sucker for pictures of outer space, finding craters that will transform to hills, or dimples to pimples, when slowly rotating the photograph. Space fascinates me far more than time. Any graphic representation free of humans draws me into it: I am transported, I begin to nest, and pretty soon that space is festooned with imaginary books, whether the image represented a woodland copse or a cathedral. A naked shelf-less wall seems sacrilegious.

Another fortunate extracurricular encounter brought Marshall McLuhan to my attention, along with his intellectual circle. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964)

primed me for the Whole Earth Catalogue in 1968. Somehow, without first realizing their Toronto connection, I devoured anything coming from Edmund Snow Carpenter, an actual anthropologist, and Harold Innis, whose documentation of northern North American history resonated with me in the Pacific Northwest of my Swedish heritage. At some point in this wild growth period I encountered Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* (1959), finding his emerging *oeuvre* captivating, as it connected space, time, person, society, culture, speech, language, and more, even the pervasiveness of the paralinguistic that would crop up later (cf. Hall 1984). I realized Hall's consonance with McLuhan and Fuller, and Bateson and Sebeok, too, and finally my future (from 1977 on) Purdue colleague, O. Michael Watson, who was an early student of proxemics.

Probably in Justus Buchler's collection (1955[1940]), I encountered Charles Sanders Peirce's essay "Evolutionary love" (1893), which held out promise for a synthesis of all things intellectual. I also devoured his "The fixation of belief" (1877) and "How to make our ideas clear" (1878), in particular. It's possible that a hippie preoccupation with "free love" sucked me into the first of Peirce's essays, but that misunderstanding was no deterrent. I found it fascinating that Peirce and Fuller were both driven by a number, three, and that they were able to cultivate the consequences of three both in the abstract world of ideas and in the concrete world of engineering. Each of them conjured up persuasive 20–20 vision in dealing with mental and material systems, while lacking that faculty in actual life. Were they both left-handed? I didn't know, but those worlds were joined in my musings, and I longed for admission into their cosmos, even though I knew I would be deficient, having perfectly good eyesight and a reliable right hand.

Gaining some traction by returning to college through night courses at Pasadena City College from 1964 to 1966, I then moved on to Honolulu (facilitated by my actuarial consulting firm employer) for a 1968 B.A. at the University of Hawaii. There, intensifying my studies, I declared my major as anthropology, readily abandoning the feeble commitment to chemistry pre-med of 1952. The architecture of the periodic table stayed with me, however, perhaps keeping me fallow for Peirce. Likewise, the notions of moles, nodes, and valences that could suck and shove, paved the way for ecologies of relations in all angles of space, time, and substance, and a deep sympathy for Bateson.

It's my personal impression that younger minds find math and the sciences more approachable than the waffling social sciences as well as being a veritable refuge from the intimidating, memory-laden humanities. In terms of public acknowledgment, the tangible rewards for historians and philosophers are so often posthumous; in contrast, mathematicians and scientists must be shockingly young to accomplish anything! By the time I returned to college, I was no longer young, so a middle

ground, like anthropology, was all that was available. However, “social science” held no appeal as a label. I did not seek a profession, but rather a way of life, to extend my established commitment to a life of the mind. Anthropology itself is all over the place – and not just geographically or historically, but also from art to zoology – open to all paths to understanding. Semiotics consists in those very paths. Home at last.

While in Honolulu in the mid-1960s, I met Margaret Mead several times as she criss-crossed the Pacific (and later at Yale), and I sat in on a seminar with Gregory Bateson that was also attended by Anthony Wilden. Bateson was then working with dolphins but also pulling together his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (2000[1972]). By the time I could read Bateson’s full assemblage, Wilden’s *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (1980[1972]) had also been published. I didn’t meet up with Wilden again until 1987 when he participated in one of my early symposia on systems thinking and semiotic modelling at the Semiotic Society of America meetings in Pensacola; by that time Wilden had graced his admirers with two fortunately more accessible texts: *The Rules are No Game: The Strategy of Communication* (1986a); and *Man and Woman, War and Peace: The Strategist’s Companion* (1986b). Gender itself never drew my attention, so I didn’t single out female thinkers for special attention, even though Susanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1941) became a cornerstone and also led me backwards to Ernst Cassirer (1953–1957[1923–1929]; 1944), and forward to Morse Peckham (1967) and Nicholas Humphrey (1973).

Still in Hawaii, through coursework in anthropology and linguistics, I became conversant with the works of Kenneth L. Pike (1967[1954]), and allowed myself to be caught up with his contrast between “emics” and “etics”, even using this terminology in my bachelor’s thesis. I also stumbled on Charles Morris’ *Signs, Language, and Behavior* (1946), and upon its publication, I found Thomas A. Sebeok’s article in *Science* on “Zoosemiotics: Juncture of semiotics and the biological study of behavior” (Sebeok 1965), unaware that these two prestidigitators knew each other (cf. Sebeok 1991). Eighteen years later, I would actually meet and collaborate with Sebeok (Anderson *et al.* 1984), and thereafter be dedicated to all things biosemiotic as well as semiotic. Another confession: should we imagine any distinction here, between semiotics and biosemiotics?

But Hawaii’s interlibrary loan wasn’t yet finished with me! I discovered among other things, R. Gordon Wasson’s (with Valentina Pavlovna Wasson) *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (1957), published in a limited edition from Verona, Italy. Pairs of xeroxed pages arrived in clumps that I deviously requested, paced out over a two-year period. Since I had always been immersed in a world of trees and other plants (though not to exclude other creatures), it occurred to me that ethnobotany might offer some continuity with old habits, and even with my father’s only passion

besides fly-fishing. But meanwhile, for my undergraduate thesis (Anderson 1968), I completed that ethnography of the Japanese religious sect, Tensho-Kotai-Jingu-Kyo, and its charismatic “dancing goddess” foundress, named Ogamisama.

From plants to dance – my interest in language and linguistics led me deeper into classification in ethnobotany, and eventually ethnoecology, but also into nonverbal behaviour that, as noted by Sebeok, Margaret Mead, and Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson, defied our ordinary approaches for documenting and analysing communication (Sebeok *et al.* 1964). So far, I was not willing to exclude anything from my plate; humans and other creatures, extending from alloanimals thence to plants; language but also culture and biology; the nonverbal along with the entire body and its environs and, now, microbiotic contents as well; emotions fused with cognition and cosmology – it would be relations all the way down, and up, and through and around, and relations meant ecologies.

Upping the ante in semiotics

When it came to selecting a graduate programme to cap off my intoxicating return to college, I was drawn by the diversity, breadth, and depth of anthropology and related disciplines at Yale University – in anthropology: Harold C. Conklin, Floyd Lounsbury, Cornelius Osgood, Leopold J. Pospíšil, Harold W. Scheffler; in biology: G. Evelyn Hutchinson; in linguistics: Rulon S. Wells III, Sydney Lamb, Joseph Greenberg; in history of science, medicine, and technology: Derek de Solla Price – these particular thinkers merely scratch the surface of the world of ideas that came to touch me at Yale. As at the University of Hawaii, Yale was thick with itinerant intellectuals of every stripe. Of peripheral significance, the Human Relations Area Files – a cross-cultural survey brainchild of William Graham Sumner – had been enhanced and consolidated at Yale in 1949; HRAF continues now as a digital data base without peer. Around 1970, I played the role of a student being initiated into the Files, in an instructional film buried (hopefully deeply) in archives somewhere.

The gourmand affliction of eyes being bigger than the stomach, sums up my quandary in academe generally. Considering my untamed interests, anthropologist Hal Conklin was the only contender to serve as my major professor, even though he was in the Philippines among the Ifugao my entire first year in the Yale graduate programme. He compensated for my loss many times over when he returned, first by foisting on me Roman Jakobson (cf. 1957) and John L. Austin (cf. 1962). Later I assisted him with the footwork in assembling his extraordinary bibliography of folk classification (Conklin 1980[1972]). Even though we would agree that ethnography cannot be “taught”, *per se*, Conklin’s instruction embraced every contingency, including the unique personalities of ethnographers and their significant others.

His lectures ranged from show-and-tell to hands-on experimentations making and documenting and describing and analysing both cultural artifacts and hypothetical linguistic constructions. Maps were everywhere, and all maps must have legends. Legendary, that sums up any exposure to Hal Conklin's virtual Montessori approach to ethnography (Anderson in press).

Along the way, biologist G. E. Hutchinson (cf. 1965) must have facilitated my discovering Jakob von Uexküll's *Theoretical Biology* (1926) and his later "A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds" (1957[1934]), translated from the German, *Streizüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen* and introducing the notion of *umwelt*. I later reflected on *umwelt* in relation to Hutchinson's "niche", and on his end-of-life proclamation in 1991 that what was still left on science's plate would be the relation of insides and outsides (Anderson 2000, 2001). Greenberg introduced me to universals, especially linguistic universals revealed through typologies, and raised the question of the relativities of universals of any sort, and even *vice versa*. Osgood (cf. 1951) dangled the challenge of documenting negative space, for instance what one does not uncover in any investigation – that being virtually infinite, and thereby broaching markedness theory; later from the field, I took the liberty of mailing both Osgood and Conklin drawings of imaginary plants that I had not discovered in Lapland, and would not likely encounter even in virtual space. Lamb allowed me to connect with the ideas of Louis Hjelmslev and of M. A. K. Halliday, whom, as well as Lamb, I came to encounter in person at a number of semiotic conferences and summer schools during the 1980s and thereafter.

Coincident with my moving to Yale, I became an enthusiast of Stewart Brand's *The Whole Earth Catalogue* (from 1968, intermittent to 1998), thence his *CoEvolution Quarterly* (from 1974) merging with the ensuing *Whole Earth Review* and just *Whole Earth* (until 2002). In 1969 I even produced a flyer for fellow anthropology students leaving for dissertation fieldwork, listing outlets for research and camping supplies, inspired by *The Whole Earth Catalogue*. Brand's brand, as it were, of exposing connections in general systems embraced people and ideas already somewhat familiar to me, for instance, Bucky Fuller, that exciting and excited lecturer from my years in California. Eventually, decades later, I would meet Brand as well, in Sausalito, where I made a brief presentation that failed to sit still long enough to be captured on my vita.

Once back in academe for good, casual reading of fiction became a casualty! I had too much respect for genuine literature: it demanded reading, close reading, digestion, ideally discourse, and I had no time for such luxuries. Instead, I fell into skimming and scanning through contemporary and classical general science, while exposing myself to as many thinkers in the flesh as possible. At Yale, I had a penchant for taking courses with scholars passing through New Haven, skipping courses

from regular faculty with whom I could interact on a daily basis anyway. After all, attending even a slice of the public lectures could be a full-time job.

I realized the only field sufficiently expansive for my undisciplined mind was still anthropology – but how to narrow ever-expanding appetites for actual research! Armchairs in archives would not suffice. Travel continued to draw me, but I had no particularly strong languages to build upon. Earlier wanderings in the Northern hemisphere had included a summer in 1961 with the Inuit of Ungava Bay, Quebec, where I fancied I was exploring ethnobotany. I was puzzled how I could find myself at home on an exposed, treeless, continental shelf scarcely allowing of tundra, when I so identified with the virgin conifer forests of my native Pacific Northwest, but I did. Reflecting on this new fascination with the Arctic, already in Hawaii and now at Yale, I dove deeper into late-19th-century Siberian ethnology and eventually also into Antarctic exploration, though sheer adventure would not suffice for anthropology. Later at Purdue, I became close with retired biologist Al Lindsay, who, besides everything else, had been on Admiral Byrd's second Antarctic expedition. The North and South poles in their minimalism still draw me.

Onward to field research in Saapmi

Tilting toward the Northern latitudes, ethnobotany, and mobility, I designed reading courses to be supervised by, besides Hal Conklin and Cornelius Osgood, regular Yale visitors Jacques Barrau and George Condominas. Barrau's French ancestry was steeped in botany, one parent coming from New Caledonia where the madder root contributed red colour for military uniforms. Condominas was born in French Indochina, affording an introduction to other exuberant plant worlds. In contrast, one of my research projects focused on lichens, a very semiotic union of fungi and algae, only palatable to reindeer and caribou (the same species, *Rangifer tarandus*). However compelling Siberian reindeer-herding cultures remained for me, the logistics of dealing with the U.S.S.R. and the fact that Canada and Alaska were so very close, too close, conspired to back me into Lapland, nowadays called Saapmi, the traditional home for Saami in the far north of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola peninsula of, now again, Russia. And some Saami are seasonally nomadic reindeer-herders, utilizing lichen pasturage in winter – those lichen species once relevant to the pre-aniline international trade in dye-stuffs. Many threads coalesced free of premeditation.

Generous funding allowed me to dally on the way north to Lapland in 1971. On this trajectory, I met Claude Lévi-Strauss and André-Georges Haudricourt in Paris, and even more persons at the Scott Polar Research Centre and all the universities in Cambridge, Oxford, and London, where I could use my own native tongue. I also

stopped at other major Fennoscandian universities and combed through museums and archives where I was easily distracted as I encountered luminaries far from my trajectory, including Thor Heyerdahl.

After several months in Europe building up steam for ethnographic immersion, I realized that I should pause to take better aim on Lapland. I had now met Scandinavian linguists of the Saami language, Asbjørn Nesheim in Norway and Björn Collinder in Sweden, but it would be a Saami linguist *of* Saami, Israel Ruong in Sweden, who tilted my trajectory, then tentatively aiming for Swedish Lapland, to Norwegian Lapland instead, where the Saami language would be more intact. He suggested: Continue north, then turn left: “the field” at last. There, in the Northernmost Norwegian counties of Finnmark and Troms, over the next five years, I gained sufficient proficiency in language(s) and reindeer-management practices to contribute to a study of Saami ethnoecology. Almost reluctantly, I returned to Yale at the close of 1976 to analyse data and write the dissertation.

While in the field, incidental intersections with a Saami research associate to Nesheim (and to his already-deceased collaborator Nielsen), Hans J. Henricksen, frustrated me, because I never built up the courage, in any language, to broach the question: Was he or his senior lexicographers aware of Mark Roget’s *Thesaurus* of 1852 as they organized their auxiliary dictionary of Saami “vocabulary classified according to the meanings of the words”? Its three sections, replete with diagrams and photographs, covered: (1) “general fundamental ideas and the inanimate world”; (2) “vegetable and animal life”; (3) “person and community” (Nielsen, Nesheim 1962: 484, 488, 490). It turned out that these were prominent among the categories in the unique bibliography, *Folk Classification* (Conklin 1972), that I helped compile for Hal Conklin; this triptych beyond basic principles of classification being: (1) the cultural-dominant (kinship, deep-time archeology, default anthropology); (2) the biological-dominant (ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnomedicine); and (3) the physical-dominant (orientation, colour, sensation). The persistence of triplets alongside doublets did seem overdetermined, yet fell well within George A. Miller’s now renowned “The magical number seven, plus-or-minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information” (1956). But a half-century later, the mantra may now be “four, plus-or-minus one or two” (cf. Cowan 2001; Honig 1988)!

Earlier, on my way to the field in 1971, in Paris, Haudricourt had pulled forth Henricksen’s thick Volume IV proto-thesaurus from the stacked previous three volumes covering Saami vocabulary in alphabetical order, exclaiming how extraordinary volume IV was. I had to admit that I had not discovered this marvellous volume, not at Yale, not at Harvard, either, the libraries of choice during my graduate career. Later, in 2016, I am thrilled to be reviewing Dinda Gorlée’s “Peirce’s Logotheca” (2014), an essay exposing Peirce’s disregard of Roget’s masterpiece!

In the field for such a duration, learning two new languages (Saami and Norwegian) and being exposed to a third (Finnish), and immersing myself in the folkways and ethno-science of the Saami, I had the luxury of pondering my own heritage and cosmology as well. As to heritage, I ventured to Härjedalen in central Sweden to meet some distant relatives, very likely to have unexpected Saami ancestry. As to cosmology, musing in my native English, solo and uninterrupted, I probed ontologies galore. For example, how fundamental are notions such as earth, air, fire, water – or information, matter-energy, space, time? What of handedness, chirality, symmetry, and patterns generally, again backing into markedness theory without yet having internalized all of Roman Jakobson that I had devoured in grad school (cf. Jakobson 1971[1957]: 130–147; Waugh 1982; Newfield, Waugh 1991).

The dissertation expanded as though on growth hormones, until 1978 when I cut its thousand pages and (of course) three volumes loose as *Saami Ethnoecology*. Its infrastructure recognized time, space, and other organization within language, culture, and ecology. I regard the dissertation saturated with semiotics, without my necessarily once introducing that term.

Adventitious roots in academia

By the time I defended the dissertation, I had taken a position in anthropology at Purdue University, where I discovered I would have semiotic colleagues within and beyond my department, most significantly, besides O. Michael Watson, already mentioned, and Jack O. Waddell, both anthropologists, others would be found in other departments, Floyd Merrell, Calvin O. Schrag, Victor Raskin, Virgil Lokke, Tom Broden, and Mark Levinthal. Equally important, though only for a semester, Earl W. Count joined the faculty, bringing a strong strain of general systems theory (cf. Count 1973) that melded well with what I had discovered already in Europe from Ilya Prigogine's far-from-equilibrium dynamics (Prigogine 1980; Prigogine, Stengers 1984[1979]) and René Thom's catastrophe theory (Thom 1980) – these English publications following the introduction of their ideas by two decades! For Gaston Bachelard's (1984[1934]) seminal ideas, the lag for English readers was fully fifty years, and more when we continue to follow emerging research on both metaphor and the senses. Henri Bergson's (1911[1907]) notions on creative evolution were translated soon enough, but they garnered little traction in that century. This illustrates that there are linguocultural clines within science (Anderson, Gorrée 2011), but yet no idea can be hermetically sealed from a larger discourse community, silos notwithstanding. Semiotics facilitates that larger community; I met both Thom and Prigogine through semiotics, though sadly Bachelard and Bergson were no longer around.

Meanwhile, after joining Purdue in 1977, Merrell (cf. 1982) exposed me to G. Spencer-Brown (1972) and Walker Percy (1983), Levinthal came to me with a copy of Max Delbrück's argument for metaphor in science (1978), and Lokke exposed everyone to Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Anyone living near media during the previous decade were already aware of Carl Sagan (1977). Issues of consciousness were seeping in alongside a mathematical approach to the understanding of systems. And language could never be pushed from the agenda; it was a primary medium for interpretation and understanding, even of itself – the ultimate of all caveats. How fertile have been the metaphors colonizing the semiotic mind! Sebeok (1975) (and many others) deployed “web”, decades before “the” web! Juri Lotman (1984, 2005) is associated with “sphere”. Others have launched “nets” and “networks” (cf. Latour 1993[1991]) and even “meshworks” (Ingold 2007). These visual metaphors grapple with the imperative to honour both system, structure, and function, both space and time, noun and verb, kinky prepositions (Anderson 2012), gathering and losing steam as they amble around senses beyond the visual. Other named and unnamed (in English anyway) senses, emotions, affect, and memory increasingly peek from the wings of so-called evidence-based research, but mostly only when amenable to crisp quantification.

To these strains of abstract semiotics I would eventually add biosemiotics, but meanwhile I lacked proper exposure to the middle ground of general semiotics. That came to be augmented when I met Thomas Sebeok and his veritable dynasty at the nearby Indiana University. There, in 1983 I attended the Fourth International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies sponsored by the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, followed by other I.S.I.S.S.s held in Toronto and back in Bloomington. Besides meeting many lofty semioticians (even some of them anthropologists) in these summer meetings, including Sir Edmund Leach, Dame Mary Douglas, and Umberto Eco, I established more regular relations with innumerable persons now counted as close friends, including Thomas A. Sebeok, Dinda L. Gorfée, and John Deely.

At I.S.I.S.S. in 1983 I was scooped up by Sebeok to help author a “manifesto” he had in mind. He clearly wished to showcase three current publications, diverse but equally stunning: Thure von Uexküll's “Meaning and science in Jakob von Uexküll's concept of biology” (1982); Lynn Margulis and Karlene V. Schwartz's *Five Kingdoms: An Illustrated Guide to the Phyla of Life on Earth* (1982); and the forthcoming John Deely-translated *Tractatus de Signis* by John Poinot (1985[1632]). Sebeok was also interested in the Gaia hypothesis, as forwarded by Margulis and James E. Lovelock (1974). Both Margulis and Lovelock would come to be involved in later semiotics events, and the younger Uexküll and Deely were among the coauthors of this “manifesto”, eventually tamed as a “position paper”. I myself insisted on problematizing C. P. Snow's “two cultures” (1959) that I felt only afforded excuses to

the dull and lazy. Eventually, Deely and I together pushed and pulled the final version into shape. Our story has been recapitulated at the close of the oft-reprinted position paper (Anderson *et al.* 1984), so here I will limit myself to mentioning how it folded in some of the passions that had been incubating for decades in the archeologies of my consciousness, and below it.

Inadvertently, this position paper brought me closer to biosemiotics, but not only because of Margulis, Lovelock, or either Uexküll. Rather, I found ways to relate and problematize the conventional division of labour among the sciences and between the units of analysis therein: the natural and social sciences and the humanities, ecology and ethology, the verbal and nonverbal and a-verbal, the living and once-living (dead) and the inert. Tagging along for the ride – those fundamentals that had colonized my mind before I was exposed to semiotics *per se*, such as: the classical elements we inherit from the Greeks; the contemporary elemental assumptions of dissipative structures (space, time, matter-energy, information); other notions such as the digital and analogue (emphasized by Bateson); qualification and quantification; edges and insides and outsides; subjects and objects, the subjective and objective; data and *capta*; and the generative distinctions between abduction, induction, and deduction. There was opportunity in this position paper to mention evolution and development; entropy and negentropy; “natural” and “artificial” selection; hierarchy and heterarchy; epigenesis and neoteny; and complexity and simplicity. While couplets crop up in these inventories of semiotic concerns, in every instance they will be interrogated as relationships with manifold dimensions. I fancy that the “manifesto” peeked over the abyss toward evo-devo-eco if not also everything implicated by entanglement, embodiment, and extended cognition (cf. Clark, Chalmers 1998). At the same time, that “manifesto” was itself anticipated by still earlier minds; one instance of revelation concerns Kalevi Kull almost two decades later pointing me toward the works of Friedrich Rothschild, working and writing already before the mid-last-century (Anderson 2003).

Following the publication of the 1984 co-authored non-manifesto position paper, I radically expanded my network with semioticians having biological persuasions, seeking out to meet developmental biologist Stanley N. Salthe (1985, 1993) and bioanthropologist Peter C. Reynolds (1981, 1991), both contributing fresh perspectives on dynamical systems. These two joined dozens of other scientists and scholars in *On Semiotic Modeling*, edited by myself and Floyd Merrell (Anderson, Merrell 1991). The biosemiotics contributors included Jesper Hoffmeyer and Claus Emmeche, who later introduced me to the vibrant networks of conspecifics who, since 2001, have organized annual International Gatherings in Biosemiotics, supported by the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies, formally constituted in 2005, largely the creation of Jesper Hoffmeyer of Copenhagen and Kalevi Kull of Tartu.

Semiotic dances with ideas, people, and congeries

Eager to meet and see and hear colleagues, rather than just reading them, I continue to participate in regional, national, and international conferences in anthropology, linguistics, and especially semiotics. In semiotics, I've been more successful in attending meetings of the Semiotic Society of America and the International Gatherings in Biosemiotics than the International Association for Semiotic Studies; I make an extra effort to attend serendipitous conferences that may be one-time events, as these almost by default will be very semiotic.

One particularly fruitful conference in 1985 – *Is the Earth a Living Organism?* – drew Tom Sebeok, James Lovelock, Mary Catherine Bateson, Paul Ryan, and many other dedicated and inadvertent semioticians (cf. Anderson 1985). Equally impressive, and drawing a diversity of committed and cryptic semioticians, would be a splendid 1995 affair in Brussels – *Einstein Meets Magritte: An Interdisciplinary Reflection on Science, Nature, Human Action, and Society* (cf. Anderson 1995). An exception to the rule leading me to target one-time events would be one spurious conference in 1987 that lives on; the initial event was held at the Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico, with the title, *Artificial Life: The Interdisciplinary Workshop on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems* (cf. Anderson 1987). This Alife interest group went viral, as it were, continuing with conferences and inspiring one of the most significant semiotic think-tanks in the world, the Santa Fe Institute.

Other semiotic if not explicitly semiotics consortia that tempt and tickle an unruly mind include John Brockman's Reality Club and The Edge Foundation (Brocmann 1990, 2007, 2009, 2011); the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (cf. Pääbo 2014); any residue of Stewart Brand's Whole Earth in The Long Now Foundation and The WELL (Turner 2006; Brand 1994, 1999, 2009); all admirers of Stephen Jay Gould (cf. 1977); any resumption of Howard Higman's Boulder Conference on World Affairs (having participated in its final eight years, 1987–1994); followers around the world of Christopher Alexander (above), of Yi Fu Tuan (cf. 1974), of Edward Tufte (cf. 1990, 1997, 2001[1983]; 2006), of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (cf. 1993), of Freeman Dyson (cf. 1985, 2006), of Roald Hoffmann (cf. 1995), of Julian Jaynes (cf. 1976), for starters.

I find it tempting to compare some of the above charismatic founders with Thomas A. Sebeok, especially as I have met most of them first-hand. Nowadays the consortia may be virtual or otherwise, may involve facework or not, may be enthusiastically beckoning or somewhat exclusive or downright reclusive. Yet, close-up or from afar, their intersections, gatherings, and publications keep me feeling well-nourished intellectually, despite my living in the middle of a very large continent.

Keeping one of my heads in the clouds with informal networking and conferencing, I continue to nomadize between and among Saami nomads, maintaining my ethnographic research programme in Saapmi (Anderson 2015). It helps that many semiotics venues occur in Europe, conveniently even in Northern Europe given the involvement of Tartu and Copenhagen in the biosemiotics movement.

Reflecting on the title I've used as a crutch for this essay, my spiralling around semiotics applies equally to the ideas, the individuals exploring those ideas, and the formal organizations, these usually denoting a geographic region or a specialized subdiscipline, if in fact semiotics should be a discipline. It is not. Semiotics as the study of meaning-making, as the interpretation of interpretation, and being so inclusive in its mandate, certainly resists being labelled as a discipline. Semiotics is a shifter, a grand central station for self-referential invitations to dance.

At the same time, semiotics' subject matter of "the sign" could better be divorced from the Indo-European habit of "thingifying", to recalibrate its focus on process – "signing", or "meaning-making", or ultimately "interpreting". While languaging for most disciplines never comes into focus for separate inquiry, the situation is quite the opposite for linguists, anthropologists, and semioticians. For many of us, language is not an opaque monolithic faculty, but is itself nuanced by diverging and converging pathways that differentially meld culture with biology and with cognition. Some linguists do resist the proposition of linguistic relativity associated with Sapir and Whorf (or just Whorf) (cf. Spier *et al.* 1941), despite more and more evidence from historical and psychological linguistics and cognitive science, confirming tightly-looped correlations between the structures of languages and the lived experience of language-bearers (cf. Chen 2013; Deutscher 2011; Durst-Andersen 2009, 2011, 2012).

Even as languages reveal more and more correlations with sensation, perception, cognition, thought, memory, emotion, affect, and other behaviour, inclusive culture and even biology, the extralinguistic nonvocal and also nonverbal turn out to dance with the linguistic, in and between language-bearers and even between species. While the conventional units of analysis have become ever more promiscuous, and all categories subjected to interrogation, semiotics facilitates even more adventures in space and time beyond the structures and functions among and between phenomena themselves. We continue to finger earlier semiotic constructs: Uexküll's construct of *umwelt* (1957[1934]), Rosen's anticipatory systems (2012[1985]), Mandelbrot's fractals (1977), Thom's catastrophe theory (Thom 1980; Zeeman 1976).

Now materializing in many discourses, references to epigenetics and the micro-biome scramble those very conventional units of analysis we had just problematized, relaxed, or re-drawn (cf. Jablonka, Lamb 2014[2005]). Epigenetics has parallels with the discarded Lamarckian "inheritance of acquired characteristics" (Lamarck 1914[1809]; Koestler 1967) that so well describes culture; it turns out that biology

also proceeds linking past and future in time and external and internal in space, finding that genes are neither insular or mechanical, but record extrasomatic environments. How vast and multivalent these ecologies must be if we fold in ephemeral embodiments crudely labelled sensation, perception, affect, cognition, memory (cf. Anderson 2009; Howes, Classen 2014).

All such research and rumination fuels the literature and conferences and individual minds in semiotics. While some semioticians may devote themselves to traces of past behaviour, some to written texts, some to traces of living behaviour, circumscribing the subject matter of signing, still other semioticians operate at more speculative levels, relating “all of the above” – these represent the range from philosophy to biology to mathematics to language to cognition to cosmology and back again, closing as it were one loop of the spiral. In the circulation of ideas, I’m inclined to lump cosmologies as continuous analogues rather than cleaving them into digital distinctions. That explains if not excuses my omnivory.

But academicians generally do seem to clone, huddle in paradigms, commit to fashions, stack in silos. A generation ago there was a spate of “new” models, prompting retorts of “what’s new” from old-timers. Then on marched a flurry of the prefix, “post-“, perhaps in step with the turning of the century. Nowadays the fashion is more apt to be marked as “turns”, the ontological turn, for instance, this stirring together of ideas that may have become a bit faded in the recent past. From faded to jaded, with patience and imagination, all ideas can be revitalized via semiotics. This assumption subscribes to a probable payoff when evolutionary novelty can intellectually swamp the dull developmental trajectories pertaining to the entropic material world (following Salthe 1993).

Ottar’s fish

One final confession, or personal assertion, before closing: I do surmise that each person will have been, at least from birth, a semiotician, an anthropologist, a linguist. I also assume that it’s unreasonable to imagine that a person could be either anthropologist or linguist without foregrounding the semiotic tinges of all research. Yet, absent omniscience, there must be blind spots even beyond those we might intuit. Blind spots bind, as do more palpable signs.

I resort to a parable in forcing this spiral to still. Return to about 892 CE. Imagine a Norse merchant-adventurer – sea-hunter, tax-collector, pillager, entrepreneur – based in Saapmi, in Northern Norway, and sailing up and down the coast from the Russian White Sea south to Denmark, but also encountering the English coast, visiting the court of King Alfred of Wessex on at least one occasion. There this Viking, Ottar, was interviewed, no doubt by Court Ethnographers and Linguists and Semioticians, about

his life and lifestyle far up north. Ottar spilled out the whole story, emphasizing his own wealth and importance. I will rely on interpretations by another anthropologist, Ian Whitaker (1981), who points out – in adding up all the entrepreneurial spoils from the nomadic Saami and his own sophisticated subsistence activities on land and hunting at sea – that Ottar forgot the one most crucial element affording his survival along the arctic coast of northwestern Europe: fish. Specifically, cod.

There was no way that Ottar could have prospered, or even survived, without the only stable staple: freshly caught or dried fish.

Another red herring. I have tried to divert attention by destroying the scent of Charles Sanders Peirce, who may be my codfish. Please insert Peirce in the above recipe, and stir, firmly. But then, what of Juri Lotman, and a host of other influences!

At the same time, I am certain that I have likewise overlooked at least one significant influence for every one of these fifty years of circulating around signs and signers. Just to skim through the eighty symposia I have organized or co-organized since 1983, would demand a radical expansion of the spiral to this point. Such is the habit of signs, they grow, proliferate, infect, transform, but also pass on with or without a trace.²

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² Thanking Dinda Gorrée for her editorial patience.

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