

Cortez in our Complexes: Acting Out Now as Acting Back Then



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I would like to start by taking two jumps backward in time and place.

The year is 1519, the place, the Aztec capital city Tenochtitlan. A small band of conquistadors under Hernando Cortez, future founder of Mexico City, is being driven out of Tenochtitlan by the enraged Aztecs. Men retreating hastily up a gangplank stretched out over water use firearms to hold back their opponents. So quickly do the Spaniards depart that they leave heaps of gold and other loot behind them in the city.

In 1856, and not all that far from there, Alonzo Horton, future founder of the American version of San Diego, was staying in Panama as part of an extended cruise. When a rioting mob attacked the hotel, he and a small group of fellow passengers managed to escape. They retreated up a gangplank toward the ship while Horton fired his revolver to cover their retreat. So hastily did they flee that Horton left \$10,000 in gold dust behind in the hotel.

The name of his cruise ship? The *Cortez*.

How can this be? How can a man in one century repeat so exactly, yet so unwittingly, what happened to another man in another century?

Well, what can we say about Horton’s uncanny reenactment? It involved:

- a historical event,
- a particular region of the world,
- stolen territories of conquest and cultural injustice,
- unconsciousness of irony or repetition,
- two men who would become city founders, and

- a pointing back to a past and forward to a future in which land would be parceled up and leveled (the paving over of Tenochtitlan and its lake, the digging and filling of San Diego Bay).

Notice too how this many-sided repetition refused to stay in any one sphere of experience: political or cultural, social or personal. Its chief limitation was its locality.

If we *could* confine it to one sphere, that of human psychology, it would look a great deal like what Freud meant by a repetition compulsion. Freud coined the term after noticing that traumatic themes tended to repeat themselves in his patients' dreams and relationships, over and over: recurring nightmares, recurring romances, recurring disappointments. It was as though his patients were possessed by some silent but powerful need to symbolically repeat what had injured them at an earlier time.

If many-sided reenactments such as Horton's are more common than we realize, might we be facing the prospect of a repetition compulsion, not just of inner themes and traumas, but of local ones as well emanating from injuries like conquests, wars, industrialization, or overdevelopment (or what Vandana Shiva calls "maldevelopment")? *Do our supposedly personal conflicts repeat those found in the history of the places where we live?* These are the questions which will preoccupy us as we home in on the intimate connections between a given region's unresolved "case material" and our own.

Our first task is to look around for more examples of such returns of the ecohistorically repressed, and we can do this by analyzing specific places much as therapists do their clients, assessing them for the recurring themes and images that indicate old wounds. My impression is that as world-therapists we can see these more clearly in big cities, those maximum points of human and environmental impact and anguish.

As we go from city to city by way of excerpts from a book I just wrote on this topic--the working title is *Hearing the Heartscape Pulse: Tending the Soul of Place*--listen for how many domains these localized themes transgress, and see how it feels to think of them as meaningful syndromes instead of as coincidences. (I still recall the anxious renter who described his apartment as a "nervous breakdown" after the Northridge Earthquake. He wasn't on a cruise, but I'm not sure *he* missed the boat on that one.)

London

In London, with its Roman street patterns which centuries of fires have never managed to obliterate long after the streets themselves had vanished, 12th Century buildings at Ironmonger Lane followed a thousand-year-old street edge. Milk Street, Wood Street, and Aldermanbury cleave to Roman lanes; markets at Cheapside and East Cheap bustle on long-vanished Roman thoroughfares; and Guildhall stands on a Roman amphitheatre built where Saxons once held their folk moots. St. Giles casts its shadow upon the site of an ancient Saxon church. More recently, a 1960 shooting marked the street where Jack the Ripper killed Mary Kelly, a street whose name had been changed to soften its ugly history.

Note that these newer roads and buildings were almost always built by people with *no knowledge* of what was underneath or what had gone before.

Radicals always seem to gather at Clerkenwell, and occultists at Bloomsbury. Heathrow Airport runs on an Iron Age camp with a neolithic track. The Public Cleansing Department occupies the spaces of an ancient public privy; a sauna on Endell Street echoes an ancient bath; a Small Pox and Vaccination Hospital, now Whittington Hospital, was built over the healing wells at Barnet. St. Michael's Orphanage straddles an old poorhouse. Londoners forget, as all of us do, but the places below them remember, insistently, as urban developments and functions evolve from previous models despite their complete physical replacement. An ecohistorical repetition compulsion, then, through architecture and infrastructure.

Are earthly forces at work in this? Below ground level sank Saxon burial mounds, then Roman temples, then Christian catacombs, then Newgate Prison's inexplicable duplication of the imaginal geography of Dante's Inferno--and now the Underground and its invisibles and unmentionables. "At All Hallows, Barking," writes Peter Ackroyd, "a buried undercroft and arch of a Christian church were constructed with Roman materials; a cross of sandstone was also found, with the inscription WERHERE of Saxon date; it is somehow strangely evocative of WE ARE HERE."

So was Freud, who loved archeology and topographical comparisons, and so was Charles Darwin. Almost a century before Karel Capek compared the East End and its people to a geological formation, Darwin was hard at work in London on his theory of evolution, whose centerpiece featured later forms evolved on the remains of the earlier.

In general, regions of the north, Darwin posited, were more ascetic than the sensual south, which was why northern forms of life tended to dominate their southern competitors. Had he added "wark" to "south," he'd have left us a fair summation of London's expansion from the stiff upper bank of the Thames southward onto lands once plied by brothels and other amusements of the senses deep in the heart of William Blake's place of birth.

From an ecopsychological perspective, the persistence of evolving forms, mutations, and survival struggles in Darwin's theory of evolutionary replacement not only parallels a similar persistence in the soils and streets of London, it is itself an expression of that persistence beyond the merits or weaknesses of the theory. A return of the buried-over in our theory-making.

Rome

The question might be raised why we chose precisely the past of a *city* to compare with the past of the mind.

-- Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Freud abandoned the city metaphor of mind as overly fanciful. We will keep it, but in volcanic Rome of the seven defensible hills, the lava-streaked earth, the invasion-resisting river, and the domination the Tiber's left bank over its right, we will briefly emphasize but a central twinned image: that of Romulus and Remus. Local folklore, after all, is often at bottom what the place has to say about itself, especially a place whose Bronze Age inhabitants left behind urns that resemble soldiers' helmets.

According to legend, Romulus, a son of Mars, built Rome as a haven for outcasts, and then he killed his brother Remus to keep charge of it; and this pathological theme of one strong brother dominating the other has spread wherever the early Roman influence has, strong emperors dominating the weak, the empire dominating the early republic, Constantine dominating Christianity, and on and on and outward from the long Italian boot.

The Etruscan, then Roman emphasis on hierarchy and power, symbolized by the fascicles, an ancient badge of office, reappears in the English words *formula* (from a Latin term reflecting the requirement of exactly worded prayers), *virtue*, *prudence*, *temperance*, *fortitude*, *justice*, *piety*, *fidelity*, *constancy*, and *perseverance*, all stemming from Latin roots sunk in conservative Roman soil. The list includes *municipal*, *apartment*, *tenement* ("to hold"), *mint*, *money*, *dictator*, *imperator*, *cardinal*, *prince*, *empire*, *emperor*, *tsar*, *kaiser*, *basilica*, and of course *patriarchy*.

As for the Roman church, much of it existed even before Rome did. The Curiate, the self-selected priesthood headed by an infallible authority, the control of reproduction, the father as supreme head of the family, nuns as Vestal Virgins, and even the title *pontifex maximus* precede the Christian and Imperial presence in the city not by decades, but by centuries. ("Vatican" from the prophecies of soothsayers and fortunetellers plying their trade near Vaticanus Hill.)

Cathedral and *bishop* are not Latin words, but in Greek they mean "throne" and "overseer." The first cathedrals were grouped around and under the Palatine that had hosted so many emperors whose later sculpted images appeared with crosses on their foreheads. The Campus Martius (Field of Mars) faced the Vatican from across the Tiber and has done so ever since.

New York City

I turned a page in a book on the history of urban construction within the Big Apple core of Manhattan and beheld a 1931 photograph that made me feel sick. In it a hovering dirigible pointed its prow directly at the nearby Empire State Building. I thought about scenes out of *King Kong*, with all those buzzing airplanes.

The Empire State Building was built with an aircraft mooring tower as a publicity stunt, but with a single small exception, no airship ever succeeded in approaching it safely. The tower was then made over into an observation platform because selling concessions and having a look at the rising skyline were safer than risking a high-level ignition.

From the start, 911 has been a war of symbols as well as of fire, steel, and blood. The very name repeated itself that dark day in the numbers spinning out of the New York Lottery.

The twin towers. The first phone ever to receive a 911 call was the red twin of another in Haleyville, Alabama, in 1968. A fire closed the town's 911 museum in 1999. Twin towers, phones, fires, numbers--and warnings? What is the message?

In Britain the emergency number is 999, and 111 in New Zealand, site of a fantasy film about two falling towers. 999 and 111: a fellowship of the ring. Asked why so many people burn to death in the U.S., firefighter Leonard Kershner replied that emergency response time was a factor. AT&T implemented "911" in 1968; the number, like that of the New York Lottery, was selected by a computer.

The Empire City's first fallen structures predate its American ownership, the state's "Ever Upward" motto, and the towers named "skyscrapers" after the billowing topsails of incoming trade ships. Dutch traders who owned Manhattan (1624) scrapped a proposal for a huge fortress and erected instead a square earthenwork bastion, but in two years the foundations crumbled away, as though anticipating the futility of such projects. Settlers could not be persuaded from stealing stones from the sagging walls.

In eleven years the British threatened the colony into submission, but the name of a dismantled palisade, the old fort's twin in hopeless defense, lingered on in the lane running between Broadway and the East River: Wall Street. William Kieft had ordered new fortifications built nearby to protect his people from the Indians he had enraged.

British troopers infuriated the Sons of Liberty by chopping down their liberty pole, yet once the fighting broke out, the colonists castrated the trees of Manhattan to provide clear firing lines. Thugs who attacked the departing British Loyalists referred to themselves as Levelers. Their targets wore red ribbons.

I have heard that shortly after 9/11, hotdog sellers in New York City unknowingly stood under trees still shedding the ashes of human flesh--and this in a place whose first play, published by Robert Hunter and Lewis Morris in 1714, bore the title *The Man Eater*. Something about place speaks almost in the tones of omen or prophecy...or symptom. Before the 1906 disaster in San Francisco, at least two people disgusted by the City's greed and claptrap urbanization wished openly for an earthquake and fire. They bring to mind those Cassandras one hears about who tell you not to board the *Titanic*. Did the ship somehow warn them? Did New York City try to warn us? What was the nature of this nightmarish wakeup call, and have we really understood it?

September 11. On that day in 1609, Henry Hudson discovered the river named after him and went home to be tried for violations of his trade mandate.

September 11. On that day in 1776, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Edward Rutledge sat down to an unsuccessful peace conference on Staten Island with Admiral Richard Howe. They met at Conference House, raised on a leveled Indian village, and

when the meeting was over, Howe's younger brother William came down like a hammer on top of the hills--there were hills then--of tree-scoured Manhattan. Soon most of it ascended skyward in widening towers of ash. Washington had been right to pull back: no way to defend it all from within the southernmost portion of the future eleventh state.

And just as New York City transcends itself by capitalizing so many American themes, so does the fateful date transcend the city too: September 11. On that day in 1941, ground was broken for a new kind of military headquarters, an installation to be shaped like a pentagon.

I think it's time to lighten up a bit, so let's move on to the City of Light:

Paris

I know we're supposed to hate the French just now, but I'm interested in a city where the human form is not obscene but making bombs to destroy it is, so.....

Seen from the air, the small island surrounded by the Seine looks upward like a pupil: the Ile de la Cité, a haven to locals from Roman times and later site of the Sainte Chapelle and Notre Dame de Paris--"Our Lady of Paris," the iris-shaped *kilometre zero* from which all highways radiate through the City of Light. Sensible, then, that two of the city's saints and protectors, Genevieve and her later echo Joan of Arc, remain conjoined to images of illumination: the first to her mother's restored eyesight, the second to heavenly visions.

For Descartes, who studied in Paris, God was the source of all light, the pineal gland His organ of the soul. That we know the gland as a generator of endocrine messages and a secretor of melatonin, the chemical signal to sleep, has not eclipsed its mythology, which includes its designation as a "third eye." Marie Curie continued the Parisian linkage between luminosity, story, and systematized knowledge by presenting a new, light-emitting substance at the world's first international physics conference, held in Paris in 1900. She called it "radium" (hence "radioactive") after the Latin word for ray.

From the rag-picking *flaneurs* to philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was born cross-eyed and grumbled about "The Look," Paris has deployed mobile eyes to scan and appreciate her intricacies both bright and dark. The collector, the porter, the messenger, the poet, the painter, the cafe patron, and even the "gawker" or "looker": all have turned their gaze on the city of famous panoramas, and of photographs invented there in 1823.

It is said those who founded Paris were not the Celtic and iris-bound Parisii after all but Trojans who landed in 376 BCE. If so, they brought their capacity for visual entrancement with them. Think about the Second Empire urban renewals of Baron Haussmann, obsessed with darkness-banishing visibility, or about the common etymology of "fashion" and "faction." Or about Foucault's preoccupation with systematic surveillance, The Look darting out of his fantasied panopticon.

The first known street signs in Paris displayed to onlooking passersby the names of natural features of the landscape. These evocative designations were replaced by the names of local public figures; then by chaotic numberings; then, in 1779, by colors and Saussurean opposites: white on red for streets parallel to the Seine and white on black for those perpendicular to it. The horse-drawn carriages that plied these streets shared their propensity for flowery labels--Les Tricycles, Les Gazelles, Les Favorites--until finally integrated into the grand narrative, as Lyotard might term it, of one overarching transportation exchange.

So when Claude Levi-Strauss coined the term “floating signifier” to describe the arbitrary relation between the sign and what it signified, he was also locating himself in the history-laden streets of the French capital: a banking capital of floating greenback signifiers, of floating river barges and decaying tourist boats, of street arcades built to float feet and eyes past garments hanging in open shops. Likewise Saussure, for whom signifiers were integral to the fabric of social life, and even Descartes and his famous “rule of signs.” In the semiotics of language and its formulae echoes a semiotics of place. Patrice Higonnet underlines this “monumental grammar” by emphasizing that “the monuments of Paris can be seen as part of this same organized spectacularity: they too are texts, whose essential purpose today is to ensure the legibility of the city....”

And of course the city has known the Symbolists, the Impressionists, the Cubists, and the Surrealists: so close, the latter, yet so far, because backwards. For them, Paris, in all its splendid transhuman grandeur, was a map of *their* psyches, the place modeled on the poet’s unconscious instead of the poet’s rooted in place. We self-analyze, therefore Paris exists, though seen but darkly through a Lacanian mirroring.

“I love people,” one Surrealist wrote, “who allow themselves to be locked up in a museum at night so that they can contemplate at their leisure, after hours, the portrait of a woman illuminated by a veiled lamp. Clearly, they need to know more about this woman than we do.” Locked up after hours, enclosed in a veil of introspective surrealism, they could scarcely have found the space to entertain the ecological reverse: Paris is, therefore we are imagined.

So many places and so little time, and so many more questions than answers. How is it that Samuel Taylor Coleridge envisioned “Xanadu” in an opium dream the very year that the Forbidden City, a former residence to Kublai Khan, was undergoing renovation in a nation undermined by the opium trade? He didn’t even live in China, nor did Freud live in Jerusalem, whose gates, walls, defenses, superegoic enemy garrisons, and tripartite urban structure so closely resemble the most fundamental entities of his version of psychoanalysis. Did these places reach out to men with some unusual but unconscious sensitivity to them? What do less populous or less damaged places have to say?

And here we are in Santa Barbara, named after Saint Barbara, a beautiful young woman locked up in a tower by her wealthy, jealous father. She didn’t stay there, however, because the wealth and the tutors who guided her isolated education were not enough. Only the world was enough, and she came down from the castle to greet it. (See any

repeats of that around town?) Nor should we wonder, given this mythology, that Pacifica's main campus sits on a road named Lambert, the very name of the French philosopher who coined the term *phenomenology*.

Would it be too much to suggest at this point that the places where we live and attend conferences are not dead heaps of matter, but living, vital, and possessed of qualities of psyche, as every civilization but ours has believed? That psyche isn't as small as human heads or brains but actually as wide as the world, not a secretion but a dimension of being, an invisible layer intrinsic to all that exists?

We know that our childhood bruising and early traumas work their way into our present problems; but what about the layerings in London, the falling financial topsails of New York City, the burning Joans and decapitated Saint Denises of Paris, the Cortez still loose in our complexes? What if place--and this is key--functions as a kind of unconscious, turning toward us the face that we turn toward it?

Ted Roszak wrote that all psychologies were once ecopsychologies in their aboriginal unwillingness to split person from locale, symptom from world. Perhaps a historically sensitized and depth-informed ecopsychology, a "psychoanalysis of place," could help us regain this felt linkage by hosting the *genius loci* whose wounded past calls out to us by re-evoking ours: calls out, calls out until we hear, heed, reflect, and respond with loving attention to our reactive surround.

I'd like to stop with a piece from "To Learn How To Speak" by South African poet Jeremy Cronin because it carries this quality of attention while reminding us of our origins:

To learn how to speak
With the voices of the land,
To parse the speech in its rivers,
To catch in the inarticulate grunt,
Stammer, call, cry, babble, tongue's knot
A sense of the stoneness of these stones
From which all words are cut.



San Diego from space.

Visit Craig Chalquist's Web site: <http://www.tearsofllorona.com>.