

# Populism & Politics

P&P Article #2 MARCH 2021

## Everybody Wants to Be ‘Origines’: Nativism, Neo-pagan Appropriation, and Ecofascism\*

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**This paper explores the tensions that emerge in neo-pagan media and practices, when they appeal not only to far-right enthusiasts but also to those with a left-leaning, environmentalist bent. New Age appropriation of Indigenous cultures and the anti-human temptations of ecofascism further complicate the picture. Ultimately, any group that follows a purity mentality, seeking deep, unadulterated roots in nature, risks nativist thinking and exclusion of those without the privilege of imagining themselves doing heroic deeds in equally imaginary, old-growth woods.**

In the Netflix series *Tribes of Europa*, a group of post-apocalyptic survivors has retreated to the forest, where they live “happily” and “in harmony with nature,” to quote the opening voiceover (Netflix, 2021). These “Origines” live protected, or so they think, from the other tribes warring over the former European territories, decimated by an unexplained global and technological meltdown in 2029. The sudden crash of a drone-like object in the forest drives the series’ central conflict, resulting in heavy bloodshed between the Origines and rival tribes.

The Origines call their forest home “Refugium,” fear another tribe called “Crows” (a name that would carry obvious racist overtones in the US), and utter lines such as “We are the voices of the forest, the blood of the earth, and the breath of the wind.” These lines ring painfully close to Blut und Boden Nazi rhetoric. The

Origines’ unironic use of the word “Heimat” is also problematic, in light of the Nazi fetishization of that term, for all the critical cultural work around it in the decades of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or reckoning with the past, in Germany (Krug, 2018). In one of the opening scenes, the young protagonists’ dancing to a contemporary indie rap song gives a sense of forgetfulness of that past, as does the series’ *Game of Thrones*-like aesthetic of violence and torture (see Gjelsvik and Schubart, 2016).

According to series creator Philip Koch, the “shock” of Brexit led him to develop this dystopian-utopian fantasy (Scott, 2021), with its “ruin porn” (Riley, 2017) of abandoned concrete structures and geodesic dwellings in the woods. The idea of a destroyed European Union certainly haunts the series, but on a deeper level, it echoes back-to-nature fascinations on both the

political right and left, especially in a time of ecological collapse. The nativist idea of retreating to one's roots, to an imagined state of Indigeneity, or to an impossibly "virgin" wilderness (see Solnit, 1994: 52) may seem like a 1970s hippie fantasy and is certainly nothing new, but it has gained traction as ecological anxiety and COVID-driven outdoor adventurism have led more privileged humans to bake sourdough, take to the road in converted vans (Anderson, 2020), and watch screen fantasies of a simpler life in the woods.

This paper explores the tensions that emerge in neo-pagan media and practices, when they appeal not only to far-right enthusiasts but also to those with a left-leaning, environmentalist bent. New Age appropriation of Indigenous cultures and the anti-human temptations of eco-fascism further complicate the picture. Ultimately, any group that follows a purity mentality, seeking deep, unadulterated roots in nature, risks nativist thinking and exclusion of those without the privilege of imagining themselves doing heroic deeds in equally imaginary, old-growth woods.



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## The Real Barbarians?

COVID-era Netflix offers another pagan fantasia to viewers more or less confined indoors. Like Tribes of Europa, Barbarians is informed by Game of Thrones and the recent explosion of "Viking TV." This series also valorizes forest-dwelling as Heimat and, in its real-life historical setting, portrays the Romans as vicious colonialists who not only demand unreasonable tributes from their Germanic neighbors but behead and crucify them as well. Blonde tribal



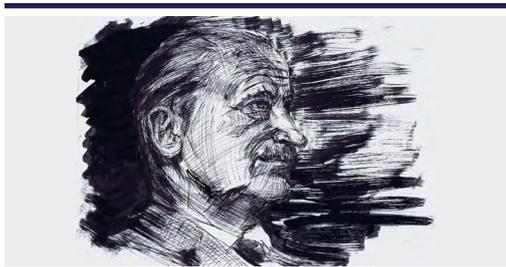
teens appear as innocent, playful, and fierce when necessary. They joke about human sacrifice and fear the wolves on the outskirts of the forest, a repeated motif that comes uncomfortably close to contemporary anti-immigrant rhetoric blaming the "wolf" of fairy-tale infamy in Germany (Bennhold, 2019). A key moment occurs when the young heroine Thusnelda takes the heraldic eagle from the Romans, making it a tribal icon – with its inevitable future on the German flag.

The invading Romans come across as the "true" barbarians here, fitting paradoxically into liberal, post-colonial critique as much as they do into nativist, pro-Germanic narrative. Meanwhile, the series' torchlit ceremonies and marches recall atavistic Nazi aesthetics, as does its "primeval forest" or "Urwald" setting, not far from that of the 1936 propaganda film *Ewiger Wald*, or *Eternal Forest*, which has found a new generation of fans on white supremacist websites. Both that film and the Netflix series focus on the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, a weighty historical moment for the German far right (see Winkler, 2015). Though Barbarians writer Arne Nolting claims that part of the series' goal is to reclaim this material, Teutoburg Forest remains a pilgrimage site, and the battle that took place there is "an ideological rallying point" for white supremacists (Rogers, 2020). German Studies scholars have expressed concern, via social media threads (see Diversity, Decolonization, and the German Curriculum, 28 October 2020), that this series also promotes essentialist thinking and toxic masculinity.

Some neo-pagans claim that,

**(\*) This article** follows up on topics of neo-paganism in the Feb. 3 commentary "Music and the Far-Right Trance," calling critical attention to nativist themes in entertainment media, problems of cultural appropriation, and ecofascist strains in environmental activism.

although their Germanic ancestors (literal or figurative) may have beaten back the Romans in 9 A.D., they have long been a “conquered people” (Lindenschmidt, 2015) under Christianity, and their practices constitute anti-colonial resistance. Combined with the idea that “when they destroyed paganism, Christians made exploiting nature possible” (Kaplan, 2016: 27), a Romantic inheritance with appeal to the ecologically conscious left, especially in light of many evangelical Christians’ support of Trump in the US, neo-paganism’s ideological tangle remains complex.



Martin Heidegger.

## Roots and Purity

Concepts of ancestral “roots” and “unspoiled” countryside have a long and tangled history, too, especially in German culture, and not just because of these ideas’ appeal in stereotypically xenophobic, rural communities. The still-influential philosopher Martin Heidegger, an unapologetic member of the Nazi party, extended his love of the literal forest to ideas of rootedness in language and existence itself, “not simply a rootedness in the soil, in the past, or in the tradition from which one ‘views’ the world” but “something concealed, mysterious, and chthonic whose meaning lies hidden beneath the surface of the earth” and that validates the “destiny of a Volk” (Bambach, 2003: 19). His quasi-poetic wordplay shows a fascination with etymology as a depth-seeking practice: where is a German word’s most profound origin, and what does that mean for a nativist sense of identity? In his 1951 “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” Heidegger traces the German

verb “bauen” (“build”) vertically back to the Old High German (and Old English) “buan,” or “to dwell in one place;” he then relates this word horizontally to “ich bin” (“I am”), linking dwelling with Being itself (Heidegger, 1977: 324-325).

This close link between home and existence, and the fascination with what lies underneath the ground, continues to surface in German literature and film, and not always with ill-considered tribal forest scenes. For example, novelist Jenny Erpenbeck’s critically sensitive take on the Heimat problem, *Heimsuchung* (Visitation or Haunting, 2008), treats historical trauma in a way that reverberates in one piece of land over centuries, with particular attention to the years during and after the Second World War (Goodbody, 2016). The philosophically informed and ecologically terrifying Netflix series *Dark* invites viewers to ask why a cave in the woods can have such a strong pull, and how much damage humans can do to each other once inside it.

One writer responding directly to the toxic aspects of Heidegger’s nature-driven thought is Elfriede Jelinek, best known for her unsparing critiques of Austrian “whipped cream” culture and the violence it sugarcoats, for example in her novel *Die Klavierspielerin* or *The Piano Teacher* (Hanssen, 1996). Jelinek’s 1991 spoken-text play *Totenauberg* (its title a play on the name of Heidegger’s Black Forest cabin) includes an “old man” character (Heidegger) and a “middle-aged woman,” meant to stand for Hannah Arendt, the philosopher who was Heidegger’s sometime lover and, in what gave their relationship an excruciating twist, a Jewish antifascist who, with her teacher Karl Jaspers, coined the term “banality of evil” when writing about the Nuremberg trials (Diner and Bashaw, 1997).

*Totenauberg* is not just a dialogue between these two historical figures, though, as Jelinek also includes

skiers and other performance athletes, some hunters and men in Tracht (traditional Bavarian dress), and even a few cheerleaders. As the “old man” laments that nature has simply become an image for those who consume it (in a statement foretelling today’s outdoor selfie culture), the other nature enthusiasts lay their claims to “authentic” enjoyment of the woods and mountains (see Jelinek, 1991: 25). This text shows, uncomfortably, how outdoor recreation can be as much about ego as eco-awareness, and how concerns about the purity of that enjoyment cross conventional political lines.



Mad vikings warriors in the attack, running along the shore with Drakkar on the background.

## Current Nativist Tensions

In our present moment, the appeal of purity culture across the political spectrum (from the vegetarian “QAnon shaman” who helped to storm the US Capitol to left-leaning consumers of organic-only foods), can lead to a strange nexus of virtue and violence, onscreen or otherwise. Adherents of “conspiratoriality,” a blend of New Age beliefs and conspiracy thinking, include anti-vaxxers on the right and left as well. The post-technology dystopia/utopia of series such as *Tribes of Europa* appeals to purity impulses that may be heightened in the age of COVID-19, when “somehow people feel that their societies now are unsafe for them” and this anxiety can fuel “regressive populist movements” (Richards, in Haslam, 2021: 8).

Recently in North Carolina, a group belonging to what the Southern Poverty Law Center has termed “the neo-Völkisch hate scene” (Ball, 2021) purchased a church building, causing anxiety and pain for their Black neighbors. Claims of “ennobling” pagan practices rooted in white European heritage, along with an ideology of “healthy, active lifestyles” and rules about racial purity (Ball, 2021) are painfully familiar in a part of the US that is deeply split about reckoning (or not) with its own racist past. Fans of Wiccan culture and “Viking rock” bands such as Wardruna may argue that neo-pagan fascinations are not in themselves dangerous, but the agendas of groups like North Carolina’s Asatru Folk Assembly (Ball, 2021) show how thorny such attractions can be.

In Norway, a recent self-examination by a Viking re-enactment blogger has caused intense debate. After years of cultivating craft skills and appreciation of pre-Christian culture in Scandinavia, Ingrid Falch found herself implicated a few too many times in right-wing propaganda. “Unfortunately,” she writes, “blood and swords sell more tickets than cooking and spinning wool. Better keep it speculative, cheap and easy – reproducing the stereotypes making sure that ‘most people’ won’t see the difference between you and the Q-shaman” (Falch, 2021). For all the efforts to puncture too-earnest Norse aesthetics with humor, as in the Norwegian TV series *Norsemen* and *Ragnarok*, this “beast I can’t control” has led Falch to leave the re-enactment community. The resulting online repercussions have been brutal at times, often reinforcing ideas of white supremacy and misogyny associated with neo-pagan culture (Falch, 2021).



Collapsing beds situation for Corona Virus patients. Medical staff work in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for COVID-19 multiple patients inside a special hospital in Bergamo, on November 11, 2020.

## Problems of Appropriation

What about Indigenous fantasies relating to cultures not one's own? In the US, wealthy suburbanites have been purchasing Dances with Wolves-style tipis ever since that film appeared in 1990. A recent manifestation of this trend is the use of traditional tipis as "après ski" pods for COVID distancing (see Compass Rose, 2021), which often leads to exactly the opposite effect, as libertarian business owners make free with Native traditions for entertainment. On the other end of the political spectrum, shamanic training groups, Vision Quest trips, and festivals such as Burning Man have long attracted educated, left-leaning whites (Aldred, 2000). "White guilt" over several centuries of Native genocide and oppression may contribute to this phenomenon, but much of the attraction seems to be toward spiritual nourishment in an age when religion is often associated with right-wing politics (Olomi, 2019).

In Germany, a generation raised on Karl May's Western adventure novels has contributed to ongoing romanticization of Native American culture (Schumacher, 2020) that may seem innocent of right-wing politics but fosters damaging stereotypes. In addition, what many "Indian hobbyists" in Germany may not know is that Nazi researchers studied US discriminatory policy toward Native peoples in order to hone the 1935 Nuremberg Laws (Miller, 2019). Meanwhile in

southern Sweden, Wild West fascinations have become more complicated, as a theme park called High Chaparral became a camp for 500 Syrian refugees in 2015 (Loewinger, 2017).

White appropriation of Native symbols and rituals is of course different from European seeking of ancestral "roots" in the primeval woods, but it is equally problematic. A drum circle intended for specific cultural or medicinal purposes, for example, can become an excuse for vague trance-like experiences when used in a New Age setting, and shows disrespect to the very Indigenous practices it takes as inspiration (Johnson, 2020). Adrienne Keene of the Native Appropriations project has created an open call for Indigenous voices to address this issue, with additional attention to cultural practices in the COVID era and in relationship to the Black Lives Matter movement (Keene, 2020). As Mark Rogers has put it, "Everyone wants to be an Indian, but nobody wants to be an Indian," referring to Paul Mooney's comment about "everyone want[ing] to be Black" without the "experience of being part of that culture" (Rogers, 2014, 2018).

Debate is ongoing in the US about sports team mascots named for Native peoples, or using racist nicknames (National Congress for American Indians, n.d.); traditional clothing imitated in fashion, such as feathered headdresses (Wood, 2017); stereotypes in Hollywood films, from Pocahontas to one-dimensional warrior figures (Little, 2021); appropriations in the classical music world, as in quoting or imitating traditional songs stripped of their cultural purpose (Davids, 2019); and academic writing about Indigenous topics without consulting those who know them best, an issue of concern outside the US as well (Arbon, ed., 2010). With the regenerative agriculture movement gaining traction around the world, Indigenous voices are also speaking up about the need to give credit for soil restoration practices where it is

due, and to reconsider value systems driven more by “commodification” than by the land itself (Mangan, 2021).

## **Ecofascism and “Avocado Politics”**

To return to the problem of purity culture, back-to-nature advocates across the political spectrum often cite a wish for “unspoiled” wilderness (Cross, 2018), meaning outdoor spaces free of others except themselves. Especially in the age of COVID, this wish has resulted in what is now termed “wreckreation” in the American West (Wilkinson, 2020), with overcrowding and trash becoming increasingly problematic, though the political stakes for public lands protection are very real (Hart and Soyer, 2021). As an avid hiker in the mountains where I live, I admit to getting up at 5 a.m. to walk my favorite trails without the noisy, selfie-obsessed crowds I have come to resent – and this reminds me, uncomfortably, of Heidegger’s comment in Elfriede Jelinek’s play, about his own resentment of nature becoming only an image. I have felt smug triumph when reading about quieting oceans during the pandemic, and I have laughed at recycled satire about overpopulation and climate destruction (The Onion, 2011).

In a more innocent time, I might have been a deep ecology adherent, following the ideas of Arne Næss about the natural world as more than “natural resources” and about the need to acknowledge human-non-human interconnectedness. These ideas do in fact permeate most ecological discourse in academia, with reference to Donna Haraway’s metaphor of tentacle-like entanglements among species. While I draw on this thinking in my own work in the environmental humanities, I am also aware of the dangers of wishing for a post-human utopia, however tempting the overgrown cities Alan Weisman evoked in his 2007 book

The World Without Us. For all my own selfish wishes to have a mountain trail to myself, my long study of Nazi nature-cult thinking has made me wary of ideologies that promote purity and idealistic “harmony with nature.”

Ecofascism, the belief not only in racial but also in environmental purity, posits that the world really would be better off without us – or at least without the darker-skinned climate refugees a warming planet will increasingly push out of their homes. This nexus of ecological and racial purity, an ideology that also fosters “deep” connections with the natural world, complicates conservationist thinking, as young activists are discovering amid the hype surrounding COVID-era planetary recuperation (Newton, 2020). What this ideology ignores, too, is that the first wave of climate refugees is the wealthy, who can afford to flee the California wildfires or rising coastlines in Florida (Bakkalapulo, 2018), and as “climate gentrification” (Hu, 2020) pushes marginalized people further away from affordable housing.

Though many deep ecologists disavow far-right, eugenics-driven thinking about population reduction for the planet’s sake (Drengson, n.d.), that movement’s tendency toward oversimplified ideas of purity, depth, and harmony has contributed to ecofascism insofar as it ignores political misuses of “nature” in the past century. Murray Bookchin (1999: 203) expresses it this way: “Vital as the idea of “interconnectedness” may be to our views, it has historically often been the basis of myths and supernatural beliefs that became means for social control and political manipulation.”

Likewise, immersive ecological artworks and “primeval TV” series such as Tribes of Europa can promote a feel-good sense of environmental connection, rather than encouraging activism that takes environmental racism into account, too.

Over the past decade, ecofascism has become a draw in far-right recruitment, linking deep-ecology ideas of humans as “parasites” with its own anti-immigrant sentiment (Lamoureaux, 2020). White supremacist shooters from Christchurch to El Paso have also identified as ecofascists (Lawrence, 2019). In Austria, “avocado politics,” in which brown-shirt ideology hides in green political agendas (Gilman, 2020), has led to an unlikely alignment between the center-right People’s Party and the Greens. Austrian agitator Elfriede Jelinek’s work seems as urgent as ever, with its uncomfortably close-to-home portrayals of right-wing immigration policies (Dege, 2016). Her Heidegger- and purity-culture critique Totenauberg would be a timely piece to revisit as well.



## **Conclusion: Contamination, Curiosity, and Reciprocity**

While back-to-nature idealism can certainly foster environmental care, it has a dangerous side, too. Narratives such as the currently popular series *Tribes of Europa* and *Barbarians* promote a nativist vision of paganism that veers close to the “blood and soil” ideology of Nazism. Purity culture in eating and recreating, along with the seeking of “unspoiled” nature, however understandable, can feed this ideology across the political spectrum. Meanwhile, appropriating Indigenous cultural practices works as a wishful-thinking kind of nativism that bypasses the real experiences of Native peoples who have suffered oppression and genocide. And as deep-ecology values spill over into

ecofascism, this form of environmental activism becomes not only anti-immigrant but also anti-human.

How to untangle the toxic threads that have found their way into ecological consciousness, from Martin Heidegger’s nativist philosophy of “rootedness” to today’s Viking re-enactment controversies? One approach is to allow for what some environmental artists call “contamination,” the practice of refusing purity in one’s work in order to accept that the planet is irrevocably compromised and, at the same time, to salvage what is left. Some artists work intentionally with waste and pollution, as in John Sabraw’s work creating pigments from contaminated streams in the UK (Surugue, 2019), while others, as in the Parallel Effect group’s recent *Vigil for the Smooth Handfish*, work with rituals for grieving a planet already in collapse (Audrey Journal, 2020).

In more practical terms, many conservationists are becoming less focused on restoring an “ideal” state of nature and more concerned with managing the messes that already exist. Emma Marris’ book *Rambunctious Gardens* (2011) has won an enthusiastic following but has created controversy, too, as it goes against conventional wisdom about removing non-native, invasive plant species. At the same time, Marris outlines concrete practices for rewilding and assisted migration, such as building wildlife bridges over highways. Climate adaptation thinking has its dangers, too, in terms of normalizing catastrophe; as Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018: 71) have noted, “simply to claim that ‘society must adapt’ is to represent social responses to climate change [...] in a way that makes these adaptations seem natural and functional.” That said, the crisis at hand does not allow the luxury of wishing for a pristine future based on an imagined, “harmony with nature” past.

An ethos of planetary care that

does not fall into nativist or purity thinking requires critical evaluation of environmental media (even in the form of Netflix entertainment!) and of one's own attitudes (the wish to have the forest to oneself, for example). One aid in this can be learning about Indigenous approaches to land and culture without disrespectful appropriation. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), written from her dual perspective as a botanist and as an Indigenous woman learning about her own heritage, has become a guide for environmental thinking that views other species as kin but does not sentimentalize those relationships. Curiosity and humility are key, so that humans can ask, "Who are you?" instead of "What is it?" (Kimmerer, 2013: 42) and can appreciate what we see and hear without needing to own it (see Robinson, 2020).

In many Indigenous cultures, reciprocity is also essential to co-regulation with the land. One way to express this is to ask for consent before entering a forest, logging it, or building a home there, a practice Native communities in the US are now asking others to honor, especially as oil and gas interests threaten traditional lands (Danesh and McPhee, 2019). In more personal terms, reciprocity can be a form of gratitude. As Kimmerer puts it, "What could I give these plants in return for their generosity? It could be a direct response, like weeding or water ... Or indirect, like donating to my local land trust so that more habitat for the gift givers will be saved" (Kimmerer, 2020). If nativism is a kind of narcissism, critical curiosity and reciprocity can break the mirror we humans seem to want to project everywhere, and so that we can see the world around us as a subject, not the object of our deep, dark forest dreams.

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