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2023

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On A Comet's Tail

Migration, Revolution, Movement

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I'm starting this newsletter just a couple days after a newly re-discovered comet passed the closest point to Earth in its long orbit around the sun. NASA astronomers call the icy celestial body C/2022 E3 (ZTF), which I think is a rather disrespectful name, so I'll call it Greeny. They also claim to have discovered the comet, when in fact they've rediscovered it. Even if we think of only humans as discoverers, Greeny passed by here 50,000 years ago and was certainly noticed by contemporary humans.

I wasn't able to see Greeny, it's been cloudy in these parts, and sadly, the only people I've spoken with who managed to see it complained about its lack of a visible tail, the difficulty they had distinguishing any visible coloration about it. I feel pretty bad for Greeny that they directed their complaints cometwards. Anyone who knows, knows that the comet's not to blame. The light pollution of our present civilization damages our view of the heavens and all the things zipping around in it [*ed. – see **Return Fire vol.5 pg50***]. Our civilization is an expert in getting us to blame the victims of its violence, though, so no surprises there. Sensible people would engage in acts of sabotage and terrorism against lit up shop-

ping centers and national power grids every time a clear night sky failed to offer up the gift of a million stars. **But we live in a time without sensible people.** These days, it takes too much courage to be sensible.

En lieu of seeing Greeny, I tried imagining them. And I tried imagining the people who saw them on their last pass, fifty thousand years ago. More specifically, since I think frequently about intergenerational memory and social evolution, I tried imagining my ancestors when they saw a glorious and unprecedented green body streaking across the heavens, fifty thousand years ago.

For me, it is vital that any foray into ancestry begin with the recognition that there is nothing objective about tracing lineage and descent. From the very first moment, it is a project, a choice, a weighted decision that *I will identify with these other ones.* From top to bottom, it's a construction. This does not mean that it is artificial, in the sense of false (but yes artificial in the etymological sense, artifice and construct being synonyms). **At least in the human experience, with consciousness, questions of identification are rarely far behind.**

Nuclear families, descent through the patriline or the matriline, these are cultural artifacts, strategies for identification that have existed in some human societies and not in others, together with identification with a clan, identification with a famous elder, identification with a war leader, identification with a deity, with a sacred place, with an idea.

More often than not I identify with my anarchist ancestors, those people who rose up against the authoritarian and exploitive structures of their time and place. They are the ones I have learned the most from, the ghosts in whose company I feel the most comfortable. But I can't find those ancestors when I look back fifty thousand years. The meaning of rebellion and freedom has changed

so much over the ages. I feel confident that Olga Taratuta,¹ Ōsugi Sakae,² and Alexander Berkman [*ed. – see **Return Fire vol.1 pg86***] would recognize me as kin, would feel that the torch I carry together with my comrades today is one they passed onto us.

I don't feel the same confidence of recognition or kinship when I imagine the people who overthrew their contemporary states in Mycenae and Assyria in 1150 BCE or at Tiwanaku in 1000 CE. I think what they did was right, and I think if I had grown up amongst them I would have joined in, but I think it's very possible that self and my current self would conceptualize our actions in completely different ways and set our sights on opposed horizons.

I don't completely reject the idea of biological kin, even though the inference of shared biology between parents and children is often mistaken. But, for better or worse, a great deal of care occurs in our family structures. Even if it is often poisonous it generally gives us life. And we learn a great deal about our history and our place in the world within our families, even if it can also be a school of hard knocks.

What have I learned from the southern Anglo-Saxon alcoholics or the austere Dutch Calvinist farmers who gave me my eight last names? (Eight last names is an Iberian concept – referring now to my adopted home and adopted families of the last decade and a half – that normalizes knowing one's ancestry at least to the remove of the great grandparents, the eight people three degrees back who had to exist for each of us to be on this earth.)

I have learned a lot about how we got here. I've learned that there are many ways for white people to participate in oppressive systems, even when they're poor, and I've learned what's required of poor whites to climb into the middle class

¹ ed. – So-called grandmother of Russian anarchism (1876-1938); multiple prison escapee, underground fighter of the Black Banner group, expropriator, supporter of prisoners.

² ed. – Anarchist and theorist in early 20th century Japan.

in the US, and I've learned that even people who come from a lineage of docility and conformity can be beautiful, can nourish you, can stand up for what they think is right, can teach you worthy lessons, can make huge mistakes and still deserve love. Other times, I've learned you need to let some people go, family or no. Then there are those folks who have gone so far beyond any bounds of decency, you've got to spit on their memory, curse their name, especially if they're family.

In any case, my ancestors fifty thousand years ago were probably decent enough people. As near as I can tell, the humans I descend from were hunter-gatherers living on the shores of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, and in sheltered valleys in the Caucasus. They probably ventured out into the tundra-like steppe to the north of them to hunt during the summers, tracking and bringing down huge mammals that no longer walk this earth. They ranged west occasionally into Anatolia, east into the Zagros Mountains of what's now Iran, south along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where other peoples lived.

Their ancestors had left Africa five to twenty thousand years earlier, or two hundred to a thousand generations ago, so they must have felt pretty at home in those lands between the Black and Caspian Seas. Unlike the earliest and the fastest groups that followed the subtropical coastal regions eastward, they learned how to adapt to the light temperate forests, the dry shrub and grasslands and their freezing winters. The planet was about 5C colder (than the pre-industrial mean) back then. In recent memory, a couple or a couple dozen generations, the temperatures had gotten warmer, but since then it had been cooling again.

At the time a great green comet appeared in the sky, they occasionally crossed paths with Neanderthals, or at least knew of people who did. Sometimes even had babies with them, though that was probably a pretty weird occurrence, or a sacred one, or the subject of a lot of jokes.

ally passing comet. Other moves are necessary for our health, our survival. And some take us into a relationship with the world that is so insatiable, so cruel, it will cost us many generations to extricate ourselves.

But nothing is still. Not even in death. I wonder where Greeny will find us on the next pass. What things will we pass on to future generations? Of all we have poisoned, and all we have grown. Of all we have learned, and all we have mistaken.

find harsher and harsher obstacles. If the move itself is traumatic, are people forced to forget the place that was their home for generations, so they don't have to remember the violence that forced them out?

Movement can have many flavors. As a free choice, it can be exhilarating. What did it feel like to move into the tundra, when no humans had done that before? What did it feel like to erect megaliths, a temple, and live in one place all year round, eventually teaching the plants to grow where you wanted to eat them? What did it feel like to mount up on horses and ride across the steppe, across the very continent?

Some of the moves would have been sad, or urgent, looking for abundant food in the occasional havoc wreaked by rising and falling temperatures, the advance and retreat of glaciers. **Sometimes we would have wanted to leave behind things of our own doing.** I've been reminded recently of how trauma can inhabit a place. In my current job, I drive a repetitive route, and I can feel the anxiety prick up in my chest every time I approach the intersection where I almost got in an accident weeks ago. Such a small thing, and yet I'd still avoid that place if my job didn't require me to return. So strange, having to go through the motions, so different from the ability to wander.

What would it have been like to live in a beautiful place, a magical place, a place with good water and good hunting, your favorite berries bountiful every fall. And then, a conflict ill-resolved leads to bloodshed with a related community, a couple people you've cared about your whole life, dead. Maybe you would go to live with distant relatives in the mountains a month's journey west, maybe the whole community would pack up and go to live somewhere else, at least for a generation, to not have to be reminded every day of their loss. **What does it mean when you're forced to inhabit cursed ground?**

Movement has always been a part of life. Some moves leave us no return, others are cyclical, like the revolutions of an occasion-

What did Greeny mean to them? **They knew the stars intimately, and this one would have moved unlike all the others. They probably didn't believe in gods, that came a lot later, but they lived in a magical world, in which dreaming was important, and life was sacred, and spirits came and went and could inhabit different bodies.** Did they take it as a warning of the winters getting harsher, the ice sheets which had begun to move south? Or did they connect it to something more local, something more ephemeral that left no trace for us to consider fifty thousand years later?

The anarchist in me wonders what revolutions were like back then. Modern hunter-gatherers are, in the majority, intelligently and consciously anti-authoritarian. How did they get that way? Was there some nomadic regime of arrogance and insult that they overthrew and learned to never reconstitute again? No hunter-gatherer society has displayed a material inequality, but there are some that had inequalities in status or were weakly patriarchal, others that carried out occasional bloodshed against their neighbors. Did the rebels of the day take Greeny as a harbinger of revolution and raise a rallying cry against the injustices they had normalized for too long?

However my ancestors took the comet's appearance, whatever changes they incorporated in its aftermath, they kept on doing and learning, because within five thousand years, some of them learned the technologies necessary to live permanently in the arid steppe that covered northern Asia and most of Europe at that point. What was it like when they left? I talk about leaving, because I'm descended from the ones who stayed.

Twenty thousand years later, another eternity, some of them settled more permanently in Anatolia, leaving the Caucasus behind (fifteen millennia later the Anatolian branch would shift from hunting and gathering to planting and harvesting). Others, ten millennia later, 35,000 years after a green comet passed by, would move into Europe, replacing the last of the original wave of hunter-

gatherers who had settled there and barely survived the onslaught of glaciers as the temperatures continued to drop.

Those who stayed would witness the collapse of the first empires on the planet, just to the south. They probably took in a number of refugees from those early revolutions, they probably learned warfare to defend themselves against the slavers and tree-cutters employed by those early states. Later they would learn how to domesticate and ride horses, and even fight from horseback. These three branches of my family tree – the Anatolian farmers, the European hunter-gatherers, and the Caspian herders and horse-riders – would, in separate waves, reunite in the very lands that my families today remember as their countries of origin.

I hesitated to explore the present topic in a newsletter precisely because the practice of mapping a genomic history is so fraught these days, largely thanks to websites like ancestry.com and 23andMe that have been expropriating the human genome – a profitable data set with key uses for policing and the pharmaceutical industry – while masquerading as service providers, in large part to angsty North American white people who have no culture outside the market and are eager for a new identity, a connection to a putatively stable European ethnicity complete with its own traditions and clichés.

(I recognize the service can mean something entirely different for the descendants of kidnapped or migrant ancestors, but for now I'm focusing on the majority clientele.)

Part of the damage these sites do is to pass on the fiction that genes and ancestry are the same. Adoptions and infidelities – consented or clandestine – make up a sizable minority of cases in human familial/reproductive history. In other words, your parents aren't always your parents. And traditions, culture, historical memory, ancestry, are not packaged up in our DNA. The recent practice of genomic history for the people completely elides that reality.

These companies also present the fiction that genes inhere to national borders. Instead of telling their customers that their genetic markers can be found in people who resided in Scandinavia or the British Isles, for example, a thousand years ago, they claim a person's genes are Scandinavian or British. This elides the entire history of movement I sketched out above.

Set the genomic clock to fifty thousand years, and every alienated white person anxious for an ancestry they don't actually have a connection to would be told their genes are Georgian/Azerbaijani. Set it back a hundred thousand years, and every single human who offered up their DNA would be told their ancestors are either from East Africa or southern Africa.

Notice that this culturally loaded deployment of science is also happening at a time when many countries that people are tracing their ancestries back to are *tightening their borders* [ed. – see *Statement on the Menilla Massacre*], which is a euphemism for when the government that occupies a certain country prepares to kill more people in order to restrict the movement that has been an inherent part of our species since the beginning.

And that's what really stands out from my little exploration, trying to figure out where my ancestors were fifty thousand years ago. For so much of their history, they were constantly in motion. A surprising tally of millennia, though, consisted of the cyclical migrations of temperate climate hunter-gatherers shifting between summer and winter activities. Or they ranged far afield but still came back to one particular corner of the globe, again and again over a vast distance of time.

What would it feel like to have such a deep connection to a place? One of the features of whiteness is that to be white means you can never know the answer to that question [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.3 pg89*]. But more and more people around the globe are being forced into movement by desertification, by flooding, by war, by poverty, by all those things entangled. And as they move, they