

GEOMANCY

STEP BY STEP

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The ancient practice of geomancy holds promise as a surprisingly contemporary model for adjudicating humans' relationship to nature. This is because, among other things, it presumes that a true union of humans with the natural world is not given but earned, *practiced*. The relationship between humans and nature consists of a dynamic, unpredictable process, which is irreducible to static founding assumptions, such as linear material causation. Normatively, this process relies neither upon a view of human rights *over* nature in deference to human specialness (as the Judeo-Christian tradition has been interpreted to advocate), nor upon the conviction of humans' imbrication *within* nature on a continuum with other animals (as Romanticism feelingly insists). Instead, geomancy imagines humans' relationship to nature to be essentially contractual. Geomancy involves complex, mutual bonds, intuitions, obligations, and exchanges, the outcomes of which can go terribly wrong. Our habitation in the Anthropocene vividly brings home how relations among humans and the natural world can lead to alienation and estrangement as readily as to synergistic union. Because of the ways the Anthropocene has transformed earth from a system of potentially legible signs to an avalanche of ambiguous symptoms, I suggest, geomancy has been created anew.

Since the late fourteenth century, "geomancy" has been defined as the art of divination by means of signs derived from earth. To divine is to discover—whether by intuition, insight, or conjecture—those forms of knowledge which themselves proceed from the divine. It is a reciprocal art. We divine *through* the divine, in other words; divination incarnates us as momentary gods. Geomancy furthermore presumes an analogical relationship between the cosmic order and the human body, conceiving of the earth, in effect, *as* a body.¹

Traditional geomancers practiced divination by earthly signs to maintain human harmony with what was conceived as a unified cosmic order. They conventionally attended to the placement, arrangement, situation, qualities, and boundary properties of such earthly materials as water, trees, stones, hills, sun, and megalithic structures, the patterns of which could either be discerned to facilitate harmonious relations or disrupted at the risk of dire consequences. Perceiving local material forms and relationships as microcosmic re-enactments of a divine macrocosmic scheme, geomancers sought to create equilibrium across a complex, sacralised network of human and non-human interactions. Of its many iterations, two traditions of geomancy have found particular resonance in the West: Chinese *feng-shui*, which aims to regulate the flow of energy through the location and position of objects, buildings, and borders; and Britain's terrestrial geometry, which discerns in the alignment of ancient sites Meridional or "ley lines"—channels of energy claimed to correspond to ancient surveyors' trackways.² Since geomancy's popular resurgence in 1960s America, its meanings have expanded to encompass virtually any occult or metaphysical practice anchored in earth. But that expansion hasn't emptied geomancy of meaning, as one might suspect. Quite to the contrary, geomancy's reformation from the late 1980s and after shows the widening relevance

¹ See N. Pennick, *Ancient Science of Geomancy: Man in Harmony with the Earth*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 147.

² Pennick, 66; 80-81.

of such discourses and practices to our rapidly changing planetary conditions, just as it exposes the growing limitations of Enlightenment tools to contend with them.

Geomancy entails an acute level of environmental reading that, quite apart from its sacred purpose, was likely critical to human survival: to avoid danger; to find the most auspicious locations to obtain water; to dwell, plant, defend, reproduce, hunt. Geomancy sacralizes these basic human tasks through studied and ritualized environmental interactions. It includes complimentary concepts of a benign, harmonious earth and a malevolent, vengeful earth as part of a spectrum of relational possibilities in which the varying patterns of environmental crises and clemencies are contingent upon the sensitivities, skills, and failures of human agency. The rules governing geomantic time are fundamentally non-linear; rather, they are circular, cyclical, and eschatologically informed only in the mystical sense of recurrent unions with the divine. Geomancy draws variously from mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, and geophysics, codifying its “sacred geometries” in relational patterns whose significance is likely unrecognizable in mainstream Western disciplinary contexts.³ Geomancy is incidentally rather than fundamentally a modality of the visible because it remains irreducible to measurable sense perceptions. From a Western philosophical perspective, geomancy approximates panpsychism and its view that all things have mind or mind-like qualities.

I repurpose the term geomancy here as shorthand for the emergent epistemological paradigms and changed relations of definition that have evolved since the 1990s in the United States in response to three significant reconstellations of risk and their attendant forms of planetary awareness: the replacement of the Cold War’s binary global logic beginning in 1989 with a widely dispersed spectrum of potential harms hiding in plain site; the greater public consciousness of global warming, with its terrible revelation of the convergence of human and geological history; and the rise of the security state, particularly following 9/11, with its doctrine of preemption inscribed as a normative environmental power.⁴ As climate scientist Paul N. Edwards notes, “With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War left in its wake a yawning ‘apocalypse gap’ that was readily filled, in political discourse, by environmental doomsday scenarios” such as nuclear winter and ozone-depletion.⁵

³ “Sacred geometry” is employed synonymously with geomancy and sometimes in preference to it, as is suggested by the recurrence of the phrase in titles of recent books by such authors as Francene Hart, *Sacred Geometry of Nature* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, Inner Traditions) 2017; Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 1982); Miranda Lundy, *Sacred Geometry* (Glastonbury, Somerset, UK: Wooden Books, 2001); Stephen Skinner, *Geomancy in Theory and Practice*. (Malaysia: Golden Hoard Press. 1980); Russell Symonds, *Sacred Geometry: Designs of Creation* (Russell Symonds, 2014); and Mark Vidler and Catherine Young, *Sacred Geometry of the Earth: The Ancient Matrix of Monuments and Mountains* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

⁴ See B. Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception*. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2015), 200.

⁵ P. N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming*. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2010), 381.

At bottom, the *new* geomancy entails a crisis of knowing enacted through interpretations of geophysical space that are fueled by the simultaneous rise of system complexity, collective anxiety, and profound redistributions of authority; each of these components combines combustibly with the networked technologies of the digital information age. The new geomancy is the arena wherein fantastical truths and credible falsehoods interchangeably trade places. Yet the new geomancy rises above mere confirmation bias dressed up as epistemology because of its chronic uncertainty. Does fracking cause earthquakes? Is the U.S. military modifying the ionosphere to make war with weather? Will psycho-pharmaceuticals in our water change our or other species' DNA? Do genetically modified crops have unintended effects? Have we been killing bees with our lawn care products? The prolonged inability to adjudicate among the truths, falsehoods, speculations, and prognostications about earth and the biosphere erodes confidence in longstanding methods of proof, consigning us instead to private islands of veridiction. The new geomancy is best regarded as that structure of feeling that addresses itself to our planet's ungraspably complex changes, wherein humans take a decisive step towards estrangement from our earthly roots.

The new geomancers—and that includes nearly all of us now—alternately use divination diagnostically and talismanically as a means of knowing and inoculating ourselves against the largely invisible harms inflicted on the very nature of Nature and its precarious place in biconnected Earth. Harmonious relations with earth have long been disrupted; the dire consequences have arrived. Symptoms of earth's contamination (and the vengeance they seem anthropomorphically to portend) range from species die-offs and extreme weather to the catastrophic effects of profit-driven resource extractions and environmental accidents. Cumulatively, they form a larger system or symptomology—a profligate inventory of spills and leaks, breaches and eruptions, chills and hot spells, infestations and collapses that, as my somatic language is meant to suggest, symbolically reference earth itself as a jeopardized, unstable body—a wounded Gaia, to use the language of deep ecology. Earth has been bled of its anchorage, its shelter, morphing into a perpetually suspect interpretive site. Earth's spatial ordering is no longer intimately but only structurally relational, while time's linearity is re-imposed externally by thresholds of contamination that are either looming or passed.

This symptomology mandates new forms of divination that, like their predecessors, fuse the material and symbolic into a space of *geomantic reading*. If geomancy *past* meant divination by earthly signs, geomancy *present* means divination of earth through *symptoms rather than signs*; through a pathologized planetarity rather than a holistic cosmicity. The new geomancy proceeds by the anxious parsing of a transformed but still ritualized earthly space whose topography of purity and pollution has been rendered as literal and actual as it is portentous and symbolic, even as it escapes sensory capture. This uncanny earth draws us into a disenchanting, risky symbiosis. The new geomancy begins with the disenchantment of earth—not in the familiar Cartesian sense used to justify its relentless instrumentalization, but in the freshly poignant sense of loss of an imagined purity; in the damage wrought against an ancient idea of home.

