

Landscape meditations: Native versus colonist

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“**H**ow can people be so insensitive to the dignity and independence of landscape?” author John O’Donahue asked (2010: 134). By *people*, he did not mean all human beings nor was he calling our attention to human nature. O’Donahue was talking about the human as “lord of creation” possessed by “luciferian pride” (*ibid.*). He was talking about the human identity gone global: the Earth settler colonialist.

Landscape is an evocative term free of ideological and scientific connotations. Of course, it does not only refer to terrestrial places but includes lakes, rivers, wetlands, seas and icy expanses. The word may call forth a sense of ‘scenery’, but this notion is shallow when we allow ourselves to be arrested by the qualities of landscape that O’Donahue highlights: dignity and independence.

Landscape is not about vistas opened by the lens of human eye or technological apparatus. In its dignity and independence, landscape beams its inherent standing. The qualities that O’Donahue singles out, and aptly pairs, are exactly the ones that Earth settler colonialists have made it their mission to ignore. Yet landscape, with unintrusive graciousness (O’Donahue, 2010: 130), presences its own grace and sovereignty. Such telling words for landscape are not manmade packaging invoked in a romantic or noble mood. Dignity and independence disclose what landscape broadcasts about itself. They are not attributed qualities but rather recognized as corresponding with landscape’s reality.

To re-cognize, human beings must pause before landscape and receive what landscape has to say, and to reveal. This pausing and receiving is called *listening* by Native people.¹ Listening is not done with the ears though hearing may come into play. Nor is listening done with the mind though the mind will surely become engaged. Nor yet is listening exactly an observational choice though attuned observation is essential to it. Listening is a response of *the whole human* in a manner that resembles acquiescing to a command.

Author Kent Nerburn's Native informant, a Lakota elder whom he identified as Dan, stated about settler colonialists: "The greatest weakness of your people is that you do not know how to listen. You have closed your ears to other voices. Not just the voices of other people, but the voices of all creation" (quoted in Nerburn, 2009: 301).

Colonists do not know how to listen to landscape. Landscape is perceived by them as a passive object that is *for* something. This, observes O'Donahue (2010: 135), makes landscape "particularly vulnerable; it cannot get out of the way" and its inhabitants "cannot fight back". Colonialism's mode of perceiving, which spurns landscape's dignity and independence, is "a violent perception" propagated by the human identity entranced by its self-acclaimed "cosmological elitism" (O'Donahue, 2010: 134).

By way of contrast, it would be tempting to rush to imbue the Indigenous capacity to listen with moral virtues such as wisdom and respect. But listening is not, in the first place, about ethics. Listening is foremost about proper alignment with reality *out of which* Indigenous virtues (and ethics more generally) are born. Landscape's "unquivering poise and peace of thereness" to cite O'Donahue again (2010: 135), invites listening. When the human assents to landscape's soft command to listen, landscape responds by speaking and revealing more of itself.

On the other hand, when the landscape's invitation to listen is dismissed, and its inherent standing discounted, the landscape is glossed over and eyed for what it can yield (to be extracted) and what is an obstacle (to be exterminated). This violence was glorified in the 1872 painting *American progress* – discussed in this issue by Tony Hiss – that depicts settler colonialism's so-called 'Manifest Destiny'.² The painting portrays European colonists advancing with their technologies and exterminating what stood in their way – Indigenous people, buffalo, wild animals, and wilderness – razing landscape after landscape with the stampede of industrial infrastructures, mining and agriculture. Progress, we may accurately infer, knows nothing about listening. Progress has made things like bulldozers, asphalt, fences, herbicides, cement and fertilizers, for in them it finds its blind-to-landscape self-reflection. The conceit of progress has impelled human beings to turn their backs to Earth's landscapes and to the landscape of Earth as such in the universe.

Listening to landscape, though, it invariably discloses "a vast and wonderful variety of presence" and uniqueness of "texture and spirit" (O'Donahue, 2010: 135). Freya Mathews (in this issue) refers to landscape as *labyrinth*. Labyrinth materializes as the panorama of landscape delaminates before the receptive and patient human, unveiling its one-without-a-second countenance and composition. Uniqueness is built into all life, taught medicine man Lame Deer. "On all earth there is not one leaf that is exactly like another" (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972: 157). Indigenous people, Native American author and activist Jack Forbes concurred, have "deep-seated respect for individual worth" as well as "awareness of the unique tempo of the individual" (2008: 115). Uniqueness is what the colonialist gloss erases, what it does not and cannot see. The colonist perceives only types of objects, and instances of types of objects, all "'below'

him as either inanimate or sub-human” (O’Donahue, 2010: 134). The colonialist gloss sees anthropocentrically tinted constructs, such as timber, fisheries, game, rangelands, pests, invasives, livestock and the like. Such factitious constructs serve to guarantee that landscapes and their inhabitants can be used, discounted, converted, managed and annihilated without accountability.

In the contrast between Native and colonist, I hope it is clear that we are not in any thickets of ‘cultural relativism’. Earth settler colonialism simply *does not see what is*. The thereness of what-is is bypassed, and what is perceived instead is passive landscape objectified as a type, filled with tokens and masses of types, all at human disposal for settling and pasturing, moulding and improving, managing and extracting from, fencing and exterminating, and traversing with infrastructures.

The colonist’s intrusiveness upon landscape is vividly exemplified in the case of what Isabella Clarke calls “Terran Badger” recounted in this issue. “Badgers” Clarke writes, “are in the land with the same intensity and the same force that the land is in them”. As Japanese existential philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1983) would put it, the landscape is Terran Badger’s *home ground*. What this means, perforce, is that humans have no business going about murdering badgers, and with such insolence to boot as to accuse badgers of carrying a disease that colonists and their monocultures have spread. Killing badgers is not some god-given right to humanity. It is violation of landscape by the human identity that has forfeited listening.

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“Why is the landscape hardly noticed?” O’Donahue wondered. “Why is it so rarely considered a presence? Why is it abused, raided and raped?” (2010: 129). Colonialism has devised different ways of possessing landscape. It backgrounds landscape through gigantic impositions, like urban sprawl, large-scale windmill and solar farms, dams, airports and seaports, mining operations and industrial parks dominating the horizon. Colonialism converts landscape, such as bludgeoning Brazilian rainforest and American prairie, burying them under monocultures of soy and corn, to feed the suffering of domestic animals, and to grow the numbers of Earth settler colonialists and swell their ranks with industrial meat, dairy, corn syrup and other ultraprocessed ‘foods’. Colonialism further takes possession of landscape by emptying it, as has been done with the mass extermination of wild animals across lands and seas in the compounding assault of killing, habitat destruction, disease spread, climate breakdown and pollution. Colonialism also possesses landscape through inordinate manicuring and managing, and through Disneyfication as in the example of defacing Mount Rushmore of South Dakota.

When landscape is recognized as presence *anthropos* behaves otherwise. The profound difference is often signalled in Indigenous naming that expresses boundless esteem. The Lakota people call their home ground, the Black Hills, “The Heart of Everything that Is”. In the late 19th century, the Lakota

requested a treaty to grant them their homeland, which the American government agreed to, promising them the Black Hills for “as long as grass grows and water flows” (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972; Black Elk, 1932). True to form, the colonists – called *Wasichus* by the Lakota, which means “white man” *cum* “fat taker” – violated the treaty when they discovered there was gold in the Black Hills. The incapacity to listen to landscape and the capacity to lie are entirely consistent. They reveal colonialism’s betrayal of reality and readiness to indulge in aberrant conduct with respect to world and word.

Author Richard Erdoes (given the name Inyan Wasicun, “Rock White Man” in Lakota), who collaborated with Lame Deer in the writing of *Lame Deer – Seeker of Visions*, wrote memorably of his first visit to South Dakota at Lame Deer’s invitation. Driving with his family, they crested a meandering road only to be arrested by an incredible landscape: “an endless ocean of hills, covered with sage and prairie grass in shades of silver, subtle browns and ochres, pale yellow and oranges. Above all this stretched the most enormous sky I had ever seen” (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972: 276). Overwhelmed, Erdoes stopped to take it in. He described the feeling that overtook him as a *surging sensation of freedom* (*ibid.*). Freedom in inner and outer landscapes alike. What he witnessed was virtually unbroken landscape as far as the eye could see. All he had ever seen before was what colonialism does to landscape, which is to break it in all senses of the word.

Earth’s landscapes are naturally contiguous with no sharp borders between diverse places. “The country was made without lines of demarcation” Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said, “and it’s no man’s business to divide it” (quoted in McLuhan, 1971: 54). Being made without lines of demarcation means that landscapes are meant to be seamless, meshing and mixing, creating uniqueness everywhere. But colonialism is unstoppable in breaking landscape after landscape. “Earth” writes Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak, is treated like “humanity’s backyard” (2021). Krenak seems comfortable with the politically incorrect term “humanity,” for the cosmologically elite human has become, in his words, “Humanity Club” (*ibid.*).

Colonialism wrecks landscapes by parcelling them, assigning them land-uses and crisscrossing them with infrastructures. To be sure, colonists earmark some landscapes as special, identifying them (for example) as monuments, natural heritage, wildlife reserves or scenic. At first blush these forms of sparing landscape appear benevolent, but on deeper inspection, colonialism (which environmental author Tom Birch called *the imperium*) has simply concocted a variety of ways of owning/enclosing landscape. In the colonialist mindset, even wilderness and wild places are enclosable (Birch, 1990). Moreover, when some landscapes are tagged as ‘special’ and placed under the auspices of protection – protection that is always partial, precarious, and reversible – all other landscapes are thereby rendered more banal and legitimately up for grabs.

Earth settler colonialism possesses landscape physically (as stated above, by backgrounding, bulldozing, emptying, managing and Disneyfying) and possesses landscape representationally (by anthropocentric constructs, random naming

and galaxies of signposts). In the United States (and I imagine globally), when you cross the unreal break of landscape called a “state border” you are welcomed by a sign (‘Welcome to Kansas’) and simultaneously by a Google maps announcement (‘Welcome to Kansas’). This is one of the ten thousand ways that colonialism asserts, and lets no one forget, who owns the landscape, namely, the (luciferian) human.

Under the dominant colonialist regime, every landscape comes under the guise of some ‘land-use’, meaning that landscape is never left free of *framing*, including framing in seemingly innocuous ways such as parking locations to take in a view and places tagged for sight-seeing, recreation, and sources of picturesque images for laptop and cellphone ‘wallpaper’. Colonialism takes possession of landscapes at physical, representational and framing levels simultaneously. In addition, all landscapes – including now extraterrestrial – are tacitly in reserve for (whatever) future use. Everywhere we turn we see landscape enslaved, never left to be what it inherently is – seamless, unlabelled and free. When Crazy Horse was asked to sell the Black Hills to the Wasichus he was incredulous. “One does not sell the earth on which people walk” he replied (quoted in O’Reilly, 2020: 225). Terran Human participates and shares landscape with all life and cannot make sense out of the idea of possessing it.

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Typically, anytime it is underscored that Native people live(d) by precepts they consider(ed) holy – kinship, generosity, admiration, ceremony and listening to landscape and its inhabitants – the charge of romanticizing them is not too far behind. In his essay in this issue, Wendelin Küpers offers an enlightening discussion of the dangers of romanticizing (and homogenizing) Indigenous ways.

At the same time, we would be remiss to ignore that Native writings and teachings are replete with ‘romantic’ content. For example, Indigenous insight into animals and their ways is entirely foreign to how animal being has been flattened by the colonialist gloss. Nothing could sound stranger to the colonist’s ear than how Native people understand and connect with animals. For example, Black Elk admonished: “Even the smallest ant may wish to communicate with a man” (quoted in Hogan, 2020: 84). “All animals have power” medicine man Pete Catches observed, “because the Great Spirit dwells in all of them” (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972: 126). “You have to listen to all creatures” Lame Deer advised. “They have secrets to tell” (p. 134). “In the traditional worldview” Native author Linda Hogan (2020: 80) writes about animals, “we have awe for them, and an obligation to keep them *all alive*”. “We watch the animals to know how to live” a Lakota man told Nerburn (2013: 141). According to Lame Deer, buffalo have a sense of humour (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972: 131). I don’t know if science has corroborated that yet.

Contemporary people prefer not to saddle Indigenous people with viewpoints that risk romanticizing their relations with the natural world. Ever since the 1990s, academic and even popular writings have reconfigured Native intimacy

with nature in more palatable terms. Native people are said to be (and to have been) ‘good resource managers’ and ‘environmental stewards’ with ‘sustainable land-uses’. Such phony and assimilating ascriptions pass for politically correct speech, while what Native people themselves have to say is downplayed as quaint, mythological and (by anthropologists) as socially constructed story-telling serving cultural identity and cohesion. In any case, conversing with ants or laughing at buffalo jokes is widely regarded as “folklore” (Krenak’s wording) or worse as “savage superstition” (Lame Deer’s).

At the end of the extraordinary monograph *Black Elk Speaks*, it is narrated that when Black Elk was an elder, he went to the mountains to pray for his people. In that ceremony, he asked “the thunder beings of the west” to send thunder and rain as testimony that the spirit world heard him. Black Elk called on forces of nature to speak, and they responded. His scribe, John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow), was present and wryly commented that what happened would be viewed by “Wasichu readers as being merely a more or less striking coincidence” (Black Elk, 1932: 271). In a similar vein, how many viewers of Jane Goodall’s valedictory, *Famous Last Words* (2025), will believe that when she asked the rain to desist (so her students could speak), the rain responded? Who does not think of what happened as mere coincidence? But we can face Black Elk’s and Dr Jane’s statements with more imagination and courage and concede that we have become so estranged from Native ways that we have *no idea* what kind of power may reside in a human being who listens and is allied with landscape.

Responding to landscape’s invitation to listen, the human is transported into matter-of-fact awe. The colonist turns ‘awe’ into an idea that *anthropos* invented and only *anthropos* can experience. With this angle on awe, some landscapes are regarded as ‘photogenic’ or pronounced ‘sublime’. But Earth settler colonialism categorically denies that landscape is alive and speaks.

The language of living landscape is ancient, filled with ciphers written on the surface and inscribed into the depths. Listening to landscape, our ancestors responded with singing, poetry, art, dreamtime, myth and metaphor. They also responded with representation. These ways of knowing catch facets of landscape, set off insights, galvanize into silence, stir the heart, and inspire the mind. In them, the human spirit rests wide open. *All* are offerings of landscape, yet they cannot be added up to deliver the whole ... because there is no whole. What is boundless cannot be pinned down as a type or as an ‘eco-system’. Landscape is inimical to partitioning, reservations and reserves. One who is Native understands this. “I was born in the prairie where there was nothing to break the light of the sun” said Comanche Chief Ten Bears. “I was born where there were no enclosures and where everything drew a free breath” (quoted in McLuhan, 1971: 148). That’s poetry, metaphor and true representation.

Native author and shaman Martín Prechtel asks us to contemplate the following: “All is not one. All is many” (2021: 198). How many? Not countable. But that does not mean that landscape is infinite. Yet neither is landscape finite. (The habit of calling Earth ‘a finite planet’ is a terrible misuse of language though well-intentioned.) What and who landscape is composed of

cannot be exhaustively listed, the hard work of science (and citizen science) notwithstanding. “One gram of moss from the forest floor” writes botanist and Indigenous author Robin Wall Kimmerer, “would harbor 150,000 protozoa, 132,000 tardigrades, 3,000 springtails, 800 rotifers, 500 nematodes, 400 mites, and 200 fly larvae. These numbers tell us something about the astounding quantity of life in a handful of moss” (2003: 55). Before colonialism’s hammer shattered the Earth, an astounding abundance and diversity of life saturated landscapes. But now, Lakota elder Dan told Nerburn, “when you can count the animals, you’re getting near the end of your chances. We can count the eagles. We can count the buffalo [...] That’s Earth crying out. She’s giving us a warning” (quoted in Nerburn, 2013: 295).

Being anti-Indigenous, stubbornly alienated and given over to narcissistic pride, colonialism can never triumph through its trenchant non-virtuous ways. The Borg will have their proverbial dark day in the sun, but reality – which is always about ‘going native’³ – will swallow them up in the oblivion they stand for. We see that reckoning approaching, we just don’t know exactly when and how it will arrive. Subsequently, “we will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all” (Plumwood, 2007).

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Contemplating landscape, Linda Hogan (2020: 69) writes: “It takes all my attention. It takes a great love for the fields and the valleys, desert and mountain, and of this beauty so great it is an ache in the human”. She writes these powerful words with confidence because the human heart is native to Earth. The heart knows that it is no contradiction, but more like destiny, to remain open to the hungry hawk who follows its nature and to the anguished silky rabbit with half its face ripped off who still wants to live (Mathews, this issue). The human who listens sees the majesty of the hawk and the loveliness of the rabbit and aligns, in love, with the abyssal ground of landscape that made them, and has made the open-hearted largesse of the Terran Human too.

Landscape’s unintrusive graciousness, to echo O’ Donahue with whom we began, is forever victorious. But thrashing about in supremacy’s machinating shallows, Earth settler colonialism is short-lived and even before its demise always already defeated.

Notes

- 1 I use the terms ‘Native’ and ‘Indigenous’ interchangeably throughout.
- 2 ‘Regurgitated Fate’ would be the correct term, since European colonists reenacted in the Americas (with greater speed and more concentrated violence) what they and their ancestors had done to their original lands. In this terminological contrast, I’m following Carl Jung’s (2012) distinction between ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’.
- 3 Even those pesky ‘invasive species’ are going native, albeit at a tortoise pace.

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