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Place-conscious Practices: Understanding Ecological Consciousness through Lakota *Wakan*

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For thirty years, I have studied place and what it means to live in a specific locale. I have learned that to sustain a locale economically, culturally, and spiritually, I also needed to work toward understanding an ecological sustainability. I have to understand an ecosystem; I have to become ecologically conscious. Human beings cannot live consciously or conscientiously in a place without understanding the impact our lives have upon other species in a delicate ecosystem. Without fully understanding why, I began by first investigating a spiritual connection to the land, something poet and writer, Kathleen Norris described as a "spiritual geography." Conceptualizing a spiritual geography led me to Lakota mythology.

The first story in James R. Walker's literary cycle, *Lakota Myth*, depicts a living being in the creation story of *Inyan*: "As blood flows from *Inyan*, Sky (*Škan*) and Earth (*Maka*) are created" (194). *Inyan* refers both to rock and to a superior being from whose blood the earth and sky was created. The spirit *Inyan* literally bleeds dry and hardens into stone in creating the earth (Sundstrom 189). For the Lakota, all creation was born out of the earth—the earth itself, sky, sun, moon, and the four directions. The creation myths of the Lakota present images implicit in the Great Plains of America—creation of the gods who correlate to sky, water, and earth, creation of the four directions, and creation of the *Pte* or buffalo people directly from the earth; these stories are an integral part of their religion. In Ella Deloria's *Dakota Texts*, the stories personify buffalo, deer, elk, eagle, and other companion species. The stories entertain and teach valuable lessons, but also convey the idea of *wakan*; the buffalo is *wakan*, the deer is *wakan*. For the Lakota, according to Good Seat, "*Wakan* was anything that was hard to understand. Anything might be *wakan*. In old times, the Indians did not know of a Great Spirit" (Walker, *Lakota Belief* 70). *Wakan* was multi-faceted; it included many gods and animal spirits.

An integral part of the landscape is conveyed in the adult names given to Lakotan people—Black Elk, Sitting Bull, Brave Eagle—which have special significance because they are given in naming ceremonies. All are given names at birth but, at any time in their lives, they may have a naming ceremony, when a new name is given based upon a spiritual vision, heroic act, or a family name, e.g., Crazy Horse, the great Lakota warrior, was given the name Among the Trees, and as a child his nicknames were Curly or Light Hair because of his curly light hair. He was given his father's name in adulthood after

bravery in battle. The names of these various warriors and holy men depict that each had some aspect of their human character displayed in traits of other species, i.e., elk, bull (bison), eagle, or horse. They acknowledge other species as family members.

In Lakota spiritual practice, the vision quest for a young male (*hanblec'eya*) includes things from his immediate surroundings. Vegetation from the landscape is used as a part of the *hanblec'eya*, acknowledging a connectedness to the land. A Lakota would have a pipe, *cansasa*, and tobacco, but he must also have sweetgrass and sage to burn in the pipe and offer it to the sky. During the *hanblec'eya* the vision seeker could receive a communication and it would be given through some form of Lakota's natural surroundings. He might "see something […] like a man […] an animal or a bird or an insect or anything that breathes, or it may be like a light of some kind or a cloud. It may speak to him, or it may not speak. He should remember what it says and how it speaks" (Walker, *Lakota Belief* 86). Lee Irwin notes that in "the Native American context, there is no separation between the world-as-dreamed and the world-as-lived […] dreaming is given a strong ontological priority and is regarded as a primary source of knowledge and power" (236).

For Lakota, the dream world and conscious world are intertwined. Both Crazy Horse (the Lakota Warrior) and Black Elk (the Holy Man of the Lakota and whom John Neihardt interviewed for the book he would write, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*) had prophetic dreams as children. Black Elk speaks of the power of his vision, which led him his whole life. The same is true for Crazy Horse. He had a specific dream that guided him through battle. Unlike *hanblec'eya* though—that is, the vision quest or what Lakota call "seeking a vision" (*hanblec'eya*) which takes place in a specific geographical location holy to the Lakota—their prophetic dreams didn't come through the traditional ceremony. Both were very ill as small boys when they had their powerful visions (dreams).[1]

Black Elk was nine years old when he received his vision. Neihardt writes, "We stopped to get a drink from a creek, and when I got off my horse, my legs crumpled under me and I could not walk. […] I rode in a pony drag, for I was very sick. Both my legs and both my arms were swollen badly and my face was all puffed up" (18). Black Elk speaks of being in the tepee with his parents when he could see two men coming from the clouds. The two birdlike men called out to him and guided him in his dream.

Crazy Horse's power vision came several days after seeing the mortally wounded Lakota Chief, Conquering Bear. At age twelve, Crazy Horse went off alone to seek a vison upon a butte, and became ill and received no message. In *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*, Mari Sandoz writes that he gave up on his vision quest after three days and went to get his horse. Weak and exhausted, he rested upon a cottonwood tree. Sandoz writes, "the sickness and the turning in the boy's head made him sit with his back against a tree, the wind singing a cool little song" (42). Crazy Horse received his power vision while asleep under that tree. He was awakened by his father and another warrior

[1]My thesis for my Master of Arts in English, titled *Twin Paths to Spirit: Landscape and the Quest for Spiritual Vision in Some Lakota and Benedictine Reflections*, is focused upon landscape and the spiritual power it has. The twin path I investigated included Benedictine monasticism and the idea of seeking a vision through a hermitage or going off to the desert or mountains to contemplate God or the divine.

and reprimanded for disappearing for three days. When Crazy Horse told them he had gone seeking a vision, they were angry with him because he sought a vision "without making his preparations, without the sweat [lodge] or the consulting with the wise ones for guidance, or even telling his people where he had gone!" (43). It was many months later that Crazy Horse spoke to his father about his dream after building a sweat lodge, fasting, and consulting his father for an interpretation of the dream (103–104).

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Potawatomi Nation, whose people dwelt in southern Michigan in the 17th century, acknowledges an ecological consciousness through a grammar of animacy, echoing the Lakota concept of *wakan.* She writes,

> So it is that in Potawatomi and most Indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family. To whom does our language extend the grammar of animacy? Naturally, plants and animals are animate […] rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even our stories are animate. (53–54)

My understanding of Kimmerer's grammar of animacy and Lakota myth, belief, and ritual embodied in the concept of *wakan* has had a profound impact upon the ongoing formation of my own ecological consciousness, which informs my ethos as a teacher and scholar. These native American nations' worldview has also influenced my understanding of the power of narrative, conceptualizing and theorizing an ecological consciousness through story. *Wakan* teaches us how we must understand our planet, other species, ourselves, and our cultures if we are to become ecologically conscious. It is a gift to the entire world, and not something to appropriate but embrace with humility and gratitude, awakening a sense of awe.

Others have intuited the native American *wakan*, though they have needed to invent their vocabulary and "grammar of animacy." The American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both attempt to capture the essence of our relationship with our natural world by recognizing this sense of awe, through a spiritual and philosophical understanding of nature. Emerson conveys an ecological consciousness in his relationship to plant species in *Nature* (1838):

> The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. (13)

Thoreau understood how simplifying one's life led to less consumption, a principle of ecological consciousness and sustainable living; and like Emerson, he conveys an understanding of interrelated living species in an ecosystem. In "Spring" in *Walden* (1854), he writes, "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth" (298).

Both Emerson and Thoreau wrote poetically. Though trained as a scientist, the great American conservationist, Aldo Leopold, also saw the land as a living earth. In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold includes his essay, "The Land Ethic," which introduces the biotic land pyramid: a concept from ecology, the pyramid begins with plants absorbing energy from the sun and that energy flowing through a circuit he names biota. For Leopold, a land ethic "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (239). He writes,

> Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats, and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life. (253)

As a teacher of place-conscious writing, I follow humbly in the footsteps of Leopold, Thoreau, Emerson, and the native American forebears of this awe-inspiring land. Sustaining this fund of life keeps me up at night. In the 21st Century, the ravages of climate change are already upon us. A rise in Earth's temperature by "0.14° F (0.08° C) per decade since 1880" (Lindsay and Dalman) is causing weather extremes inducing hurricanes, floods, and drought. Human practices have led to a loss of species (which creates a chain reaction in the biotic land pyramid and food cycle). We cannot develop an ecological consciousness if we are ignorant of this revolving fund of life, the way in which our planet's ecosystem functions. And we must acknowledge how we got to this level of ignorance through industrialization, modernization, and a consumer economy. In the United States, we go about our daily lives seemingly oblivious to the repercussions of climate change. Even if we personally experience a traumatic event associated with climate change (such as the loss of health, a loved one, a home or business), we lack the will to change our hyper-consumerist behaviors. We lack the initiative to take political action to elicit policy changes. And we lack an intense sense of care of this place because we are displaced. Unlike Indigenous people, most Americans don't know the land in an intimate way.

II.

In a rural Nebraska home where thirteen separate individuals clamored and clanged about in tight quarters, I escaped outdoors. From mid-March to late October, many of my childhood hours were spent outside playing in the yard, climbing trees, building forts, walking the mile to the Platte River, and working in the vegetable garden with my maternal grandmother. I noticed things: I could echo the song of the phoebe, minnows move away from you when you step into their shallow pools, radishes take one week to come up in the garden, Nebraska soil is black and full of worms, and if you see a wall cloud on the southwest horizon—signs of a tornado brewing—you had better take shelter in the basement. Since childhood, I have felt this thrum of life, experiencing a string of ecological epiphanies in nature, unarticulated "ah ha!" moments—to know a thing without speaking. I was learning how to "be" in a place. I have continued seeking this consciousness and have discovered these "ah ha" moments are best articulated through story, and that ecological consciousness is an ancient story.

My maternal great-great grandparents emigrated to the Great Plains in the mid-nineteenth century. They were peasant farmers from southern Poland who came to stake a claim in the Platte River valley in central Nebraska. My paternal grandmother emigrated from Austria in 1905. My paternal grandfather's family name first appeared in the United States in 1634 in Virginia. Even though I have felt a sense of connectedness to the soil, water, flora, and fauna of the plains, I am not a native American, but I have committed to becoming naturalized to this North American locale. Robin Wall Kimmerer notes this important distinction:

> Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do. (208)

Kimmerer asks us to become naturalized to a place in order to become ecologically conscious, while David Greenwood asks us to understand the history of the North American continent and colonization to fully develop an ecological consciousness. Greenwood emphasizes the need for "decolonization soul work" or a cosmological homecoming, something he believes is crucial in an understanding of place *as land* and as a necessary critique of settler colonialism (371).

Tim Lilburn writes that we must begin a reconciliation conversation about colonization, and the harm done to Indigenous people. He cites Taiaike Alfred who writes, "The problem has been framed in many complicated ways, but really, what is colonization if not separation of the people from the land; the severance of the bond of trust and love that held our people together so tightly in the not-so-distant past and the abandonment of our spiritual connection to the natural world?" (x). Lilburn notes that people of European descent living in North America are even more removed from the land and that a contemplative practice might instill connectedness, or a sense of spiritual geography. He cites French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas' concepts of Totality and Infinity to illustrate colonization over connectedness:

> With totality, exercised between lovers, within a family, a state, among peoples, between humans and the environment, the impulse is to "make the same," to homogenize all difference under a single paradigm, to colonize in other words. "Infinity" is quite different, the roots, he argues, of ethics itself […] This behavior, disarmed, tentative, occasionally toppling, keen, grows from what he describes as an experience of the "Face," the deep recognition of the indissoluble individuality of another and a subsequent decorum and attentiveness toward the other growing out of this arresting experience. (11)

We must have *wakan*-like "ah ha" moments of deep recognition of all species—humans of all races, ethnicities, and genders, and all other species who are companions, inhabitants dwelling in this locale, the Earth. To become ecologically conscious, we must acknowledge the other in *homo sapiens* but also in the cockroach, the slug, the fungi, and the algae.

In the 1980s, David Orr created Meadowcreek Project, an environmental education center in the Arkansas Ozarks, where he "opened the door to the different possibility that education ought, somehow, to be more of a dialogue requiring the capacity to listen to the wind, water, animals, sky, nighttime sounds, and what [indigenous people] once described as earthsong" (104). Greenwood advises us to discover our own earthsong, "never live someone else's story […] live as well as we can, our own story of being and becoming, and [...] learn to give this story voice, in the presence of others, wherever we find ourselves" (375).

For several summer semesters, I taught a college-level writing/pedagogy course centered upon the Ecology of the Ozarks. This course includes immersive activities in nature such as field trips including hikes in the Ozark Mountains and nearby lakes. We participate in writing marathons at each site. A writing marathon asks students to form groups of 3 or 4 and agree upon several spots where they'd like to sit, observe, and write. After writing, students in each group read aloud their snippets of writing to each other with no responses allowed beyond, "Thank you." The groups move to several other agreed upon spots over several hours and repeat the process. At the end of the writing marathon, all small groups of writers come together at a selected site to read aloud one piece of writing, typically, a selection their group members encouraged them to read aloud because of its beauty or insight. Most of us nod our heads in approval. Some students snap their fingers.

I've conducted marathons in many cities, campuses, and small towns, but I prefer natural places. When writers are in nature, they have a predilection to write poetry or short prose that highlight a discovery of something new, or what it means "to be" in a place— what it means to be ecologically aware of other species. Lilburn describes this kind of writing as epiphanic apostrophes. He argues the essay and lyric poem are "perfect instruments in [a] psychopolitical undertaking of a contemplative return to being in the form of one's place," since "each rests on the sense of the fragment as sufficient—at the heart of one is the non-comprehensive confession, a shard; the epiphanic apostrophe lies at the center of the other" (xii). In Lilburn's own contemplative quest to understand an ecological consciousness, he has written these epiphanies, just as my students have.

In the past, I have called this the phenomenon of poetry, but that is a misnomer. It's the phenomenon of nature. Through lived experiences in nature, students have their own "ah ha" moments of ecological consciousness—they become conscious of the earthsongs—the language of the lake, the crag, the creek, and the cave. It's an experience of *wakan*, and it's foundational to the soul work underlying ecological consciousness.

Soul work is a quotidian process. It's not a one-time transformation. St. Benedict calls it conversion of life. An ecological consciousness requires turning toward Levinas' "Face" daily as a continual process of growth in attentiveness to the other. One act of my own soul work is inviting students to begin the process, too. When we go out into nature, whether it's our own backyard, a city park, a lake, a river, or a pond, we are moved to write in fragments and shards because the meadowlark sings for only a minute, flaps its wings for mere seconds. I'll continue to encourage others to seek their own understanding of an ecological consciousness, and I'll continue the soul work necessary for me in the naturalization process on this land by simplifying, by writing a bit, a sliver of a poem:

A woodpecker echos across the lake,
while a Carolina wren's loud voice
reminds us, she's here too!
Fish flop in the overflow of flood waters,
murky brown standing water,
a West Nile virus paradise.
A tufted tit-mouse sings
a soft song,
greeting the early morning.
Vines climb the locust tree
twenty feet in the air,
reaching toward the cirrus clouds and
the vibrant blue sky.

—Written June 4, 2019, at 10:10 a.m. from the scenic view at Bull Shoals Lake nearly Kirbyville, Missouri.

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