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CONFRONTING HUMAN SUPREMACY IN DEFENCE OF THE EARTH



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Landscape meditations: Native versus colonist

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"How 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.

* * * * *

"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.

* * * * *

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 Dear 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).

* * * * *

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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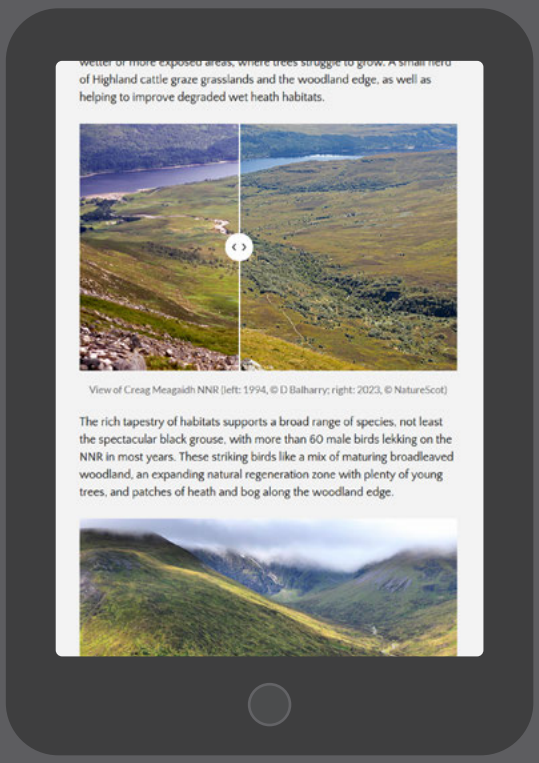
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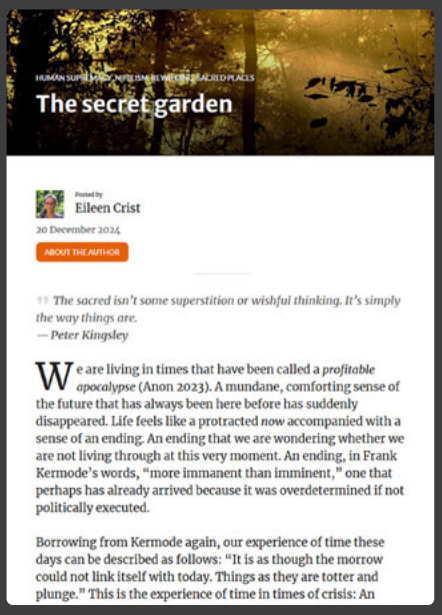
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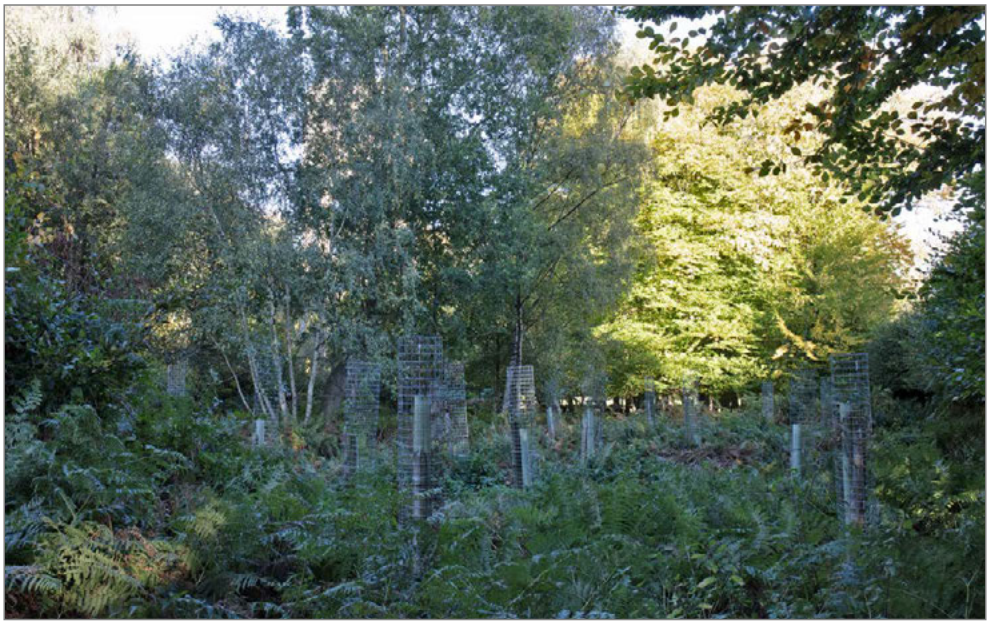
‘Dr Jane’: A personal tribute to Jane Goodall

Simon Leadbeater

Simon lives off-grid on the edge of a plantation wood in southern England. As well as caring for his woodland, he runs a small farm animal sanctuary and is a trustee of the British Association of Nature Conservationists.

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Despite a little rain recently, the ground beneath the topsoil was like concrete; I had to hammer in my crowbar to loosen the clay. By late afternoon, however, I’d completed my task. On 6 October, within a week of Dr Jane’s death, I had planted the last three trees for a grove I began creating on 3 April 2024 – to celebrate her 90th birthday. I had chosen mainly Birches, accompanied by Wild Cherry, Wild Pear, Crab-apple, Bullace, Willow, all to sustain pollinators in the spring and feed the birds in autumn. Originally I had just wanted to plant ‘The Birches’ after Dr Jane’s England home, but, as I was digging, an involuntary thought made me laugh out loud. My saplings were all



The author intends to position a plaque or inscribe on his woodland map: *‘The Birches’ in gratam et amantissimam memoriam Jane Goodall, Ph.D., DBE.*

'pioneers'! Where I have positioned them, adjacent to a managed Hornbeam hedge, they will never be overshadowed.

Why 'Dr Jane'? Upon our one meeting, on 7 September 2015, she frowned when I addressed her as 'Dame Jane'. Her last words to me, on my birthday in January after I had updated her on my 'The Birches' project, ended with 'Love from Dr Jane'. So, to me, 'Dr Jane' she will remain.

What's remarkable about this reminiscence is not the relationship I felt I had, but that thousands of people across the globe have similar vignettes to share. Jane had an extraordinary capacity for both leading a global strategy while simultaneously giving of herself to individuals who were not famous or powerful. This special quality, fostering deep connections at so many levels, must lie behind why she was so beloved and her loss felt so acutely and widely.

Jane's story becomes ever more compelling as more details emerge with each retelling. Of being asked by Louis Leakey in 1960 to study chimpanzees in Gombe, Tanzania, fulfilling her dream of travelling to Africa, even though by then Tarzan had married 'the wrong Jane'. Requiring a chaperone, she chose her ever-supportive mother. Her first major scientific insight, arising from observing David Greybeard using a tool to 'fish' for termites (as Leakey famously responded, "Now we must redefine tool, redefine man"). A Cambridge PhD followed in which she insisted on naming her subjects. In 1977 the founding of the Jane Goodall Institute and the beginning of a worldwide outreach mission entailing never staying longer than three weeks in any one place. Her indefatigable drive enduring until the night she died, on Wednesday, 1 October, in Los Angeles. Her courage, resolution, guiding spirituality, sense of adventure, even towards death. And her journey towards ethical veganism: what we all do makes a difference, most profoundly what we put on our plates. Deciding what kind of difference we want to make irresistibly drew Jane to basing her diet on plants not animals, as it should for all of us.

I knew the icon. Marc Bekoff and Koen Margodt's edited collection *Jane Goodall at 90* provides readers with an introduction to the real Dr Jane. She had a tremendous capacity for friendship, evidenced by the outpouring of tributes and grief on social media. Marc and Jane knew each other for 27 years, widely collaborated, and Marc's revised edition (with a foreword by Jane) of *The Emotional Lives of Animals* (2024) honoured her 90th.

Jane was a good friend to animals, but they were also friends with her. She oft spoke of Rusty, her childhood dog. "Owing much" to David Greybeard she included him in the dedication of her monograph *In the Shadow of Man* (1971). To do so again in her *Book of Hope* (2021), written half a century later, speaks of a deep and abiding affection. David must have felt for Jane too. The moment in the *Shadow* that moved me most was when he fleetingly held and squeezed her hand, dissolving the "barrier of untold centuries [...] a reward far beyond my greatest hopes" (van Lawick-Goodall, 1971: 268).

On that September 2015 evening when I met Dr Jane I believed myself to be in the presence of a living saint. That may sound hyperbolic, but others will attest to the same feeling of meeting someone whose serenity radiated something never witnessed before or since. However foolish expressing this may make me



Marc Bekoff with Jane sharing a fine single malt whisky, which Dr Jane referred to as her 'cough medicine' (photo by Thomas D Mangelsen/Images of Nature).

seem, I believe that something was peace and goodness. The experience was simply wonderful and will stay with me for ever.

Unyielding in the gloom of desperate times, Dr Jane was a light shining brilliantly in the darkness. From afar, that light did not so much splutter or dim, but was suddenly gone; in an instant that darkness became darker still. But Dr Jane would not approve of such a lachrymose lament. In November 2021 she sent me a handwritten letter, which, having framed, I read every time I sit down to work. She wrote of our 2015 meeting "and the change that made in your life". It cannot end thus, she would gently chide: never give up; never lose hope.

Acknowledgements

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A reflection on indigeneity

Patrick Curry

Patrick is a writer and scholar based in London, UK. His works include *Ecological Ethics: An introduction* (Polity Press, 2017).

Keywords: environmental humanities; Indigenous culture
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What follows is a personal and broadly philosophical reflection on indigeneity: a path, if you like. I do not aspire to an impossibly comprehensive and objective overview, which is just as well; a fairly recent article (Singh, 2023) shows just how complex and contested the concept is. But that author's starting-point is entirely bounded by anthropocentric concerns, whereas mine is relationships and their consequences between humans and nonhumans.

Some attention has been paid to that topic. Paul Shepard (1996) has gone into the evolutionary effects on humans of long defining other animals as the Other. More concretely, this is perhaps what Loren Eisley (1978: 16) meant when he wrote that "One does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human". And David Abram (1996: 22) points out that "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human".

What has gone less remarked is that in the moment of encounter between a human and a non-human, there can be a simultaneous recognition, both of difference – the gap between human and nonhuman – and of commonality: the fact of being a being as such, which crosses that gap. Such a moment is therefore potentially one of profound wonder, accompanied by the kind of revelation that wonder can bring and flag up. In this case, it is the opportunity to learn a double truth: both that we are *human* beings, and that *non*-human beings are beings – that weird amalgam of both subjectivity/agency and objectivity/thingness – just as we are.

I suspect that the experience I have just described is at the heart of the idea and value both of kinship, which figures so large in many indigenous cultures, and of what, shorn of its earlier colonialist contempt, has come to be called animism. Kinship signifies neither absolute identity or unity nor absolute difference or otherness, but a relationship in which both those extremes mingle and are modified (*cf.* van Dooren and Chrulew, 2022; Curry, 2010). And as Graham Harvey (2006: xi) puts it, "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others". But this mode often has a place of honour in indigenous cultures that is signally missing in globalized 'Western' culture.

What of 'indigenous' itself, and its close cognate, 'native'? Of course, there is a history of colonialist and imperialist usages to acknowledge and reckon with. But we need not – indeed, must not – abandon these terms altogether. We need terms that signify being from a particular place and, to at least a significant degree, having been formed and informed by its natural-cultural character. They should capture being of a place in ways that are not reducible to one's original provenance but are inseparable from it (*cf.* Malpas, 2019; Casey, 2009). This move to a relatively inclusive sense of indigeneity then opens out into ways to become indigenous, as explored by Gary Snyder (1990) and Freya Mathews (2005, especially ch. 3).

In a fundamental sense, every being on Earth – including, obviously, every human being – is indigenous and a native. No matter how alienated, they are alienated *from* somewhere particular and its corresponding provenance, and estrangement is not itself a place you can be from or inhabit, but derivative: a pathology of place.

The remedy is implied in the disease. As a Crow elder told Gary Snyder (1990: 42), with remarkable generosity, considering the history: "You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough – even white people – the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them". It is in this pan-human sense that Seamus Heaney (1995) urged us to place our "love and trust in the good of the indigenous".

To imagine that any being can actually be rootless as a primary condition is to succumb to, and collaborate with, an old and destructive delusion: that it is possible, for members of a tiny elite, to be a self-creating, self-supporting spiritual being, anthropocentric and virtually always androcentric, who has transcended this world and risen into a pure heaven of light for eternity. This is, of course, the toxic fantasy current in Silicon Valley (Curry, 2020). As Sean Kane (1998: 255) says, "all the work that various peoples have done – all the work that peoples must do – to live with the Earth on the Earth's terms is pre-empted by the dream of transcendence".

In that work, "the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. [...] Once the power of the place is lost to memory, myth is uprooted; knowledge of the earth's processes becomes a different kind of knowledge, manipulated and applied by man" (Kane, 1990: 50). Place in this mythic sense – which is to say, insofar as modernity is a quest for rational mastery, non-modern – is essentially entwined with story. Place is storied, and story is emplaced (Basso, 1996; Curry, 2024). And this process is, we might say, naturally ecocentric. The storied voices cannot, without violence, be restricted to humans alone. Without violence, that is, to ourselves as well, as we start to forget, through loss of contact and conviviality with nonhuman others, both what it means to be a specifically human being, *and* only one being among a multitude of others.

Place is thus integral to the stories about ourselves and others – partly discovered and partly created – which we tell ourselves and others. And once again, this practice seems to be foregrounded in cultures which are more fully

or consciously indigenous, such as the Apache storytellers with whom Keith Basso studied. But in line with the Crow elder's advice, even white folk can learn from place and story and elders.

That doesn't necessarily entail any 'appropriation', the fear of which now exceeds the frequency and severity with which it actually occurs. A few years ago, a white Canadian university lecturer told me that if he publicly even discussed indigeneity, regardless of any conclusions he might have arrived at, he could well lose his job. Such a poisonous atmosphere does neither humans, nonhumans nor the land any favours. The 'solution' – censorship – is worse than the condition. And it is certainly possible to respect indigenous cultures without foreclosing the possibility of imaginative and empathic understandings which stretch across individual and collective boundaries. That relational and specifically animist dynamic – an encounter across gaps, attended by wonder – is essential not only for art but for the most important political virtue: not unity, but solidarity. Indeed, as I suggested above, it is at the heart of indigenous values and virtues; so suppressing it would be a vicious irony.

The fact is, we are decidedly not gods but Earthlings, and most of us urgently need to get better at it. As part of that process we need to open up the conversation from *being* indigenous, treating it as a property or attribute which emphasizes ownership/dispossession and inclusion/exclusion, to the possibilities for *becoming* indigenous. Here, most of us have a great deal to learn, and one of our primary teachers is surely the indigenous land guardianship and traditional ecological knowledge resulting from centuries of living in place, and with place, and the practices that nourish it (Unuigbe 2023).

Of course, indigenous or native people are as fallible, even corruptible, as the rest of us. The carrot-and-stick of capitalism – both temptations and fear – is pervasive. We also know, or should, that even practices of low-impact sustainable and regenerative agroecology are not a panacea; they cannot support eight billion people at anything like current levels of consumption, if at all. Nor can even the most solicitous human habitation obviate the need for some portion of the Earth to remain, or become again, wild refuges – that is, completely uninstrumentalized, even for purposes of recreation or spiritual welfare. (Our mere presence, no matter how discreet, can disturb and degrade the normal behaviour of other species: see Hambler and Canney [2013].)

But there are no single remedies to ecological overshoot, so it would be absurd to dismiss any that can help. For this reason, as we work our way towards (or back to) "fewer and less", in the words of Robert Jensen (2024), let us appreciate and celebrate indigenous peoples' long experience of sustainability, both natural and cultural, as a great gift to all of humanity, and thence to all the other natural beings who are at our mercy.

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American progress: US assault on conservation is turning back the clock

Hiss T

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Keywords: conservation movement; human supremacy; Indigenous culture
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I remember how taken I was – fascinated in a grisly way – by the late-19th century painting called *American progress* (Figure 1) that I ran across several years ago, once enormously popular and now largely obscure, at least before it got posted on X recently by the US Department of Homeland Security, racking up 16.8 million views in two weeks.



Figure 1. American progress, the 1872 painting by John Gast (public domain).

It's an unsettling image about the settling of the American West, and I'd thought I could rescue it from the dustbin of history as a 'before' shot for the book I was writing about the biodiversity crisis, the imminent loss of millions of other species – so many the English language has invented a word, *endling*, meaning the last of its kind.

In the painting, a young white woman, who is 'Progress' personified, appears barefoot, with long golden tresses, scantily clad in a diaphanous gown. She hovers over the American landscape, facing west and bobbing at about Thanksgiving-Day-Parade balloon height, while ahead of her a dazed Native American family, a herd of buffalos and a snarling bear are in steady retreat. Behind 'Progress', back on the East Coast, a brilliant sun is rising over a great waterfront city. Beneath her dangling toes are six men, all white, four miners and two farmers. She (implausibly) seems to have a coil of telegraph wire looped around her right elbow and, as she trails it, it gets neatly pinned to a long line of poles stretching back alongside new train tracks bearing a steam engine, with freight and passenger cars, puffing mightily and heading away from that dazzling city's shore.

Technology in service of mass eviction

On display: the idea that subtraction must precede addition, that the land can benefit only after the earlier occupants, people and creatures who in their ignorance had been misusing it, are no longer … in the picture?

As art, *American progress* is frankly not very good: both heroes and villains look ill at ease, and the pace of 'Progress' seems joyless, even grudging. But the picture's mediocrity is its integrity. There's no dissembling here; it so honestly proclaims its values that it still speaks clearly from the year it was painted by John Gast: 1872.

1872 – the same year Yellowstone became, by Act of the United States Congress, the world's first national park, "hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States" (US Congress, 1872: 32). I was privileged to know and work with EO Wilson, the great conservation biologist known as the 'father of biodiversity'. It was necessary to keep the other forms of life alive, Wilson said, because so many were a living structure keeping all of life alive, including us. Creatures that could thrive only if we made sure enough land was left unbuilt, and that process began with Yellowstone. Over the following 150 years, it was up to fifteen per cent globally set aside, but now, Wilson kept saying, it had to reach higher and faster, a 50 per cent goal, known as 'Half Earth', a phrase I coined. In 2022, 188 governments meeting in Montreal took the first step, pledging to protect 30 per cent of the Earth by 2030.

American progress gave us insight into how we'd gotten from zero to fifteen per cent by reminding us of the attitudes those first land protectors were up against. As Seneca, the Roman philosopher, who died in 65CE, said, "There will come a day when our descendants are astonished that we did not know such obvious facts" (2010: 7:3).

Even while the paint was drying on *American progress*, protection for biodiversity advanced while the picture's premise slowly eroded. Which was

why, this summer, my jaw literally dropped. I thought I was looking at a ghost. Only I wasn't. There she was, *American progress*, on the Department of Homeland Security X account under the headline: "A Heritage to be proud of, a Homeland worth defending" (see CNN, 2025).

As if the last 150 years never happened. As if, therefore, the true math of human advancement can reassert itself: the one where subtraction precedes addition. The current US administration is clearing the ground, poking the snarling bear, when it removes protections from millions of acres of public land, and fires thousands of people who have been looking after them.

What's happening in the United States is the jagged sharp edge of something also happening across the world. The savagery of the US assault on conservation is unprecedented and unrivaled; it differs in degree, not kind, from the ongoing ecocidal pushback.

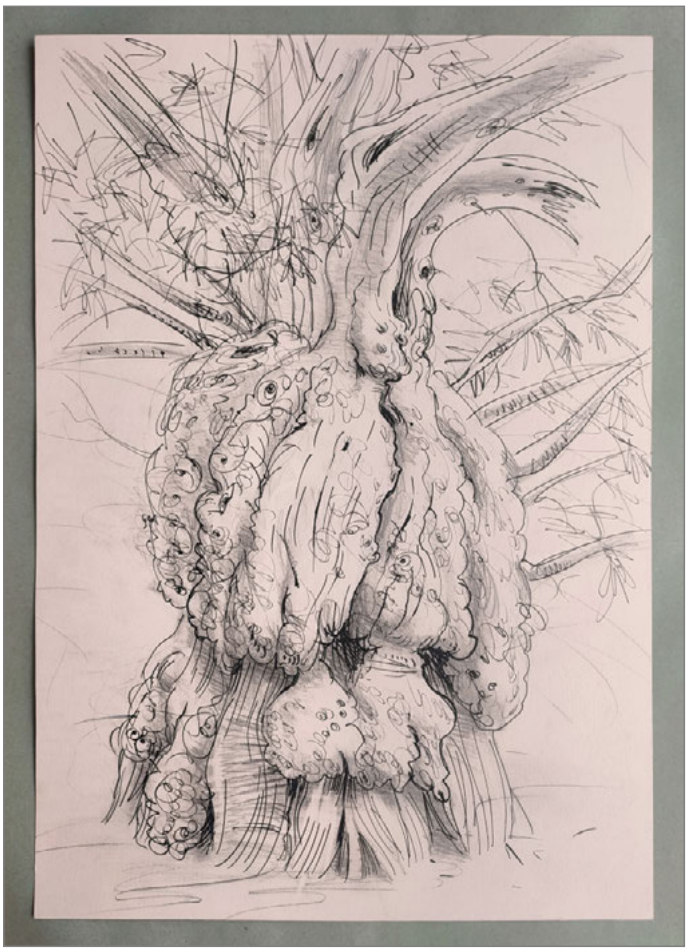
Still, the last 150 years *did* happen, and the urgency of what's ahead is already fused within our bones. Here in the United States – and globally – let's put *American progress* back where she belongs, as a 'before' picture, something our descendants will be astonished by as they, too, remember the pain that often precedes understanding. And now let's paint a better 'after'.

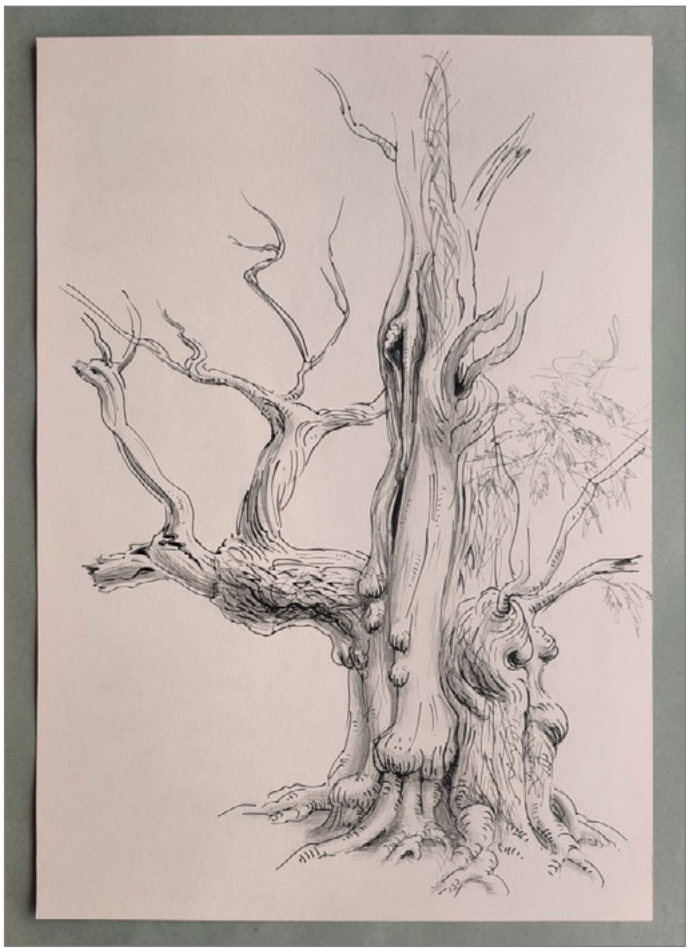
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Bigsweir Sweet Chestnut (series)

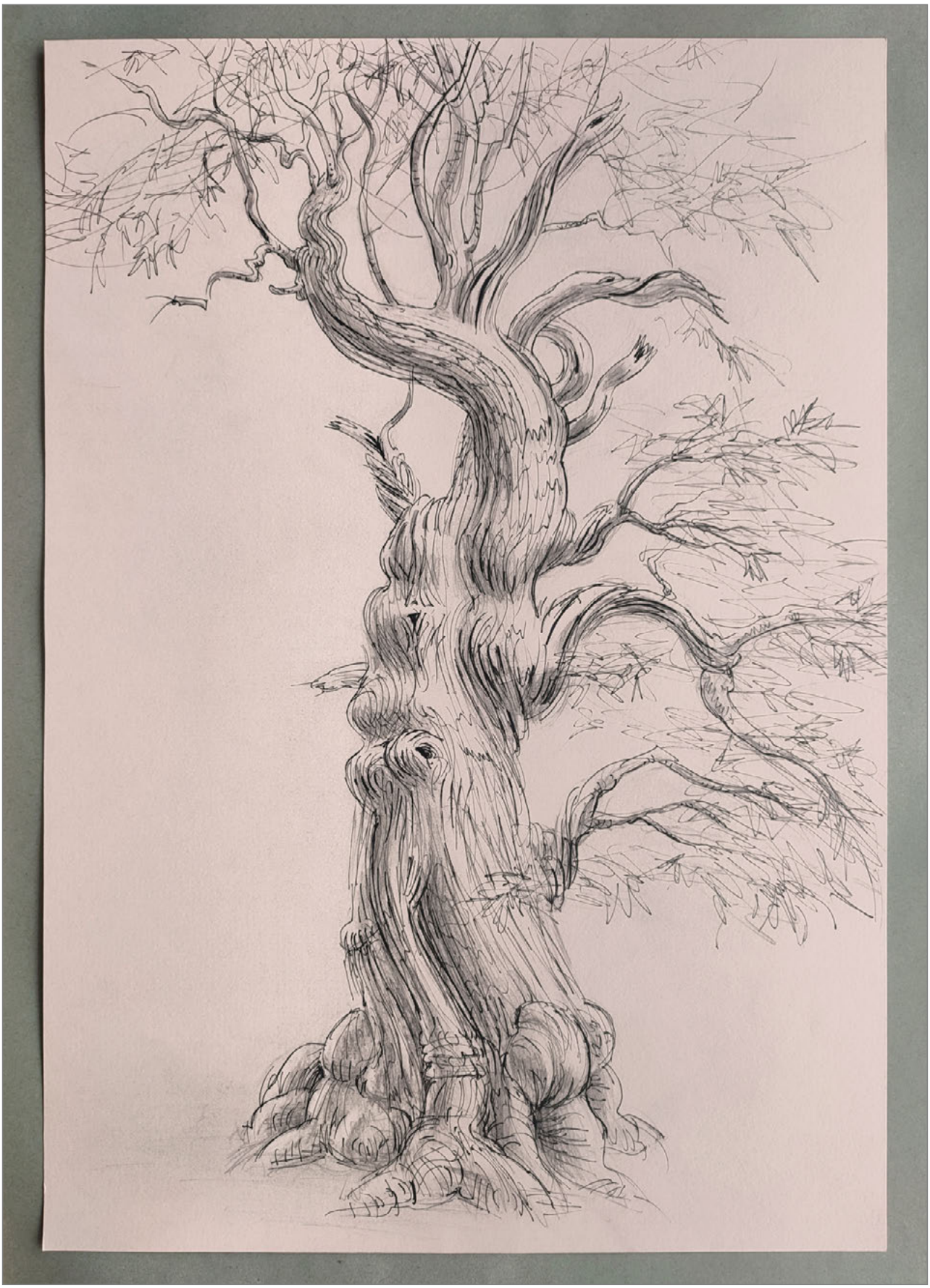
Andro Semeiko-Antelidze

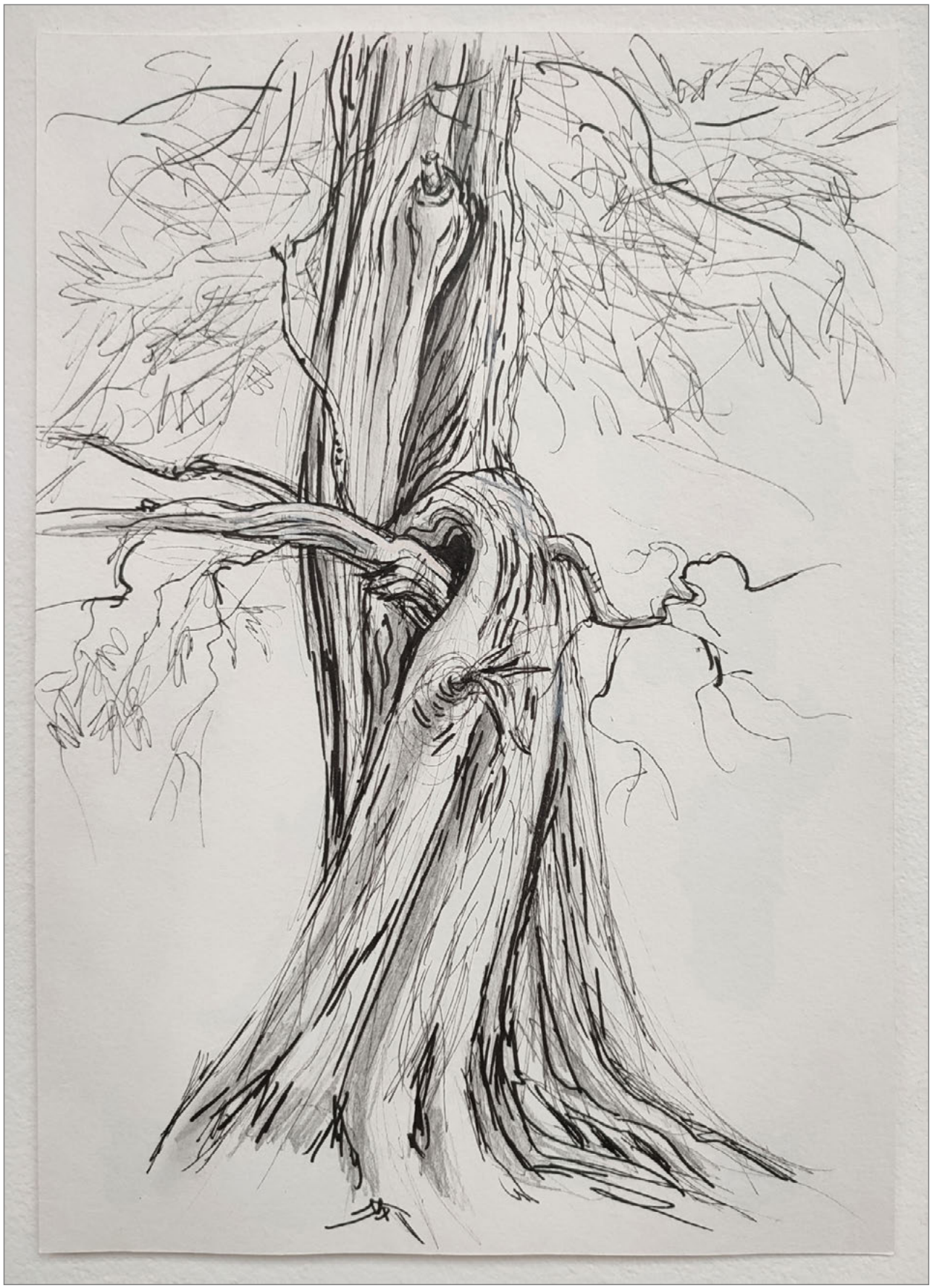
Ink and pencil on paper (various sizes; 2025).

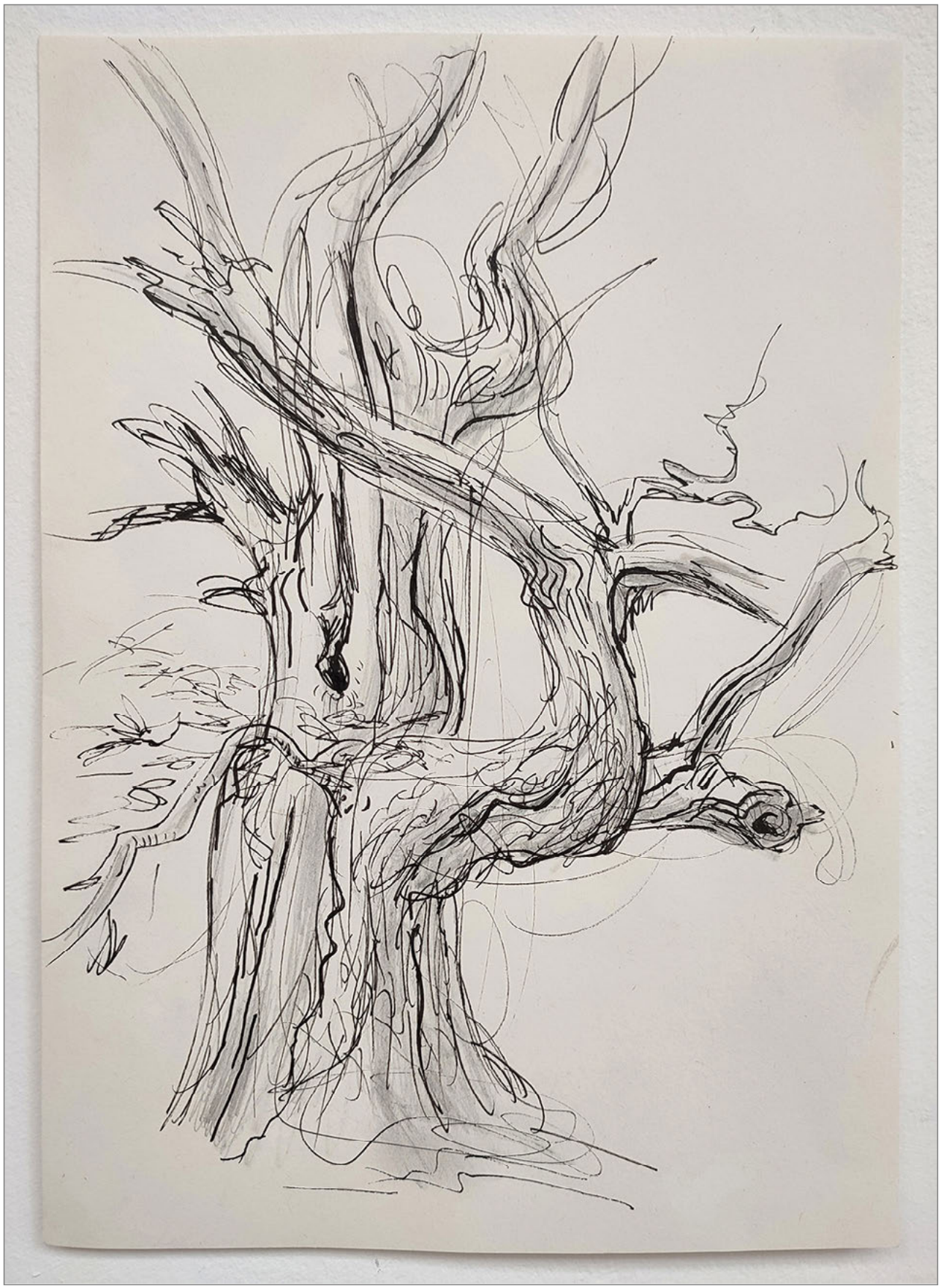
From the artist: "I felt drawn to wander among the ancient sweet chestnut and yew trees of the Forest of Dean; to sit beneath them, run my hands over their bark, breathe in the scent of wood, and watch the slow movement of their branches. As I sketched them, I found myself settling into their rhythm, slowing down; becoming, I hope, a more patient and kinder person. I can't help seeing faces and limbs in the twisting trunks and branches, hints of humans or fantastical forest creatures. At times I try to let those visions fall away and simply see the trees as they are. In doing so, they become even more extraordinary. For example, the way they communicate and send nutrients to support one another through underground mycelium networks is truly remarkable."

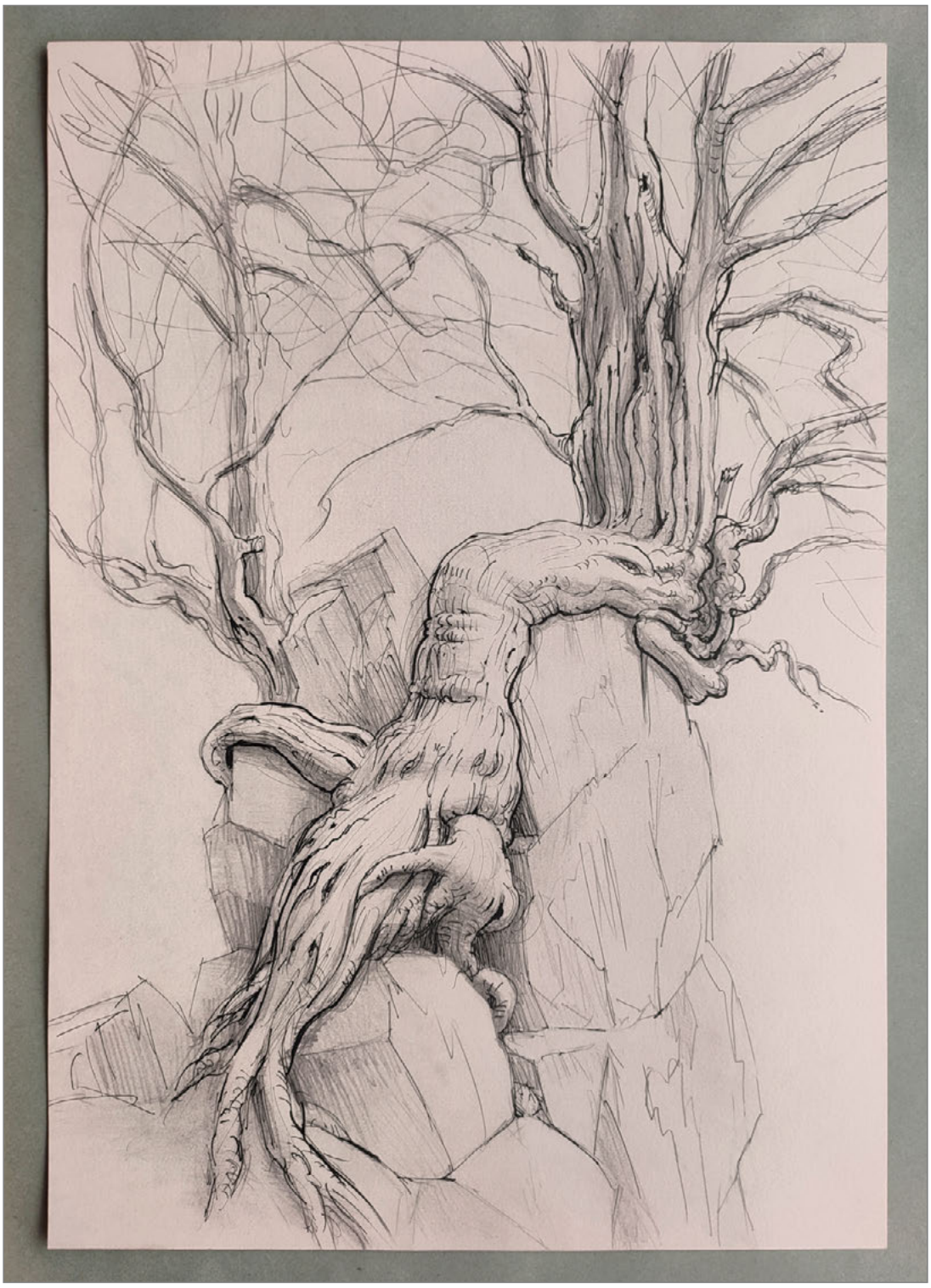
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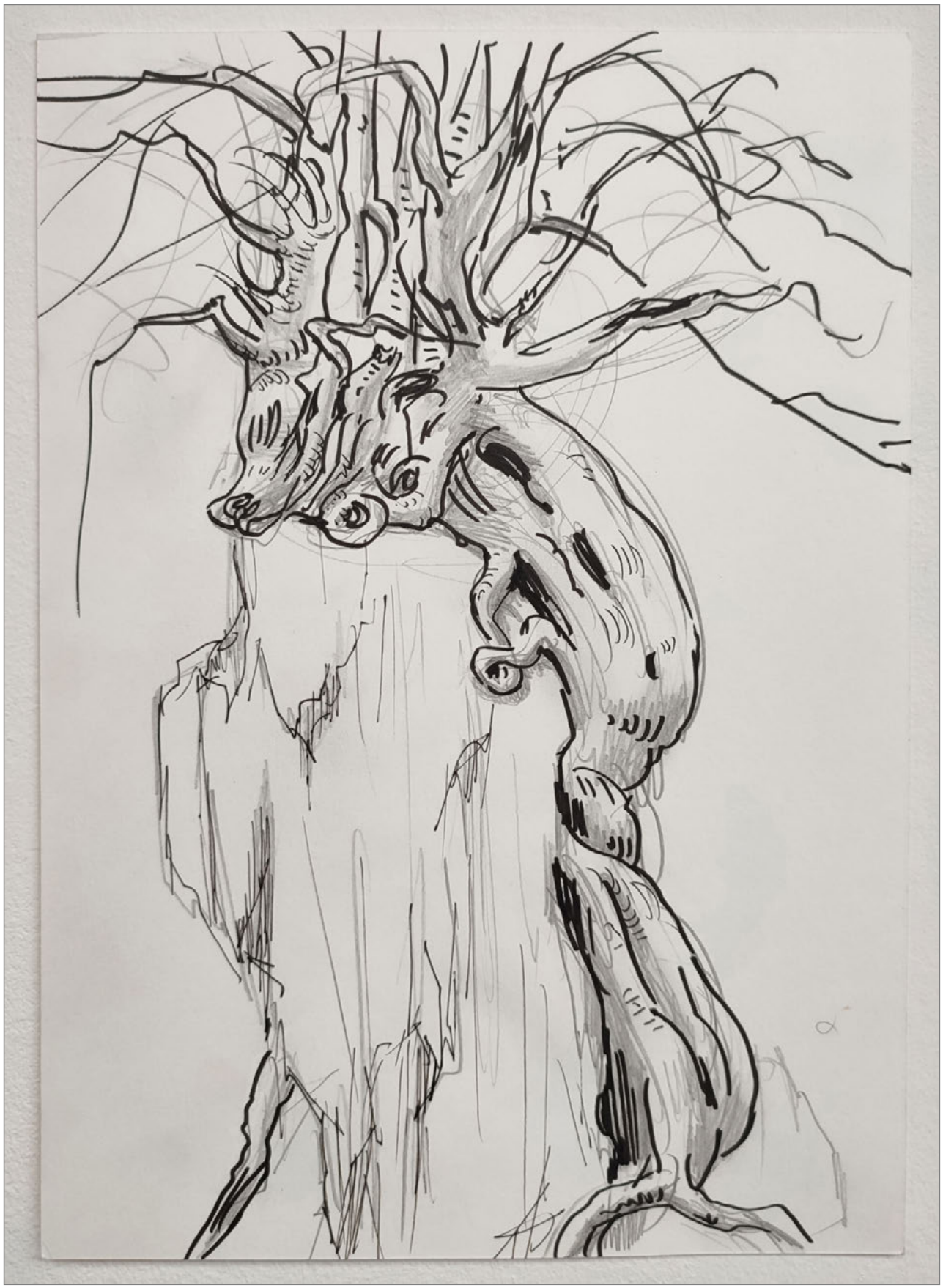




An Ancient Yew Tree from the Forest of Dean (series)
Andro Semeiko-Antelidze
Ink and pencil on paper (various sizes; 2025).

Higher-quality versions of artwork from this issue: https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/artworks.php?v=9&n=1





The elusive feeling of the real

Freya Mathews

Freya is an ecophilosopher, Emeritus Professor of Environmental Philosophy at La Trobe University and Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The author of numerous books and articles, her core work has been in the area of ecological metaphysics. She also co-manages a private conservation reserve in northern Victoria.

The kinds of social consciousness intended by the term 'Indigenous', as it is widely understood today, traditionally arise from collective forms of livelihood, or economic *praxis*, based on deeply synergic modes of collaboration with local ecosystems. This suggests that any attempt to attain a 're-Indigenized' outlook in present-day industrialized mass societies would require a wholesale overhaul of modern economies along such eco-synergistic lines. If this is the case, it seems that Indigenous-type consciousness must remain inaccessible to modern individuals for the foreseeable future. I argue here however that there may also exist purely personal possibilities of individual collaboration with local landscapes that could offer, for those who chose to pursue them, first-hand glimpses into aspects of Indigenous cosmology and consciousness. Based on my own experience, I describe one such practice.

Keywords: ecological living; Indigenous culture; values; worldviews
Citation: Mathews F (2026) The elusive feeling of the real. *The Ecological Citizen* **9**(1): 30–7.

The trope of 'Indigeneity' arguably signifies the global counter-culture of our time. It is understood to connote all that is counter to the unbounded, expansionist, all-devouring, insatiable ethos of modernity. Where the current international economy has ransacked the planet, treating every aspect of planetary metabolism as mere material resource to be shovelled into the maw of its own industrial mega-shredder, 'Indigenous' societies are understood to be bounded, wedded to place, embedded in intricate ecological lineages of ancestry and posterity. They are perceived as answerable – culturally, cognitively and materially – for the ongoing renewal of those lineages. Where moderns act as outlaws, pirates, relative to the biosphere, Indigenous people are pictured as at home in the world, seated comfortably on the ground around campfires glowing at the core of a living cosmos.

However, as the actual specifics of culture and consciousness in the kinds of society typically designated as Indigenous today vary widely, these societies may or may not match this trope to any significant degree. But where they do match it, this is presumably because their basic economic praxis – the basic

way in which they produce or arrange their everyday livelihood – requires intimate collaboration with local ecologies. Such collaboration in turn requires close attunement to and understanding of local geo/hydro/biological dynamics. While such societies used to be described by anthropologists as 'hunter gatherer', they are now understood in more eco-synergic terms. What I mean by this is that their praxis includes active interventions in local ecosystems – via the use of fire, for instance – to ensure ongoing supplies of the resources they need, but that the interventions are carefully calibrated to preserve the integrity of those systems. The daily experience of contributing in this enmeshed way to local ecological renewal imprints and shapes the community's understanding of reality – their cosmological outlook.

To take this kind of broadly *historical materialist* view of the origins of social consciousness implies that if a society wishes to recover, in some degree, the kind of deeply ecological consciousness captured by the trope of Indigeneity, it cannot do so simply by fiat. We cannot choose our worldviews merely to suit our intellectual tastes. Worldviews, at least to the extent they find consistent expression in the subconscious structure of social motivation, arise from the ways in which people, as embodied agents, actually experience themselves in relation to the world – the ways in which they habitually interact with it.

From this perspective then, contemporary mass societies could not be expected to re-discover anything approximating to an 'Indigenous' outlook without undergoing a re-organization of economic praxis to emulate the eco-synergic praxis of Indigenous societies. While it is self-evident that eight billion humans on a planet that is already undergoing biosphere collapse could not revert to the original eco-synergies of our Paleolithic ancestors, reorganization of the economy along *bioregional* (Sale, 1983; Crist, 2020) and *regenerative* (Wahl, 2016) lines might help humanity transition towards new, up-scaled versions of eco-synergy. The wholesale implementation of 'nature-based solutions' to human problems and praxis is another way in which the 're-Indigenization' of present-day economies might be attempted (Mathews, 2023). These are promising starting-points for large-scale reform. But as approaches that tackle the economy directly, they might seem beyond the practical horizons of individuals longing to re-Indigenize their own consciousness but not yet in a position to extricate their livelihoods from the tentacles of global capitalism.

Are there then other practices that might be available to such individuals? While I have suggested here and argued at length elsewhere that historical materialism is probably correct in its assumption that it is economic *praxes* that most fundamentally shape a society's worldview (Mathews, 2023), there may be other 'material' practices that can deeply affect individuals' sense of identity and purpose, practices that are not strictly speaking economic.

Caring for Country as a personal pathway towards a more Indigenized consciousness

In this essay I would like to offer one such practice, drawn from my own experience (*cf.* Mathews, 2020). It might be described prosaically as 'private

conservation', but it is much more than this – more like a lifetime commitment to minister ecologically to a chosen place. I offer this example because it has opened for me a window into a new mode of being-in-the-world. Undertaken widely, it might help to motivate larger-scale transformations of economic praxis.

In my own case, this practice began sixteen years ago when I was lucky enough to become keeper of a 350 acre land-holding on the shoulder of a granite mount in northern Victoria, Australia. Though plenty of remnant native vegetation existed on the estate, the landscape had also suffered major degradation – weeds and destructive feral animals abounded; large-scale clearing, cropping and sheep grazing had occurred; and climate change was shifting the entire vegetation profile towards aridity, with consequent die-back of bushland and parched dragon-summers spitting out lethal wildfires.

My self-appointed task was to prompt the land to reverse this degradation and recover its ecological integrity. To accomplish this, I had to acquaint myself with the terrain in all its intricate particularity. This was a gradual, on-the-ground process, especially in my case as, after decades of philosophizing, I had little aptitude for remembering the names and calling cards of the numerous species of plants and animals that populated the place. But the mount itself patiently teaches its would-be custodians; gradually one does begin to recognize and attach names to plants and animals and even eventually to notice patterns amongst them.

Importantly however, this engaged way of knowing is not a matter merely of detached observation, in the scientific or even natural history mode. One is a player rather than a by-stander in this scenario, intentionally culling destructive ferals, such as rabbits, foxes and cats, while introducing new opportunities, such as permanent water sources, for indigenous wildlife. As an active member of one's biotic neighbourhood, on all fours, so to speak, with other ecological agents, one encounters them in unexpected ways – as, for instance, finding a brushtail possum instead of a cat in the feral cat trap or a kangaroo joey self-incarcerated on the inside of a tree-planting exclosure.

Even one's most benign interventions are fraught with danger for unintended wild others: deadly cross-contamination with parasites can, for example, occur as a result of one's provision of water sources to help wildlife through the scorching summers. Moreover, living amongst wild others, off the grid in a relatively remote setting, can pose dangers to oneself: one can oneself become a victim of gut-wrenching parasites as flocks of swallows, endearingly nesting under one's veranda and perching on one's roof, defecate into one's tank water; as redback spiders make themselves at home inside a folded spare mattress; as terrifying storms lay blazing siege to one's house; as bushfires cast their spectre over the entire summer; as gas bottles spring leaks and solar batteries bubble dry in the improvised infrastructure of the house; and as shooters maraud on the rural blind side of the law.

Amidst these perils, one also witnesses the savagery inherent in Earth communities themselves. One's joy at discovering two snow-white wedgetail eagle chicks in a large stick fortress on the upper ridge, for example, is

dampened when one learns that, amongst wedgetail eagles, one of the chicks – the stronger one – is destined to kill its nest-mate before the latter fledges. One notices then that one of the chicks up on the ridge is indeed smaller than the other and that it crouches at the edge of the nest while the larger chick presides in a lordly pose at the centre. Or one goes to investigate something dropped by a large raptor in a scuffle with another bird, only to find, huddled in the long grass, a young silky rabbit, eyes incandescent with agony and disbelief, its nose and half its snout freshly ripped off by the hawk. This is not a movie, a nature documentary, and one has to act – one has to find a way to kill this poor little creature with one's own hands as quickly as possible, however personally aghast one might feel at such a prospect. In the train of such encounters, one reflects that extreme and grotesque suffering is in fact routine in the natural world; one is utterly surrounded by it every day in one's seemingly cheery little haven, but it is overlooked because generally it is hidden.

Experience of this kind immunizes one against sentimentalism with respect to nature – against any temptation to see nature merely as the good and innocent victim of human brutality and to see eco-activists as nature's saviours. Romanticism of this kind is, one realizes, as much an expression of the human–nature dualism that defines the mind-set of modernity as is the dominator attitude: nature as victim is a variant of nature as passive object while the human subject as saviour is a variant of it as locus of power and agency.

So, though pierced by compassion, one has to try to pull back from right and wrong, from taking nature's 'side', because there are so many 'sides' within nature, and one cannot be on all of them at once. One cannot be on the young rabbit's side without being against the hawk; one cannot be on the side of *this* suffering little rabbit while also dealing out death-by-fumigation to all its relatives on the estate in order to assure regeneration of vegetation for the rest of the faunal community. Nor is one any longer the omnipotent human, shielded within the capsule of the city, looking out safely at a 'threatened' countryside, a countryside rendered appearance only through the lens of one's urban amenities. One has also to be on one's own 'side' now, ringed as one is with hazards. Compassion may on occasion have to give way to self-defence as one struggles in a field of competing, endangered and endangering interests.

Relinquishing the omnipotence of the 'theoretic' perspective

The task in this connection is, I think, to shift from the presuppositional mode, with its advance decisions on matters of morals and metaphysics, to a more *strategic* mode, experiencing oneself in push-and-pull relations with the living presences that populate one's local ecological environs. One tunes into the particularity of these presences, taking one's cues from their signals rather than from abstract preconceptions regarding what to expect. In tuning in to them however, experiencing the push-and-pull of their resistance, one is immediately aware of their independent subjectivity, their active will-to-continue-in-existence, to repel incursions into their integrity; one becomes, in a word, aware of their *conativity*. One consequently registers a kind of all-in-

this-together affinity of purpose with them. Such a felt affinity makes *theoretic* presuppositions regarding their moral and metaphysical significance superfluous. One accommodates other beings – to the extent that doing so is consistent with one's own safety – because one's strategic involvement with them results in a visceral sense of fellow feeling and solidarity with them.

If one can step out of the *theoretic* mind-set in this way, and re-immerse oneself strategically, agentically, as co-contributor to a common ecological purpose, a curious thing happens. As one moves cognitively into this realm of intricate particularity, the landscape begins to *open*. A new depth dimension is revealed. Where before, the natural landscape may have seemed two-dimensional, mere appearance, now it is multi-dimensional. What was a screen of background trees, for instance, now becomes a differentiated, intricately dimensional space of yellowbox, Deane's wattle, lightwood, wallowa, weeping pittosporum and cherry ballart, with an equally differentiated under-layer of specific shrubs and herbs, all full of evidence of bird and invertebrate activity and hiding, underfoot, fungal signals and tell-tale marks of animals. One also begins not only to see, but to hear: what was generic 'birdsong' now resolves into expressions of specific birds – diamond firetails, rainbow bee-eaters, choughs – in specific communicative situations.

Each of the individually cognized plants and animals comprising this dimensional labyrinth is moreover rich in personal and narrative associations arising from one's own shared history with the community. One has, it seems, entered a new kind of space, a new form of '-cosm' that is neither macro- nor micro- nor topographic at all but a honeycomb of innerness and outerness, of signature and meaning. This is moreover a thick social milieu, in which, as in a family, a thousand things tap one on the shoulder, calling for one's attention and response. The world as mere appearance, as specular surface, has opened up and *come alive* as a result of one's ecological engagement and collaboration. One has entered 'Country', in the Aboriginal sense: "Country is living, responsive and caring, and [the word] is capitalised to denote an Indigenous understanding of one's place, which connects people, socio-economic systems, language, spirit and Nature through interrelationship" (Wooltorton *et al.*, 2020).

Of course, theoretic perspectives such as science and even metaphysics need not be entirely excluded from this exercise. One might borrow scientific nomenclature, plumb the scientific literature for answers to everyday questions, such as how to identify a mysterious crustacean that has turned up in the wildlife trough or how to propagate quandong seeds. Science can be a useful tool for one's project – it can contribute to the clusters of meaning that gradually accrete around particulars. Metaphysical terms – such as *panpsychism* or *animism*, for example – might also come in handy for designating the hidden dimensions of reality revealed by the strategic perspective. But theory *per se*, with its subject-object divide, no longer structures the epistemic space one now inhabits.

I have explained the contrast between these two ways of knowing – the theoretic (*theoria*) and the strategic (*strategia*) – at length elsewhere (see

Mathews, 2023). Through the lens of theory, the world is reduced to the passive plane of abstraction, representation: in the 'theatre' of the knower's intellect, it figures as mere map, model or schema. Stripped of its independent reality, the power of this world to push back against the knower or return the knower's gaze is lost. As a primary way of apprehending the world, *theoria* is thus, according to this account, the root of the dualism that solipsizes the subject and ontologically disenfranchises the object, eventually manifesting as the malignant form of human self-absorption that characterizes the condition of modernity.

Notice however that it is not for nothing that the term, *strategia*, as alternative to *theoria*, is somewhat military in connotation. When one bursts the bubble of dualism and relinquishes the omnipotent subject position, one becomes acutely vulnerable to the myriad forces at play in the field of immersion. One has accordingly to be ready to assume a fighting stance. I am reminded here of a remark by David Mowaljarlai, revered Senior Lawman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Waking up one morning while travelling through Country with a non-Indigenous companion, he was musing on what the day would bring. At first he spoke with deep affection about being drawn to things, how "when you touch them, all things talk to you, give you their story [...] You understand that your mind has been opened to all those things because you are seeing them; because your presence and their presence meet together and you recognise each other" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 1993: 53– 4). He describes how when things draw you towards them, you become part of the flow of morning, where this gives you life and strength. But then he goes on to say of the new day that "it faces you like a murderer" (p. 56). When I first read this passage, I was jolted and puzzled. Mowaljarlai was a traditional man of high degree, totally at home on the land, inhabiting it as he inhabited his own skin. Why, in the intimacy of this relationship, would he feel like a combatant? He tried to explain. The new day brings fear. "You can have an accident, have a snakebite or fall over a cliff." But fear makes you alert. "Without fear you've got nothing in you to become a person, you never learn anything, you have no awareness" (p. 56).

There is nothing sentimental about this relationship with Country. While all things might be talking to you, "giving you their story", you are still responsible for your own safety. Outside the carapace of technology that *theoria*, with its attendant legions of designers and engineers, assembles around the subject to actualize its omnipotence, one is indeed on all fours with a world which, for all one's intimacy with it, remains dangerous. At the mercy of the manifold forces and elemental energies at play in one's environs, one needs vigilance, alertness, acuity. Paternalist protectiveness towards the natural world might accordingly be a premature attitude if we have not yet experienced our vulnerability in face of it. Yet, as Mowaljarlai points out, it is the experience of such vulnerability that invigorates our conativity, forcing us fully to inhabit our intrinsic powers, our powers of self-efficacy.

A defender of modernity, one who has never passed through the outer appearances into the lively innerness of Country nor, hence, experienced this

invigoration, might ask *why* one should choose to forego the fortifications, the defences, that dualism affords in favour of a modality that places one so at risk? Yes, dualism has undeniably served as a vehicle for political and environmental domination in the course of its history, but it has also built this now planet-wide fortress shielding humans from the perils that haunted our ancestors. And yes, this same mind-set has produced a state of Earth Systems Collapse that may itself place humanity in jeopardy in the longer run (Monbiot, 2023). But couldn't we marshal the power of *theoria* to protect ourselves from this eventuality? Perhaps science can devise means of replacing the natural biosphere altogether with artificial systems capable of serving human interests with equal functionality? Should we forfeit such a possibility of total control and return to a pre-scientific state of vulnerability simply out of moral respect for other species?

My own answer to this question would of course be an emphatic *yes*, but as Arne Næss pointed out long ago, altruism is not a strong motivator of human behaviour (Næss, 1988). If modern civilization were asked to switch from the theoretic to the strategic mode merely in deference to the moral rights of other species, it would be – has already plainly proved to be – unlikely to comply. But the strategic attitude entrains powerful rewards of its own.

As a way of knowing that situates us as insider, a participant in a shared space of purposive activity, rather than as external and analytical observer and mapper, *strategia* dissolves the old appearance/reality distinction that is the concomitant of the theoretic perspective. It lands us squarely into the thick of reality itself, vouchsafing us direct *contact with the real*.

Our present need for contact with the real cannot be overstated. In the West our historical habituation to the appearance/reality distinction has primed us to defer utterly to literal screens, the electronic screens of digital technology, since the 'screen' of appearance is all that, as inheritors of the theoretic tradition, we have ever known. This transformation of appearance, as our primary datum, into the verily virtual, represents the apotheosis of dualism and, as corollary, the final loss of our sense of the real. But loss of our sense of the realness of things entails loss of any sense of our own reality. When our primary experience, in a theoretically and technologically mediated milieu, is no longer of things pushing back against us, we no longer experience in any corporeal way our own impact upon them. Imposing our will on the merely phantasmal elicits no sense of self-efficacy, no sense of our own potency as a centre and source of self-existence – let alone, as Spinoza taught, any sense of joy in existence.

Dualism isolates the theorizing subject, solipsizes it, removes its vital awareness of contact with reality. The illusory feeling of omnipotence that it confers is countered by a deeper, inarticulate feeling of impotence. The strategic way, by contrast, is a way of potentiation – not the 'potentiation' of mediated domination and co-optation, as per the theoretic approach, but the potentiation that accrues from repossessing the visceral sense of one's own efficacy and hence reality. There is no greater impotence, after all, than the impotence of the unreal.

For all the triumphal grandiosity, posturing and exclusive self-referencing of modernity then, there is, beneath the sound and fury, a sadness, emptiness, stultification and loneliness that is arguably hollowing out our civilization and leading inexorably to end-times violence as a final attempt to rip open the veil, the screen, of appearance and reach through to the perennially elusive real.

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Wilderness, Indigenous land zones and regionality in North American forests

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The concept and conservation approach of wilderness in the United States has been criticized as Eurocentric, as incompatible with Indigenous land use and as ignoring Native people's longstanding presence on the North American landscape. In opposition to this view, this paper argues that many Indigenous societies recognized parts of the landscape as analogous to wilderness – dwelling on, and limiting disturbance practices to, a minor portion of their homelands, primarily living spaces. For instance, the Nimiipuu in the Rocky Mountains and Algonquian nations of the Northeast left the uplands and mountains uninhabited, restricting activities there to ceremonial, spiritual, or seasonal hunting and gathering purposes. Indigenous terms such as titoqa-nót wétes ('people-less land') and táuohkômuk ('wilderness') align closely with the 1964 Wilderness Act's definition of wilderness as lands "untrammeled by man" and "where man is a visitor who does not remain". Studies on the impacts of northeastern Indigenous land use on vegetation corroborate these land use restrictions, revealing local rather than widespread regional impacts. Taken together, Indigenous classifications and empirical evidence suggest that great swaths of upland forested areas of Turtle Island (North America) grew and self-organized with minimal human impact before European colonization.

Keywords: Indigenous culture; wildlands

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Euro-American considerations of the history of the term and concept of *wilderness* in North America almost invariably begin with the arrival of Europeans. Forged in the depths of Judeo-Christian values and thought, the idea of wilderness – or so the conventional history has it – was brought to North America and imposed upon Indigenous peoples who did not recognize a dichotomous divide between 'the uninhabited' and 'the civilized' (*e.g.* Cronon,

1996; Callicott, 2000; Nash, 2001). This claim effectively bundles the diverse lifeways of more than five hundred Native nations into a single 'Native' perspective, typically based on a single Indigenous source – Chief Standing Bear of the Lakota (1868–1939): "Only to the white man was nature a wilderness". The notion that wilderness is an inherently ethno/Euro-centric idea has become axiomatic in United States conservation discourse and is closely related to a second major critique of wilderness conservation: that the concept of land uninhabited and undisturbed by people is fundamentally flawed because it ignores Native people's longstanding presence on and management of the land (Deneven, 1992; Cronon, 1996; Mann, 2005).

Wilderness *is* a loaded term. Viewed by English colonists as an enemy to civilization, uninhabited wilderness often inspired a conquering mindset towards nature and Indigenous peoples in America (Nash, 2001). Later, US government agencies restricted or excluded Indigenous peoples from practicing longstanding traditional lifeways such as hunting, gathering and ceremonies in National parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone (Spence, 1999).

However, we argue that the concept and conservation approach labeled 'wilderness' – when stripped of its cultural and political connotations and interpreted in its denotative sense – is compatible with Indigenous lifeways and principles of caring for Our Mother, treading lightly, and caring for the coming generations – values central to Northeastern Algonquians and many others. We further argue that the above criticisms of wilderness treat Indigenous people and their lands as monolithic and therefore fail to acknowledge the diversity of nations, lifeways and distinct land classifications practiced by Native Americans (Cachat-Schilling, 2018). In doing so, these criticisms have overlooked Indigenous words analogous to 'wilderness' and Indigenous traditions analogous to contemporary wilderness management. They have also neglected the predominantly low population densities of Indigenous societies and localized character of traditional lifeways that left many elevated landscapes unmarked by habitation and primarily shaped by natural processes and dynamics (Vale, 1998; Cachat-Schilling, 2018; Faison, 2024).

The meaning of wilderness

Wilderness is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as land uninhabited, uncultivated, and otherwise undisturbed by human activity that is free to self-organize. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word's first known usage is in the 13th century, with its etymology being the Middle English *wildern* ('wild or uncultivated'), which in turn derives from the Old English *wild-dēoren* (lit. 'wild deer'). Wilderness as a formal conservation strategy arrived much later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is defined in the 1964 US Wilderness Act as follows:

> *A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who*

> *does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable [...] (US Congress, 1964).*

The key points across both the term's etymology and its use in US legislation, is that wilderness is *uninhabited* – though not devoid of people who may visit regularly but stay only temporarily – and therefore *largely undisturbed and undirected by humans.*

As noted above, it has been argued that this concept of wilderness is a Euro-centric construction, and not shared by other cultures, most notably Indigenous Americans (Callicott, 2000; Nash 2001; Fletcher *et al.*, 2021). However, centuries before the first usage of the English term – and more than 1,000 years before the passing of the Wilderness Act – the classical Maya (250–900CE) recognized a sharp divide between settled lands and outer, uninhabited forestlands (Taube, 2003). The Maya were not unique in this regard. In what follows, we present several examples of Indigenous nations from the western and eastern regions of today's United States that recognized specific land use designations, including a distinction between wildlands and uninhabited lands. Context is key here, where locale, ethnicity and time period are essential factors for obtaining an accurate understanding of land stewardship history.

Nimiipuu and the people-less land

In the Rocky Mountains of present-day Idaho and neighboring lands, the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) were primarily a hunter-gatherer people who tended certain wild plant species (Hunn and Selam, 1990). The Nimiipuu settled in low elevation valleys along major rivers, and, pragmatically, avoided settling in the higher elevations of the Bitterroot Mountains (Spezio, 2000). Deep snow (up to fifteen metres from mid-autumn to early summer) and extreme and unpredictable weather made these mountains impractical to use, let alone settle in, for three seasons of the year (Spezio, 2000). The Nimiipuu gathered and stewarded many plants including, but not limited to, quamash (*Camassia quamash*), kouse (*Lomatium* spp.), yampa (*Perideridia gairdneri* and *P. bolanderi*), and bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*) in the low-to-mid elevations of the mountains (National Park Service, 2019). However, the Nimiipuu apparently spent so little time in the upper elevations that they referred to these areas as *the people-less land*, or titoqa-nót wétes (Spezio, 2000).

William Clark, in journal entries from 16–17 June 1806 during the Lewis and Clark expedition's return trip over the Bitterroots, speaks to why these mountains were titoqa-nót wétes:

> *we set out [...] through a thick wood much obstructed with fallen timber, and intersepted [*sic*] by many steep ravines and high hills [...] we ascended about 3 miles when we found ourselves invelloped [*sic*] in snow from 12 to 15 feet deep*

> *even on the south sides of the hills with the fairest exposure to the sun; here was winter with all its rigors; the air was cold, my hands and feet were benumbed. (DeVoto, 1953)*

It was not until late June that the high elevations became usable, and by mid-August the highest elevation began to get snow again (Spezio, 2000). The Nimiipuu did not view the Bitterroots as distinct from their existence in the same sense that the English Pilgrims might have; after all, these lands were part of the homeland that they used for hunting, gathering and traveling. Yet, they nonetheless distinguished the mountains as a separate land use type from the lands that they regularly settled and occupied as part of their seasonal movements.

The Nimiipuu did view the Bitterroots as an important landscape in which to enter into adulthood. Like many other nations (*e.g.* Cree, Missouri, Peoria, Miami and Naskapi) that carried out various ceremonies in forested uplands (Adams, 1905), Nimiipuu adults sent their adolescent children into these mountains alone as part of a week-long rite of passage ritual or wéyekin. An absence of people and any sign of their daily activities were integral to the wéyekin (Spezio, 2000).

Viewed through a coarse-grained, regional lens, the Bitterroot Mountain region could be considered 'inhabited' or 'settled' by the Nimiipuu, but viewed through a more appropriately finer-grained lens, the high elevations were uninhabited (*i.e.* not built upon with long houses and lodges) and impacted minimally by short stays over the year. In fact, the 1964 Wilderness Act could be describing the very land designations of the Nimiipuu: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain". Today, two of the largest Federal wilderness areas overlap significantly with the titoqa-nót wétes of the Nimiipuu: the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

Northeastern Algonquian land zones and designations

In the densely forested and topographically diverse Northeastern temperate region (today's Northeastern United States), relatively fertile, resource rich and mild river valleys and coastal lowlands are juxtaposed with less fertile and more climatically and topographically rugged uplands (US Geological Survey, 1998). In this landscape, the Algonquian nations primarily practiced a semi-sedentary lifestyle of hunting and gathering mixed with limited horticulture. It was also a landscape in which discrete land use zones were employed.

In the dialects of Massachusetts, kuttinakísh (planting lands) and otanak (village sites) lay wholly near the floodplains of large rivers and creeks, and by ponds. The vast uplands and ridges formed the táuohkômuk – a term deriving from *taueu-ohke*, literally 'open land', 'not cultivated land' or 'deserted place', and commonly translated as 'wilderness' (Trumbull, 1903). *Taueu* indicates communal status, 'open' as opposed to 'allotted or inhabited' which refers to

cultivated and village lands (kuttinakísh and otanak). In the táuohkômuk, hunting, collecting, and ceremonial practices with ritual stone complexes occurred.

People stayed overnight in the táuohkômuk at camps and rockshelters – just as people camp temporarily in wilderness areas today – but stays were short and impacts were limited (Burns and Raber, 2010). Animals were harvested, plants were gathered, stones were moved, and dead wood was collected for campfires. However, tree girdling, cutting, and burning were mostly limited to clearings in the kuttinakísh and otanak in the river valleys. Gathering houses or seasonal camps (mauwikenk and mukkkineut) at lower elevations in the foothills – a transitional zone between táuohkômuk and otanak – were used for longer periods of time and persistently year to year, with somewhat greater impact. Algonquian land zones were not casually applied. There were a range of restrictions on activities within those zones where all actions were circumscribed by ritual mandates and prohibitions. In the táuohkômuk, there was a code of 'treading lightly', and thus the footprint of people is, by intention, hard to find in these areas.

In the deeds for Mt Toby (called Kunn'kwaciw or 'Highest Mountain') in today's Sunderland Massachusetts, an Algonquian leader, Mishalisk, allowed colonists the free use of kuttinakísh in the lowlands, but placed restrictions on the sacred mountain, forbidding pigs, cows and the building of houses (Cachat-Schilling, 2018), which massif covers most of the current town lands. This place was never clear cut in the subsequent centuries, and today 170 acres of the high elevations of Mount Toby are a wildland in which no harvesting or management takes place (Foster *et al.*, 2023), while much of the rest is in conservation. The entire massif has not a single house above its feet to this day. It is also the most biodiverse landmass in Massachusetts (Cachat-Schilling, 2018).

The archaeology in táuohkômuk reflects these traditional restrictions. Artefacts are found almost entirely at rockshelters and at camp spots on ridges. These sites generally contain a few hearths, debitage from toolmaking, some points, some animal bones and little else. They almost uniformly lack any postholes for wigwams, plant processing materials, and other signs of long-term stays or presence of full communities. Middens – considered a true sign of extended residency – are entirely absent at high relative elevation across the Northeast and much of Turtle Island. What people use most ends up at their homes in their hearths. At otanak (villages) of Northeast Algonquians from Early Archaic to Late Woodland, flotation analyses of hearth materials show use of diverse plant materials – 60 or more species in a single location – while most of the valued species require either mature forest or wetland habitat (Wiegand, 1978; Lindner, 1998; Lavin and Banks, 2010). Algonquians thus had strong motivation to preserve mature forests. About three-quarters of more than 130 medicine and cultural plants in author Cachat-Schilling's personal reservoir require mature forest or shallow wetlands for habitat.

Like those of the Nimiipuu and many other nations, Lenape adolescents were taken into the forest to remote places for spiritual preparation where they

isolated in bark huts (hokesikaon) for many days until they acquired a spiritual helper. These were regarded as isolated places. The youths were brought food by their fathers or uncles (Adams, 1905) during this period of spiritual isolation. Táuohkômuk is also the primary location for Ceremonial Stone Landscapes (Hoffman, 2019; Lavin and Thomas, 2023).

Táuohkômuk lands are therefore appropriately described as conserved lands or sacred lands, and the restrictions and rituals associated with them have distinct parallels with the Euro-American concept and management of wilderness: a place to visit, camp, hunt, gather deadwood, find spiritual experience and renewal away from civilization, but not a place to clear trees and build structures (Nash, 2001). When the 1964 Wilderness Act states that wilderness is an area of land which "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable", this is an apt description of Algonquian táuohkômuk lands.

Algonquians practiced limited agriculture and horticulture along the coast and the river valleys, with planting less common in the northern regions. Although the large and more sedentary Haudenosaunee nations in the lower Great Lakes region had fields of square kilometres in extent near their settlements (Munoz *et al.*, 2014), the planting lands of the more mobile Algonquians of the Northeast are generally on record at a scale of 20 acres or less. For instance, in 1604 Samuel Champlain exploring the inlets of Passamaquoddy Bay along New Brunswick and Maine Coast noted: "There are 15 to 20 acres of cleared land [...] All the rest of the country is covered with very thick forests" (Champlain, 1878). In South Hadley Massachusetts in 1678, a sachem named Quonquont signed a lease for what is described as a cornfield of "about twelve, sixteene [*sic*] or twenty acres of Ground". Other planted lands are named in land agreements around present-day Chicopee near Uskuaiok and Nayasset. The lands named as "now planted" again in 1636, lying between "muskeosquittaj" (*miskeketash* = shrubby wetlands) by the river and uplands, appear to be mostly between ten and 20 acres (Wright, 1905: 33–55). Lastly, Massachusett writings describe Indigenous fields of about fifteen acres in size (Goddard and Bragdon, 1988).

The size of these horticultural fields combined with their locations almost exclusively in river valleys and along the coast greatly restricted the amount of land impacted ('managed') by Indigenous peoples in the Northeast (Tulowiecki *et al.*, 2022). Algonquian narrative traditions further reveal that intentional use of fire was limited to planting lands to clear and prepare horticultural fields and reduce agricultural pests; there is no mention of intentional fire set in the vast táuohkômuk lands. Empirical evidence corroborates this limited use of fire, as charcoal deposits in sediment cores are over an order of magnitude higher in paleoecological sites near Indigenous settlement areas along the coast than in upland interior sites away from settlement areas (Parshall and Foster, 2002). Studies on the influence of Indigenous land use on forest composition bear this out as well; for example, even-aged white pine stands grew back on abandoned village and agriculture sites of the Hodinoshyoni and Algonquians (Munoz *et al.*, 2014). However, beyond the scope of the village and

planting lands in the lowlands – akin in size to scattered small hamlets – the Indigenous land use effect disappears, revealing the untrammeled condition of táuohkômuk lands. As Figure 1 shows, the vast upland regions in the Northeastern US remained largely unsettled and unmarked by habitation with little to no impact on the vegetation by people.

The localized impact of Indigenous lifeways and land zones was further reinforced by population densities that are estimated to be over 100 times lower than those found in the eastern US today (Milner and Chaplin, 2010; Faison, 2024). For instance, data from the archaeological and ethnohistorical record suggest that population densities at 1500CE were predominantly in the order of 0.15–0.7 people per square km in the Northeastern US, with localized areas of especial density including patches of eastern Massachusetts, southeastern coastal Maine, Long Island and eastern New York around present-day Albany (see Figure 2; Milner and Chaplin, 2010). To put those densities into perspective, the US Census Bureau in 1890 defined as "unsettled" land with less than 0.77 people per square km.

Interestingly, the largest wilderness areas in the Northeastern US today occur in visited but unsettled táuohkômuk areas: the Adirondack Forest Preserve of New York, Green and White Mountain National Forest Wilderness areas in Vermont and New Hampshire, and Baxter State Park in Maine (Faison *et al.*, 2023). The Adirondacks with 2.6 million acres of designated Forever Wild forestland offer a particularly instructive example of the concordance between

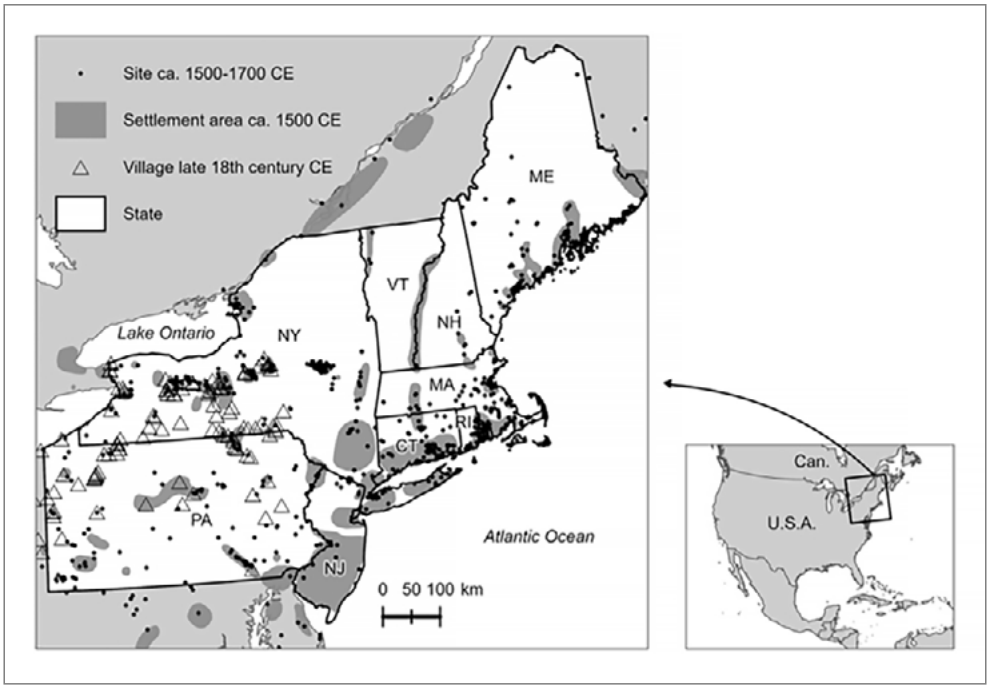


Figure 1. Incomplete but broadly accurate location of Native American settlements in the river valleys and along the coast in Northeastern US. Note the vast upland areas (in white) that remained unsettled and the tight clusters of village site locations that reflect periodic relocations. Map from Tulowiecki *et al.* (2022). Used with permission.

modern land use designations and traditional Indigenous land zone practices. There is evidence of seasonal Indigenous planting fields and settlements in the lowlands around today's Indian Lake, Lake Piseco and Lake George (Otis, 2018); these same areas are largely in private ownership and in developed hamlets today. In contrast, there is no evidence of Indigenous settlements or planting fields in the higher elevations of the Adirondack Forest Preserve – in fact there is a tradition that the high central mountains were a place of avoidance – as is true with Euro-American settlements today. Thus (like the Bitterroot Mountains), the Adirondack region could be considered to have been largely 'inhabited' or 'settled' by Indigenous peoples prior to European contact, just as the region is 'settled' and 'inhabited' today: in the valleys near water. But in both cases, millions of acres in the vast uplands remain in an uninhabited and unmanaged state, even as they are and were frequently

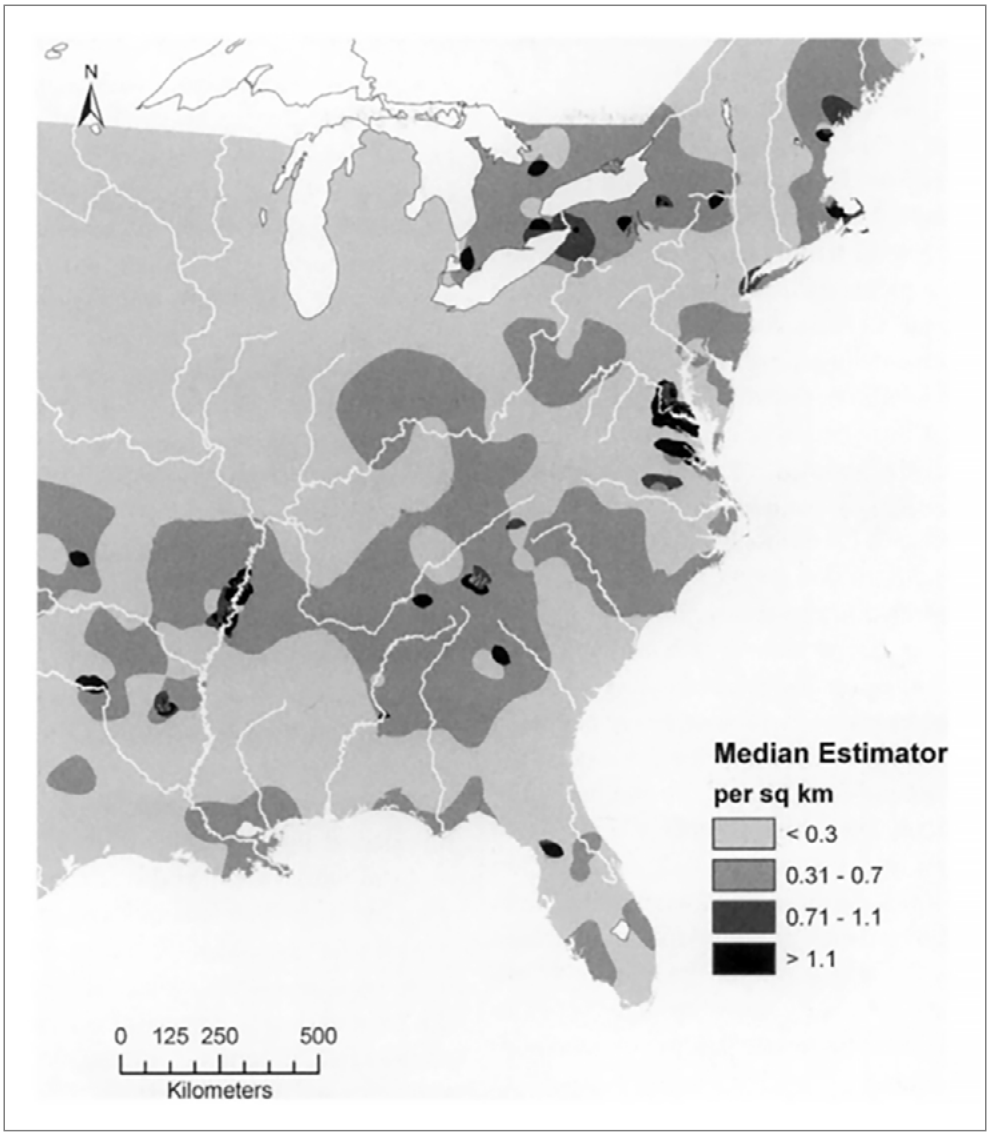


Figure 2. Estimated human population densities in eastern North America at 1500CE. Map from Milner and Chaplin (2010). Used with permission.

visited, camped in and used for hunting and collecting. In other words, the Adirondack Preserve's Forever Wild designation partly carries forward Indigenous land tradition by continuing as táuohkômuk.

The Pacific Northwest

Indigenous land use patterns in the Bitterroots and the Northeast are broadly consistent with those found in the Pacific Northwest Cascades and Olympic mountains (Burtchard, 2007). Nisqually, Taidnapam, Puyallup Muckleshoot and Yakama peoples – as corroborated by archaeological evidence – used temporary basecamps and rockshelters primarily in the sub-alpine and alpine zones of Takhoma (Mount Rainier) above 5,000 feet (Smith, 2006; Burtchard, 2007). Here, people hunted mountain goats, marmots, and other game and foraged for huckleberries. According to Burtchard (2003), "no unequivocal evidence of exclusively plant processing locations has been found" in Mount Rainier National Park, and no evidence of permanent or semi-permanent village sites have been detected within the National Park boundaries (Smith, 2006). Along the densely forested mid-slopes below 5,000 feet, where game was less abundant, only scattered archaeological sites have been found, with no evidence of residential features (Burtchard, 2007). In the late Holocene, hunters and foragers on Takhoma were associated for most of the year with lowland village sites that were situated along salmon-bearing streams and coastal sites where anadromous fish, and to a lesser extent marine animals, were harvested and stored for winter subsistence. Additionally, camas, wapato and biscuit root were harvested and processed in particularly productive locations in low and mid-elevation wetlands. Quamash fields were tended in a semi-horticultural manner. The closest lowland village site to Takhomawas along the Upper Cowlitz drainage, some five to six miles south of contemporary park boundaries (Smith, 2006).

Extended seasonal camps in the Great Basin

In the Great Basin region, numerous seasonal camps from the late Holocene occur in the alpine zone between 10,000 and 12,000 feet in Nevada's Toquima mountains and the White Mountains of California. Alta Toquima, located at 11,000 feet – just above the tree line – in today's Alta Toquima Wilderness Area, consists of 31 stone structures (Thomas, 2020). Similarly, in the White Mountains of California (today's White Mountains Wilderness), more than a dozen seasonal camps with house foundations, the remains of timber(or pole)-and-thatch dwellings, have been found (Bettinger, 1991). In both locations, middens and plant processing tools occur. These sites are interpreted to have been used more intensively and for longer durations by families or groups of families than traditional elevated hunting and foraging camps (Bettinger, 1991; Thomas, 2020). In that sense, these sites are not entirely consistent with contemporary wilderness principles of an absence of structures and "the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable". However, given that these sites were generally above the tree line, no forest clearing was required to establish the camp; and, like any residential area, these seasonal alpine sites concentrated impacts, leaving the surrounding landscape lightly used.

Conclusion

In his critique of wilderness, Cronon (1996) wrote that "to create an 'uninhabited wilderness' – uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place – reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is". But is the idea of wilderness truly a European-American invention, or did uninhabited land largely undirected by people already exist in the titoqa-nót wétes of the Bitterroot Mountains and the táuohkômuk of the Northeastern mountains? Algonquian and other Indigenous people employed and continue to employ complex stewardship systems. No wide brush paints Indigenous stewardship true to life. Indigenous words speak to wilderness through táuohkômuk, titoqa-nót wétes, and the whole library of our land language.

When stripped of its cultural and political connotations and understood in its denotative sense – land predominantly shaped by natural processes and free of extended human habitation – the concept of wilderness aligns closely with the conditions described and managed within several Indigenous land classifications. The evidence of Northeast Algonquian and Nimiipuu land use zones along with the archaeological record suggest that forests designated as wilderness today are not an historic aberration but reflect a continuation of the dominant condition in large swaths of North American upland forests prior to European settlement. Although forests grew out of Native American fields and cleared village sites, or were altered by use of fire, wood gathering and the planting of nut trees in settled lowlands, substantial evidence for large-scale disruption of upland forests is not found in archaeology, soil sediment records or other sources in the Northeast, Pacific Northwest and many other locations in Turtle Island (Vale, 1998). One might even say that the authors of the 1964 Wilderness Act sanctified a land use condition that the Nimiipuu and Algonquian peoples had observed and labeled long before the English and their word 'wilderness' arrived in North America.

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Culture and meat-eating: A critique of anthropocentrism in animal ethics

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Despite theoretical diversity, the field of animal ethics often filters animal suffering through human-centred frameworks that obscure urgent ethical questions raised by the global meat industry. Well-meaning efforts to respect cultural difference result in a multi-layered ethical filter that systematically deprioritizes animal life, uses appeals to culture to justify and excuse systemic harms to animals, and shifts responsibility for those harms away from individuals. To address this, animal ethics needs to reorient itself towards listening – remaining open to uncomfortable claims, including critiques of meat consumption and its relation to culture, rather than filtering them out under the guise of cultural respect.

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The field of animal ethics is diverse, featuring a range of narratives and theoretical frameworks. Yet, despite this diversity, there is a mainstream embrace of a human-centred perspective, even if it is accompanied by sympathy and theoretical nuance. This often stems from well-intentioned efforts within academic discourse to balance competing ethical priorities – in particular, to protect or prioritize marginalized human voices.

Critiques of the meat industry, for example, often subordinate the moral status of animals to considerations of 'cultural complexity'. As a result, those in the field rarely call for the non-use of animal products, and an end to the large-scale, systematic killing of animals as an overriding moral imperative, even when this is clearly what they would like to see happen. The result has been that laudable attempts to honour genuine cultural differences have obscured the urgent ethical questions posed by the systematic exploitation of animals.

In what follows I argue that the field of animal ethics is shaped by a persistent tendency to speak for other human groups, and that this practice

acts as a filtering mechanism that deprioritizes animal existence. In attempting to protect or prioritize human voices, ethical discourse often sidesteps or downplays the suffering of animals. Scholars may avoid critiques of culturally embedded practices such as meat consumption, for fear of appearing culturally insensitive, elitist, or exclusionary. The result is a tacit consensus: we should not "threaten the meat industry nor the diets of the majority of the population" (Singer, 2002).

The act of speaking for others, while often motivated by considerations of justice and solidarity, reinforces a framework in which human-centred concerns dominate, and animal interests are filtered out as secondary or inconvenient. This filtering mechanism makes use of at least four discursive techniques, which I will call *'What about?' as evasion*, *Better others*, *Selective cultural defence of harm* and *Distancing responsibility through identity and cultural silence*. I will argue that although each of these 'layers' of the filter represent ostensibly legitimate ethical concerns, they are given too much weight in the mainstream discourse of animal ethics.

The filters

'What about?' as evasion

When concerns about animal suffering or the meat industry are raised within animal ethics, scholars often divert the conversation by bringing up questions like: What about the homeless? What about women? What about this-or-that specific cultural tradition? Whatever the underlying intentions, the raising of such questions functions discursively as a strategy to reassert human priorities and defer ethical engagement with nonhuman lives (*cf.* Adams, 1990; 2003). Claire Jean Kim shares a personal example: when she expressed interest in animal issues, her father questioned her priorities, asking why she was not focused instead on North Korean refugees. His reasoning, she notes, was rooted in the belief that "the claim of blood, people, and nation takes priority over other claims" (2022: 197).

Another similar way of surreptitiously reasserting the priority of human concerns is to ask Why? – a question often intertwined with cultural justifications. For instance, when Psyche Williams-Forson was conducting research on African American foodways, she was frequently asked, "Why chicken?" – a question implying that some cultural topics are off-limits for critique, particularly when they involve identity-affirming practices (2006: 18). In the context of animal ethics, scholars often treat culture as a monolithic and inviolable category, prioritizing its preservation over critical examination. Celebrations of cultural identity, particularly by others, such as elevating Soul Food or Asian cuisine to a pedestal, may appear progressive or inclusive. But often they function to uphold the dominant anthropocentric order, preserving the legitimacy of meat consumption under the guise of cultural respect, while subtly insulating the meat industry from criticism.

As Williams-Forson argues, African American filmmakers like George Tillman are frequently expected to represent their communities through safe and celebratory tropes – such as Soul Food rituals or strong matriarchs –

rather than engage with more disruptive or ethically complex narratives. Similarly, Sayadabdi (2019) observes how Iranian diasporic food discourse is shaped by idealized memories and adapted to Western tastes to gain cultural and identity legitimacy.

Western and most non-Western cultures have long upheld the belief that animals are morally inferior to humans, justifying their exploitation and contributing to resistance against animal ethics. In this way, the relationship between human and other-than-human beings remains shaped by a human-centred narrative, which typically treats culture as innocent without acknowledging the gradual and compulsory institutional norms that shape it, and "without examining the subcultural contexts that exist within the larger culture" (Kheel, 2004: 9). Even when framed as empowerment, such representations risk reinforcing the very structures they appear to challenge. They become part of a larger filtering system that pushes animal ethics to the margins by re-centring human identity, pride and cultural preservation as primary concerns.

Better others

Another way in which systemic cruelty to animals is filtered out of academic discourse is by morally privileging the views or practices of certain human groups – 'better others' – and treating criticism of those views or practices as cultural insensitivity, a continuation of past injustices, imperialism, racism and so on. These better others are often those who were (and perhaps still are) invaded, colonized and marginalized, but are now cherished. Those who were deprived due to their geographical, racial, economic or political position are now regarded as better others – even the best others – in their treatment of animals. But who considers them 'better others'? Those who once did not even consider them human. And the irony is that this is itself an act of decontextualization: when it comes to the meat industry, uncritically praising past practices can, all too easily, be co-opted. 'Better othering' can be seen as a form of compensation, or even restitution – but too often, in this field, it is at the expense of non-human animals.

The terms that are often used to signal good faith and the intention to express a plurality of understandings of others (and speaking for them) – such as 'the Global South', 'Indigenous communities', 'the Middle East', and so on – cannot help much unless we stop using them to prioritize human beings over other beings. For example, as Kalland (2013) notes, Indigenous knowledge is frequently romanticized and aggrandized by non-Indigenous academics, NGOs, media and the public as a superior alternative to scientific knowledge, especially in addressing questions of resource management.

As an example of this filter, veganism has been critiqued as the promotion of a culturally narrow or culturally insensitive perspective – Western, urban and rooted in a philosophically naive and oppressive human–nature dualism (*cf.* Plumwood, 2004). Curtin (2004) thus argues for a 'contextual' moral vegetarianism, on the grounds that the vegan alternative would be culturally insensitive. Similarly, Van Dyke (2015) expresses concern that veganism risks

becoming a rigid moral ideal – extreme in nature – and instead advocates for a virtue-based, contextual ethics of eating, where choices depend on individual circumstances and aim to balance justice to self and others. One of her key criticisms is that veganism can become a form of 'moral policing' that ignores the 'cultural complexity' of our relationship with animals.

But these critiques of veganism rest on an unquestioned anthropocentrism, in which human concerns always override the ethical significance of animal life. And, it must be asked, do people *really* experience 'cultural marginalization' or 'discrimination' when they encounter someone vegan? This seems implausible, and the result of an excessively theoretical attitude. Furthermore, in a world that is slaughtering more animals than ever – with global meat production reaching 371 million tonnes (carcass weight equivalent) in 2023 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024) – it is hard to understand how describing veganism as 'culturally narrow' can be seen as a weighty and justified critique.

Selective cultural defence of harm

The 'better others' filter is a discursive technique for insulating certain views or practices from critique, by suggesting that the critique is a form of cultural oppression, insensitivity or marginalization. The anthropocentrism that underpins this filter can be made clear when we consider how *selectively* it is applied.

Consider two examples, one imaginary and one all too real. First, imagine a society in which eating human infants is a longstanding cultural tradition. If outsiders were to criticize this practice and were met with accusations of cultural insensitivity, most people would reject the defence outright. The reason is simple: the moral status of human babies is seen as so absolute that no appeal to cultural tradition could override it. Now consider a second example: domestic violence against women. This is sometimes justified through appeals to custom, hardship or religion. Yet despite these rationales, such violence is broadly condemned. We do not excuse it as a matter of tradition, even when it occurs under difficult circumstances. In both examples, the harm is clear, and the victims are recognized as moral subjects, so cultural defences fail to carry ethical weight.

Compare this with how ethical discourse addresses meat consumption. The killing of nonhuman animals is practiced across virtually every culture, and this widespread familiarity grants it a kind of immunity from critique. When animal suffering is questioned, objections are frequently dismissed as culturally insensitive or ideologically rigid. This reveals a troubling double standard: cultural sensitivity is invoked selectively, often shielding human practices when the victims are nonhuman and less able to resist or be heard. This suggests that many who reject human hierarchies do so not purely out of moral belief, but because they understand the consequences – dominated groups eventually resist, leading to instability. In other words, abandoning these hierarchies often reflects a strategic balance of power as much as an ethical insight. But animals do not resist or destabilize the system in the same way. As a result, we normalize the hierarchy, encroaching upon them without fear of consequence.

4. Distancing responsibility through identity and cultural silence

The flip side of claiming that a critique of anthropocentric cultural practices is culturally oppressive, is to claim that an ecocentric or non-anthropocentric practice is a *luxury* – a choice available only to the affluent and the privileged. This filter frames, for example, veganism or the avoidance of animal products as luxuries only available to those with the freedom to change their lifestyle and ethical outlooks, and unavailable to the marginalized. In a phrase – they are choices only genuinely available to the 'white, able-bodied male'.

The use of this filter permits a kind of moral distancing. For instance, I, as a woman who is not white, might unconsciously exclude myself from complicity in systems of animal oppression and cruelty by assuming that such terms apply only to the white, able-bodied male. This can create a convenient oblivion that prevents me from recognizing my own responsibilities in perpetuating systemic issues. People like me (that is, anyone not in the white, able-bodied male category) might tap into the idea that we are somehow outside or exempt from these systems. But why not acknowledge the reality of other configurations of privilege? For instance: 'Middle Eastern, able-bodied male', 'Middle Eastern, able-bodied female', or 'person of colour, able-bodied male'. Initially, these terms may feel shocking, but they compel us to confront broader truths about privilege and complicity.

What is often overlooked is that privilege does not only mean dominance or power in a broad sense – there is also the privilege of not being criticized. Those of us who do not belong to dominant groups may still benefit from an implicit cultural exemption: our practices are less likely to be questioned for fear of appearing insensitive or oppressive. This can create a space where harmful norms – especially those involving animals – are shielded from critique under the banner of protecting cultural identity. In this way, relative marginalization becomes a kind of ethical immunity, allowing us to avoid the discomfort of self-examination while still participating in larger systems of harm.

As uncomfortable as it can sometimes be, we need to be clear that past practices are not beyond criticism, nor do they necessarily retain their original meaning today. Consider this expression of the Indigenous North American concept of the 'Honourable Harvesting' in deer hunting (quoted in Kimmerer [2013: 186]):

> *I know he's the one, and so does he. There's a kind of nod exchanged. That's why I only carry one shot. I wait for the one. He gave himself to me. That's what I was taught: take only what is given, and then treat it with respect.*

The logic expressed in the remark "He gave himself to me" may appear respectful and reciprocal, but it ultimately reinforces a human-centred narrative that justifies domination – albeit in a softer, spiritualized form. By imagining that the animal 'consents' to be killed, the human assumes the authority to interpret the animal's actions and to assign meaning to them. Even when framed in terms of restraint and reverence, this logic maintains a hierarchical relationship in which the human takes and the animal is available

to be taken. The animal's life is still treated as a resource, and the act of killing is morally rehabilitated through narrative rather than questioned outright.

Furthermore, the idea that Indigenous or traditional practices, such as Andean animism, can be understood as uncontaminated by colonialism and ethically distinct from Western systems, requires critical scrutiny, as these practices are often co-shaped by colonial and capitalist histories (Bentancor, 2017). Nor should we ignore the moral hypocrisy of praising the practice of 'using the whole animal' when it occurs in Indigenous hunting practices, while turning a blind eye to the fact that the very same practice is central to the capitalist logic of industrialized meat production (*cf.* Amir, 2020). What appears as cultural resistance may in fact reproduce the same anthropocentric and capitalist structures it claims to resist.

I now turn to examples of cultural silence. Across the world, lower meat consumption in many regions is often due to economic and religio-political obstacles, rather than to secular ethical commitments. For example, in Bhutan religious nationalism projects Buddhist non-violence by banning animal slaughter within its borders while relying heavily on imported meat, thereby shifting moral responsibility elsewhere (Miyamoto *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, in Iran, meat prices fluctuate with economic instability, and *per capita* consumption is often low not because of ethical reflection, but because of economic hardship (Koocheki *et al.*, 2016). If it were not for these economic barriers, many people would likely consume more meat, as eating more meat is widely perceived as a sign of greater welfare.

What complicates this further is that in countries like Iran, there exists no substantial philosophical, ethical or cultural tradition that systematically engages with animal rights or veganism. Hence, most Iranians – whether academics or members of the general public – are never meaningfully exposed to these conversations. This creates a deep ethical silence, where harm persists but is neither named nor questioned. As a result, people often overlook their own role in the meat industry and the harm it produces. In such contexts, ethical invisibility becomes a kind of silent moral license among the people of a country with a shared culture. This pattern reflects a cultural consensus – silent, yet deeply embedded, and this pattern is not just limited to Iran.

Pushing back

In the academic field of animal ethics, criticism of meat eating typically takes the form of nuanced, theoretically rich and professionally polished argumentation. Such complex work can have intellectual value, yet its very richness can sometimes obscure ethical clarity, turning urgent moral issues into abstract exercises in complexity. In particular, frameworks like intersectionality and interdisciplinarity have opened space for layered and context-sensitive reasoning, but they can also lead to a form of ethical detachment, where action is continually deferred in favour of ever-deeper analysis.

Contextual, culturally-sensitive ethics should not become a tool for deferring responsibility, but rather a call to listen more carefully – to actual voices, in actual places. It becomes problematic when it functions not as a genuine call to

attentive listening, but as a sophisticated theoretical framework that ultimately legitimizes the foundational narratives normalizing animal exploitation. In such cases, it results in speaking for others rather than listening to them. To 'listen' in this context means to remain open to ethical claims that may be uncomfortable, disruptive or outside dominant frameworks, including those that challenge widely accepted practices like meat consumption. It involves not immediately dismissing such claims as culturally insensitive or ideologically extreme but instead taking them seriously as part of an ongoing moral conversation, especially when they come from individuals or groups outside the cultural majority.

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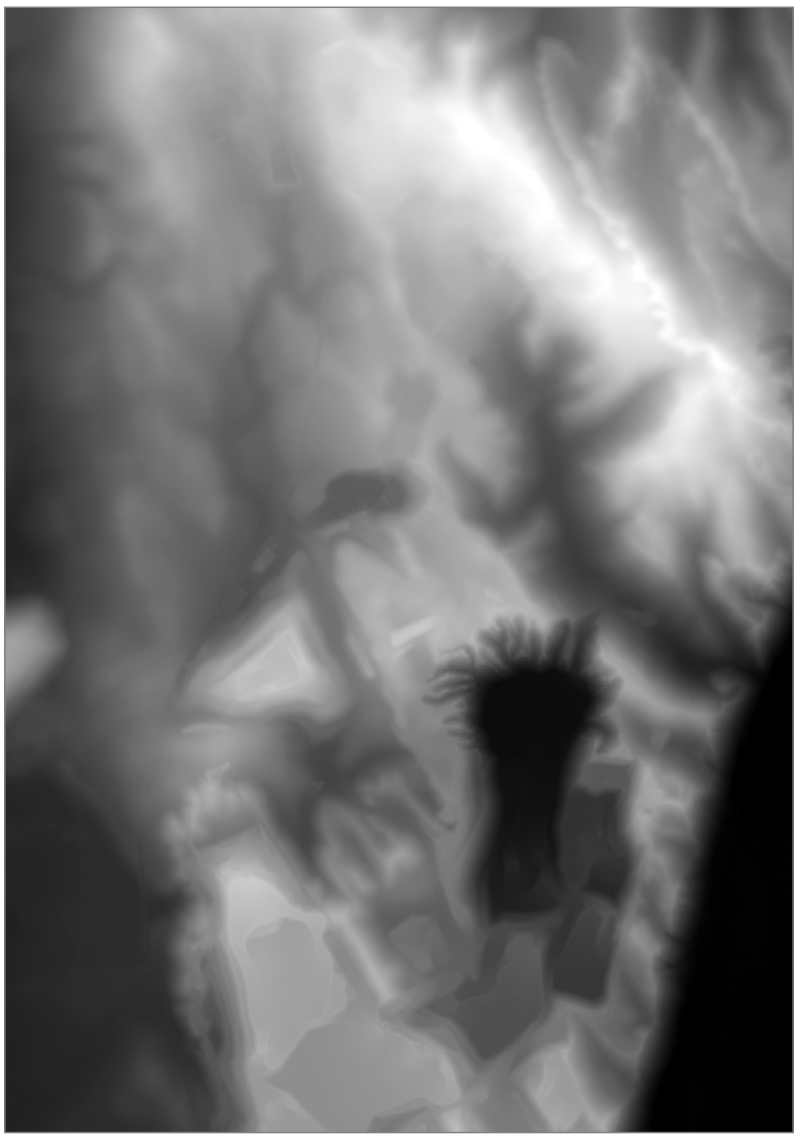
Williams-Forson P (2006) *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black women, food, and power*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, USA.

Images from the Sandscapes project

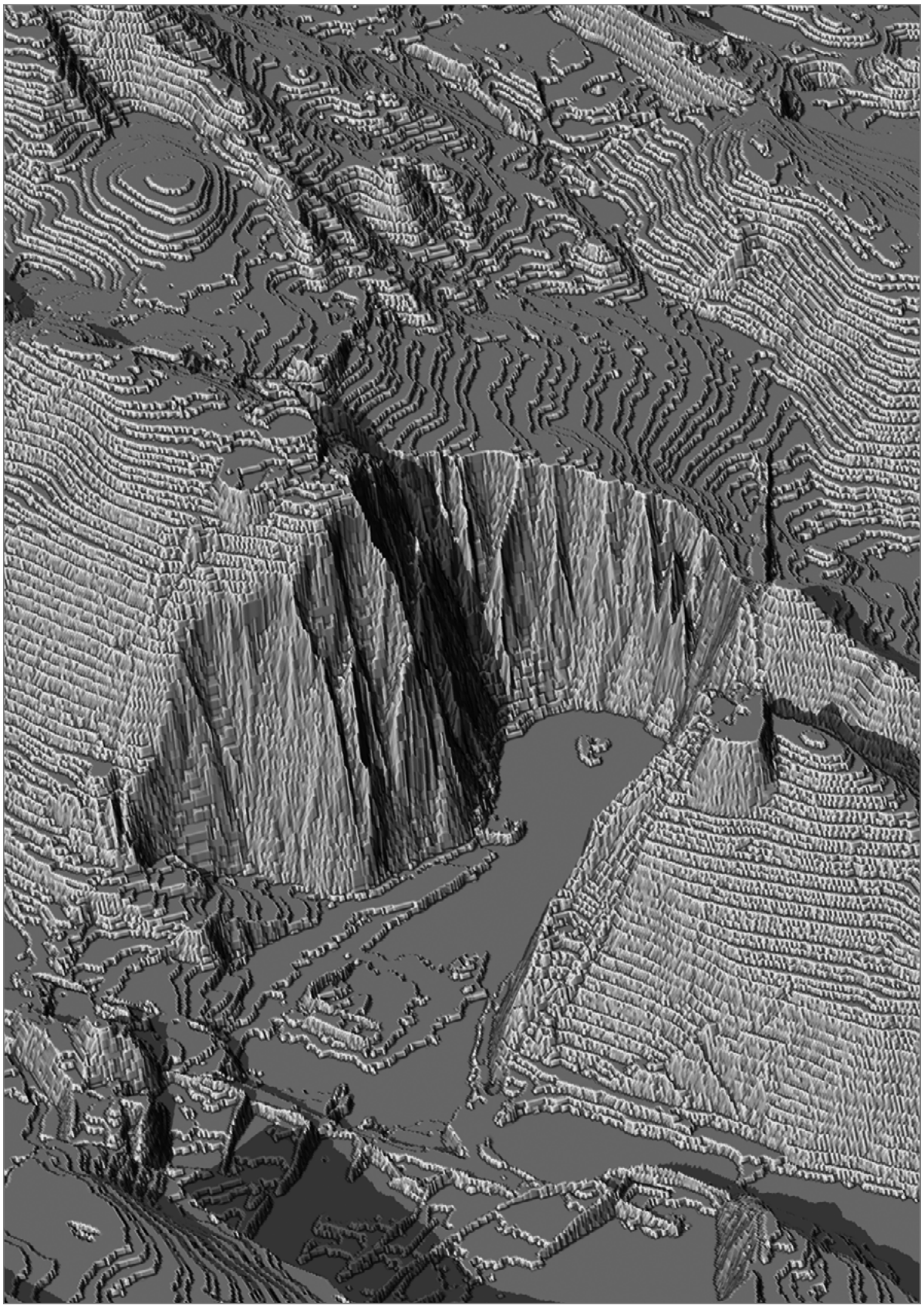
Global Extraction Observatory (Eduardo Kairuz and Sam Spurr)

From the artists: "In this project, the Global Extraction Observatory presents an initial approach to the cultural, territorial, and environmental violence of sand mining. Dissecting satellite images of Sibelco's Enterprise and Yarraman sand mines on Minjerribah (also known as North Stradbroke Island, off the coast of South East Queensland, in Australia), the project visualizes the history and effects of this mammoth extractivist operation, occurring on Quandamooka Country's fragile ecosystem. The dismantlement of these satellite photographs (a techno-capitalist form of insufficient representation) helps us focus on distinctive elements that would otherwise remain concealed and entangled in the striking appeal of the original images."

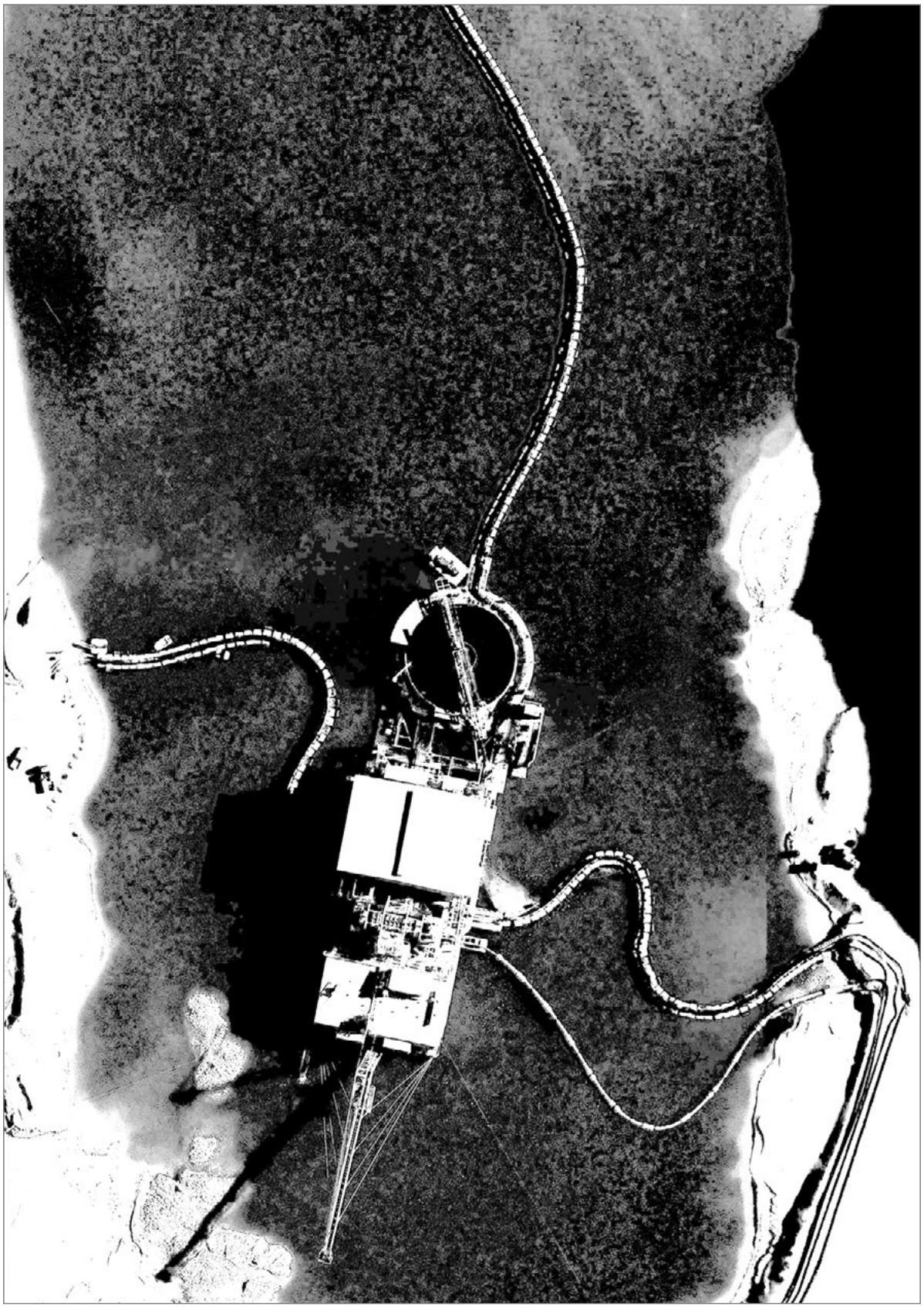
Higher-quality versions of artwork from this issue: https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/artworks.php?v=9&n=1



Ghosts



Landscapes



Monsters



Muds



Sands



Satellite

The Terran badger: Telling the right story

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This paper offers an alternative to the anthropocentric and moralizing conceptualizations of badgers as villains, vectors, vermin or victims. Rather than arguing that these mustelids threaten dairy farms, hedgehogs and songbirds, or claiming that innocent badgers are instead wise and generous, the paper contends that badgers should be valued simply for being badgers. These mammals increase the biodiversity of their locale and demonstrate a way of being that is deeply entangled in the life of the land upon which they live. Their bodies carry the evidence of polluted earth, while their habits offer testimony of the relative health of an ecosystem. This paper suggests that thinking with badgers can help us to conceive of ecocentric ways of being in the land.

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Ecocentrism would ask that we respect a fellow animal not for services rendered to humanity, nor for living up to some humanistic ideal of pacifism, generosity or altruism, but simply for who they are. In particular, what would it be to respect in such a way the much persecuted – and, occasionally, sanctified – badger?

European badgers (*Meles meles*) are mustelids, members of the weasel family. They inhabit the soil and largely depend upon it for their sustenance (given their diet is largely comprised of earthworms), to the extent that their behaviour and their bodies are intimately responsive to the ecological health or disease of the land. Though omnivores, badgers are the UK's largest remaining member of the order Carnivora. In the absence of potentially threatening predators, most British badgers seem to form larger communities and spend more time socializing outside their setts than do their conspecifics on the continent.

Badgers may have outlasted wolves and bears in the UK, but they have still suffered intense human persecution. They have been hunted with dogs, dug out of their setts, snared, poisoned, shot, beaten to death and made to fight for entertainment. Their setts have been destroyed or blocked. The extent of cruelty was such that they have been granted considerable legal protection. It is illegal to disturb the setts, hunt badgers with dogs or kill them – unless you have a licence. Nonetheless, many are still illegally killed, setts continue to be disturbed and an estimated 50,000 a year die on the UK's roads (Fahrig and Rytwinski, 2009).

In addition, licensed intensive badger culling in England has killed nearly 250,000 badgers since it began in 2013. This mass slaughter is justified with the claim that badgers are a vector for bovine tuberculosis (bTB), which, if found in cattle, leads to their slaughter, to prevent further infection within the cow and possibly human community. There is much that is questionable in the reasoning (*cf.* Badger Trust, 2024). It assumes that dairy production must continue in its present (intensive, industrialized) form and that that industry is threatened by badgers. Ecocentrists and animal rights advocates would strongly contest the first assumption, while the majority of scientific opinion counters the second. Only a tiny proportion of badgers are infected at any one time, while 94 per cent of bTB transmission arises from cow-to-cow infection. Thus, so long as intensive dairy farming continues, then so will bTB – even if *all* of England's badgers were to be slaughtered. Improved hygiene and biosecurity on farms would be far more beneficial to the industry than badger culling (McGill *et al.*, 2020; Langton *et al.*, 2022). A more accurate reading of the situation is that bTB is yet another means by which industrialized animal agriculture is harming wildlife (Justus *et al.*, 2024).

Stories and slaughter

Whatever the explanatory narrative, there is something extremely unpalatable about attempting to justify the suffering of others. In considering the analogous case of the mass culling of flying foxes in Australia, Rose (2022: 48) writes, "[t]here are those who respond, saying 'yes' to the calls of others who suffer; there are those who simply turn away; and there are those who actually side with death".

Those who side with death justify the pain to badgers in part through what Cassidy (2019) calls 'Bad Badger' narratives. Bad Badgers spread diseases; they also eat or damage crops, predate the nests of songbirds and kill hedgehogs. Bad Badgers – like Tommy Brock in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mr Tod* – are disagreeable creatures who gobble up baby bunnies and deserve no compassion, for they show none. Those opposed to the badger cull might favour instead a 'Good Badger' narrative, aligned more with Mr Badger in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, who is wise, reclusive and generally kindly.

Both of these conceptions seek to view badgers through an anthropocentric, moralizing lens. I suggest an alternative: the *Terran Badger* – neither demonized nor eulogized, but instead an animal entangled in a dynamic web of ecological processes.

The Terran badger

Badgers live in in the earth, in setts – large burrows, dug out decades or even centuries previously by their ancestors, which may reach as deep as four metres below the surface. Current residents enlarge and reorganize, such that a single established sett may have many entrances, as well as both satellite and outlier setts associated with it. Although badgers tend to be very settled (they may be born in one chamber and later die, to be entombed by their fellows, just along the passage), they might move among these locations to reduce a pest burden, for a peaceful nursery or because of relational incompatibility with other residents. Sett 'boundaries' are porous rather than strictly enforced territories, with a good proportion of cubs fathered by males who are not residents of the same sett (MacDonald and Newman, 2022). Setts may also be abandoned and then later reinhabited.

Badgers, who regulate breeding according to the resources and population size of their locale (Sugianto *et al.*, 2021), are exquisitely attuned to the state of the soil upon and within which they live. Their patterns of foraging demonstrate the relative health of the land. For example, if a sett has a small regular foraging area, such that the badgers travel only a short distance each night, this indicates that this area has good soil, relatively free of industrial fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides; worm-rich organic pasture supports more badgers. In contrast, badgers on high-intensity arable land must range much further (personal communication with Peter Edwards, Northamptonshire Badger Trust).

As they are loyal to their setts, so they are faithful to their tracks, which mark the countryside like visible veins, used by generation after generation of badgers, and followed even when their traditional route has been ploughed up or intersected by a road. In following these tracks, and deepening the path as they go, badgers are both replicating the actions of their ancestors and "inscribing their own identities into the land as they go" (Ingold, 2021: 54). Junctions on the tracks tend to be marked by 'latrines' (holes in which they defecate). These were thought to be territorial markers, but that view has been superseded by the understanding that latrines are more akin to village noticeboards. With their supreme olfactory capacity, they can sense precisely who else has passed by, what they have eaten, how healthy they are and, if a female, whether they are in oestrus. The latrines are also interesting from a 'Terran' perspective: the land bears the scent of local badgers, as the local badgers, holed up during daylight hours in the earth, bear the scent of the local terroir. Despret (2021) argues that this transfer of scent between land and animal suggests a profound intimacy: they belong to the land as much as it belongs to them.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that badgers simply make use of the place as they find it. Despite all the recent focus on the reintroduction of beavers and boars into the UK, justified by their role as ecosystem engineers, there is an extant native ecosystem engineer whose contributions are seldom, if ever, acknowledged. This suggests, perhaps, that there is an inclination to value an animal instrumentally only so far as that animal has been introduced,

reintroduced or rescued by humans, while resident animals who get on with impacting their habitat in ways that benefit a non-human community (invertebrates, ground flora etc.) are not granted the same accolades. Through their digging, feeding, defecating and travelling, badgers influence their environment. They change the soil pH, increase biodiversity around their setts, disperse seeds and offer homes for other non-humans, sharing their setts with foxes, rabbits and a variety of invertebrates (Kurek *et al.*, 2022).

An anthropocentric view might see this as pure and admirable generosity, but badgers will evict foxes for their own reasons and will make use of baby rabbits as a conveniently situated food source. In addition, they will eat songbird eggs and hedgehogs. However, to regard any of this as some cause for critique is not just inappropriate anthropomorphism but a weak attempt at sleight of hand: the decline in songbird numbers and the increasing precarity of hedgehogs are not related to their millennia of co-existence with badgers but to the damaging effects of industrialized agriculture, pollution, the climate crisis, habitat destruction and the other insults to the land caused by humans.

As badgers root through the earth for worms, they consume the very soil that has received the decomposed nutrients of their ancestors; but all too often in the UK they also accumulate the toxic residues of human industry (Bukovjan *et al.*, 2014; Mullineaux *et al.*, 2021; Sartorius *et al.*, 2023) and potentially become infected with bTB, either from faeces directly passed from pasture-living cows or through the slurry sprayed on land as a fertilizer. Thus, badgers both shape and are shaped by place. To use the phrase of Coccia (2019: 66), we could say that badgers are in a state of "transcendental immersion", meaning that they are in the land with the same intensity and same force as the land is within them. They are true natives, whose identity has been shaped by the place to which they belong (Mathews, 2005: 58).

The Terran human

In many human origin stories, the human animal was formed of clay. Like plants, we rose from the chthonic darkness. Like all life, it is to that which we will return. As fellow earthy, earthly, embodied Terrans, we share with badgers the narrow living film of soil that sheathes our planet. This close connection to the land, forgotten by many of us in Western societies, is a familiar theme in Indigenous philosophies. I do not wish to colonize concepts or breezily suggest that badgers share their way-of-being with Indigenous peoples. Rather I am making an analogical point: some humans still do, and most humans surely did, experience life as entangled with non-human others and profoundly influenced by and dependent upon the land itself.

Consider the words of Big Bill Neidjie – an elder of the Gaagudju people of Australia's Northern Territory – that "You got to hang onto this story because the earth, this ground, *earth where you brought up*, this earth he grow you". As Val Plumwood glosses this remark, it reflects a view in which that earth where you brought up is "an active agent in and co-constituter of our lives" (both quoted in Rose, 2013: 106). That is, place is not passive, it is active. For one thing, it lays demands, obligations and responsibilities upon its inhabitants.

For badgers, place determines how far they roam and how many cubs are born and raised in a given year, for example. As for humans, one of the demands it lays on *Homo sapiens* is, according to another Australian Aboriginal thinker, Margaret Kemarre Turner, to experience place as *storied*:

> *If you're seeing the Land without the Story, then there's nothing there. We see our country, even though it might be destroyed by another species, we see how the beautiness is still in the country. [...] It doesn't matter that horses and bullocks have caused such destruction, we still see the spirit of the Land glistening (quoted in Rose et al., 2017: 30).*

The modern British landscape does not always glisten. Indeed, the UK is recognized as one of the world's most nature-depleted nations (Burns *et al.*, 2023). It is not just the impact of industrial agriculture and development, it is also the fractured connections between people and place. This country has "a cosmologically dispossessed culture, a culture clinging to a bankrupt worldview which prescribes a cramped materialistic individualism, the consequences of which we are presently reaping" (Mathews, 2006: 31).

Terran Badgers are also reaping the consequences of this bankrupt worldview as they accumulate carcinogenic heavy metals in their bodies; as they are slaughtered without rational cause; as they face automotive-death when they cross the road-fragmented landscape to source enough food in depleted earth; as they struggle to deal with the loss of a century-old sett on land deemed suitable for 'development'. Their very bodies show some of what is wrong in our relationship with our fellow earth-beings, while the ongoing persecution demonstrates our failure to appreciate the earth that grew us.

Terran Badgers also, however, demonstrate an alternative ontology which, while morally neutral, is illustrative of some ideas supporting a more meaningful relationship with our surroundings as well as with our human and more-than-human community. As they increase the biodiversity around their setts, so humans could desist from the chemical warfare that turns agricultural land into wildlife deserts. As badgers share their setts with diverse others, so humans could resist exterminating any wild creature or plant who appears in their space. As badgers inhabit nested communities, with porous boundaries, so humans could live with both greater communal connections and more harmonious interconnections. As they belong to the land as much as the land belongs to them, so too, perhaps, could we.

The Terran Badger story affirms both the badgers' and the land's beautiness.

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Serpents, raptors and other liminal beings: The symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism

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Modern Western thought constructs non-human animals as Other – as lacking all the supposed marks of the human, such as subjectivity, reason, language and morality. Snakes, raptors and other liminal animal figures disrupt this dominant anthropocentric worldview, and a comparison with non-modern cosmologies shows how, in many cultures, non-human animals are recognized as legitimate interlocutors, endowed with their own subjectivities and agency. A reflection on a biocentric and intercultural ethics of interspecies communication, capable of overcoming extractive logics and mending the symbolic bonds severed with the non-human, shows how we can symbolically decentre anthropocentrism, and open spaces for these non-human agencies.

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We live in a time when ecological upheavals and cultural fractures converge to question the supremacy of the human. The erosion of biodiversity and the spread of zoonoses not only signal a biological crisis, they also expose the limits of an anthropocentric worldview that has long reduced non-human animals to objects of fear or utility.

In this context, exploring animal subjectivities becomes a radical act. It is not just about recognizing animal emotions or intelligence, but about asking how human cultures – ours and others – have constructed the category of *animal* as Other: deprived of reason, language and morality (Shepard, 1996; Lévi-Strauss, 1962). This dualistic opposition has had deep cultural and geopolitical consequences, shaping the destinies of non-modern cosmologies as well (Descola, 2013). To reopen the question of animal subjectivities is therefore to reopen the very meaning of what it means to be human (Latouche, 2009; Braidotti, 2013).

In this article I focus on species that occupy a particularly ambiguous place in the human imagination: snakes and raptors. These are animals culturally marginalized or openly feared, embodying ancestral fears and, at the same time, deep symbolic fascinations (Kohn, 2013). I will also explore the concept of liminal figures – beings who dwell on thresholds: between nature and culture, wilderness and domesticity, object and subject (Maran, 2015).

Feared others

If we look closely at the historical relationship between humans and many animal species, we notice that *fear* has often functioned as a powerful epistemic device: a lens that does not merely distort the image of the other, but actively constructs its meaning. We do not fear snakes and raptors *because* they are 'objectively' dangerous. Rather, narratives of danger, suspicion and control have shaped our understanding of their place in the world.

Snakes represent a paradigmatic case. Across cultures they have embodied both renewal and danger, but in modern Western contexts a single image prevails: the Edenic serpent, translated from religious symbol of temptation into secularized figure of risk. This legacy justifies their preventive elimination as an act of 'safety', a framing that still permeates popular science and wildlife management practices (Descola, 2013).

Raptors have likewise been cast as adversaries, from the eagle accused of stealing lambs to the owl associated with death omens (Shepard, 1996). Well into the twentieth century, their shooting or poisoning was considered a civic duty to protect livestock and 'useful' fauna. This rhetoric of defence consolidated a hierarchy of value among species, rendering some worthy of protection and others legitimately expendable (Kohn, 2013).

Beneath these schemes lies a deeper assumption: an anthropocentrism that establishes hierarchies of life based on perceived utility or danger to humans. A snake that does not bite, a raptor that does not prey on what is 'ours', may be tolerated or even celebrated as spectacle; otherwise, they become objects to be neutralized. Fear, far from being a mere instinct, thus acts as a normative device that shapes ecological relations (Latouche, 2009; Braidotti, 2013).

Furthermore, human emotional responses such as fear, fascination or affection do not erase animal subjectivity; they often presuppose it. As Winnicott (1971) suggested, encounters with non-human presences open transitional spaces where emotions become forms of symbolization. Marchesini (2017) similarly emphasizes that emotions toward animals are not projections but moments of relational recognition, in which the self negotiates its boundaries with another subject. Even fear, as Shepard (1996) reminds us, can be read as the trace of a long co-evolution, a response to beings perceived as active presences rather than inert objects. For this reason, animals that provoke fear are not less but more clearly revealed as subjects: they confront us with the limits of our control, obliging us to acknowledge them as agents in the relationship.

Animated ontologies

In contrast to Western framings, many other cultures have inscribed snakes and

raptors into radically different ontologies, which do not sharply separate nature and culture, human and non-human (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Descola, 2013).

In Amazonian indigenous cosmologies, for example, snakes are not merely predators to be feared, but entities endowed with subjective perspectives, capable of seeing and acting upon the world intentionally (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). In these cosmologies the boundaries between species are not fixed lines, but constellations of relations continually redefined. A snake, in certain ritual contexts, can see 'like a human' or become a conduit for visions, revealing that subjectivity is not the exclusive monopoly of *Homo sapiens*, but distributed among many living beings inhabiting different natures.

Similarly, in many African and Asian cultures, raptors are regarded as messengers or spirit guides. The eagle and falcon in particular embody the ability to overfly borders, connect worlds and carry news from ancestors or gods. Even barn owls, which in medieval European iconography were linked to misfortune, appear in other traditions as threshold protectors and guardians between life and death (Shepard, 1996).

This transformation is also visible within Euro-Mediterranean traditions if we look further back in time. The figure of the serpent provides a striking example. Jörmungandr, the great serpent encircling the world in Norse mythology, is a necessary cosmic presence, a symbol of balance and renewal. Its death at Ragnarök does not mark the end of everything, but the beginning of a new cycle. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, by contrast, the serpent becomes the embodiment of sin and temptation, bearer of a guilt that founds the punitive order of the West and justifies its moral supremacy over the rest of creation. These contrasts remind us that there is not a single, monolithic 'Western thought', but a plurality of traditions, often internally contradictory, that have framed animal figures in divergent ways.

These cosmologies are not simply 'folk beliefs' to be contrasted with a supposedly neutral and objective scientific knowledge. On the contrary, they reveal how every culture – including modern Western technoscience – constructs animated ontologies, ways of conceiving who or what possesses interiority, intentionality and speech (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013). The difference is that modernity has fenced off such qualities almost exclusively within the human, leaving other beings only a remainder of merely mechanical or biological functions.

To compare these visions is thus to problematize our very way of delimiting subjectivities. It is to ask: what do we lose – ethically, ecologically, epistemologically – when we refuse to entertain the possibility that a snake or a raptor might be something other than a mere automaton guided by instinct? And above all, what responsibility do we bear when transmitting to non-modern peoples a paradigm that risks dissolving their more sober, cohabitant cosmological relations with the living world (Latouche, 2009; Descola, 2013)?

It should be emphasized that focusing on the role cosmologies play in constructing our ontology, does not mean denying that animals possess autonomous subjectivities which precede and exceed human symbolic constructions. As Marchesini (2017) has argued, animal subjectivity is not a

derivative of human recognition but an agentive and relational dimension in its own right. Ingold (2000) has similarly shown that to perceive the environment is to enter into a meshwork of relations that cannot be reduced to cultural constructs, because beings are already enmeshed in processes of life and meaning. In this horizon, Kohn's (2013) insight that even forests 'think' through the semiotic activity of their non-human inhabitants further extends the point: what human cultures construct are not subjectivities themselves, but the frames through which these are acknowledged, valued or suppressed (Descola, 2013).

Liminal beings

In many mythological and narrative traditions, certain animals occupy an ambiguous position, oscillating between categories we usually consider distinct: life and death, earth and sky, inside and outside, individual and collective (Kohn, 2013; Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

Snakes are an emblematic case of such liminality: they crawl on the boundary between surface and underground, shed their skins, regenerate. Thus they are often associated with cycles of rebirth, but also with deep fears linked to the unknown and the uncontrollable (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Likewise, raptors traverse a frontier space: they fly high yet hunt low, acting as mediators between sky and earth, divine and terrestrial. Their gaze from above questions the horizontal perspective typical of humans, destabilizing hierarchies of observation and control (Maran, 2015; Martinelli, 2010).

There is another figure we can evoke as an example of radical liminality, one that prompts us to question the very temporality of life: the Aldabra giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*). With its slow pace, shell reminiscent of living rock and longevity spanning centuries, this creature embodies a deep time that far exceeds our individual human horizon. Encountering these tortoises can thus produce a disorienting sense of suspension. Liminality, in this sense, does not indicate a fixed border but a condition of oscillation and passage, where categories blur without disappearing: the perception that our rhythms, our urgencies, even our inner conflicts are tiny events on a temporal scale to which we do not quite belong (Shepard, 1996).

Liminal figures thus have the power to unsettle the dichotomies upon which we construct our identity – subject/object, culture/nature, rationality/instinct, and, of course, human/animal – and help us to see the contingency of the ontological boundaries we have constructed.

Interspecies communication and biocentric ethics

In light of all this, we might ask: what does it mean, in practical and normative terms, to recognize animal subjectivities and their agencies? How can we translate this perceptual shift into a biocentric ethics capable of decentring the human without denying it?

This shift entails acknowledging the cultural pluralities in how human relationships with other animals are conceived. An intercultural ethics cannot simply impose Western categories – whether zoological or moral – on the

relationships that different peoples maintain with the living world. It must instead open to a dialogue with cosmologies that see animals not as mere organisms, but as non-human persons, allies or guardians – interlocutors in a profoundly relational sense (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Kohn, 2013).

Interspecies communication becomes the privileged laboratory for such an ethics. It is not just about developing techniques to 'better understand' animals or interpret their behaviours in utilitarian ways (for example in conservation or training), but about cultivating forms of listening, attention and respect that recognize in other living beings the capacity to signify, to choose and sometimes to withdraw (Martinelli, 2010; Hoffmeyer, 2008).

In this context, a crucial contribution comes from zoosemiotics, the study of sign processes involving animals not merely as receivers but as producers of meaning (Hoffmeyer, 2008). As Martinelli (2010) and Maran (2015) demonstrate, animal communication is a complex semiotic field where animals interpret signals, construct meanings and modulate social and ecological interactions. As Wheeler (2016) argues, this semiotic approach can help us conceptualize human cultures themselves as ecologies of signs, interwoven with the communicative practices of non-human beings. This perspective reinforces the idea that animals are not biological machines but active interpreters of signs and subjects endowed with their own interiority.

This approach is not limited to an interpretive level: it becomes a true epistemic rewilding, a *renaturalization* of our own knowledge, dismantling the cognitive barriers we have erected between ourselves and other living beings (Hoffmeyer, 2008). It means reopening to the possibility that the signs emitted by a snake vibrating its tail, a raptor in flight or a turtle moving stubbornly forward are not merely physiological reactions, but components of a broader ecological language of which we too are a part (Abram, 1996).

In this sense, zoosemiotics emerges as a critical device for deconstructing anthropocentric categories and for relearning how to read the traces of agency scattered throughout the living world, without immediately domesticating and reducing them into 'the useful' or 'the dangerous'. It is an invitation to reshape our sensory and ethical literacy, reactivating a form of listening that precedes and exceeds our own grammar, opening us to the multiplicity of worlds and languages coexisting on the planet.

Decentring anthropocentrism

Ultimately, this perspective has an eminently political value: in an era marked by ecological crisis, zoonoses and climate change, rethinking interspecies relationships through a biocentric lens is not only an ethical exercise but a strategic urgency. This implies what I call a symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism, opening space for other agencies and ways of inhabiting the Earth. In this sense, liminal figures such as snakes, raptors and tortoises provide a privileged laboratory: they show us how to go about dwelling in thresholds, in the interstices that unsettle our ontological boundaries – between human and non-human, culture and nature, mortality and deep time (Descola, 2013; Braidotti, 2013). Authors such as Braidotti (2013) and Maran (2015) have argued

that learning to live with and in these thresholds is essential for a post-anthropocentric ethics. This entails no longer placing the human at the centre of our imaginaries, but instead opening space for narratives, practices and representations that restore agency and complexity to animal subjectivities.

This is not only of ecological or ethical significance; it also represents a profoundly anti-colonial act. It allows us to strip away the attractive power of a model of modernity which, when exported, pushes traditional cultures to abandon their cosmological fabrics in pursuit of consumerist paradigms (Descola, 2013; Latouche, 2009). In doing so, we risk destroying relationships that for centuries ensured cohabitation and respect, replacing them with a blind, purely economic relationship with the environment.

A symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism thus becomes a geopolitical responsibility: allowing the plurality of ways of inhabiting the world to flourish, without dragging them into a crisis that is, first and foremost, a crisis of our own imaginary. If we in the West – heirs to a modernity that severed symbolic ties with the rest of the living world – manage to regain a cultural and mental connection with non-modern visions, we might finally mend our ontological fracture without exerting that cultural soft power which pushes other societies toward our same fate (Braidotti, 2013; Latouche, 2009). A symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism thus means stripping power away from a devastating imaginary, resisting the homogenizing pressure of our cultural frames, and letting flourish the plurality of ways of dwelling on Earth – including those that still today recognize in snakes, raptors and tortoises not mere organisms, but interlocutors, allies and guardians of thresholds (Kohn, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998).

To make this symbolic shift effective requires us to translate it into concrete action. It means, for example, rethinking school and university curricula to incorporate intercultural and semiotic perspectives that restore complexity to non-human worlds. Concrete initiatives might include educational programmes where raptors are engaged as liminal figures to foster attentiveness and humility, or therapeutic projects involving giant tortoises, whose deep temporality unsettles our human rhythms and offers a unique pedagogical experience. It means fostering artistic and media forms that deconstruct human centrality, staging animal agencies, relational ecologies and deep temporalities (Martinelli, 2010; Maran, 2015; Wheeler, 2016). It also means supporting community and institutional decisions that integrate traditional knowledges, safeguarding historical relationships between peoples and territories without reducing them to mere marketing assets or hollow patrimonial rhetorics (Descola, 2013). Only in this way can this symbolic decentring become a daily and shared experience, truly transforming our way of inhabiting the Earth, rather than remaining a purely theoretical exercise.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this journey, we have shown how cultural representations of snakes, raptors and other liminal figures are not mere symbolic ornaments, but devices that concretely shape our relationships with the living. Modern

Western frameworks have often reduced these animals to objects to be managed or neutralized, erecting the human as the measure of all things. In contrast, non-modern cosmologies and the perspectives opened by zoosemiotics invite us to recognize a plurality of worlds and temporalities, where the human is neither centre nor apex, but one interlocutor among many.

Embracing this relational multiplicity means abandoning the claim to epistemic or moral transparency, opening ourselves to situated forms of knowledge, where listening to a snake vibrating its tail or watching a tortoise advance becomes an act of mutual learning. Moving from a paradigm of control to one of cohabitation entails rethinking educational institutions, environmental practices and our own inner maps. It means welcoming alterity not as a deficit, but as an opportunity to renegotiate our ontological, ethical and political boundaries.

Perhaps only by lingering alongside those who live in different times and worlds – from the raptor surveying from above to the tortoise crossing decades – can we begin to cultivate a perceptual openness and an ecological responsibility that is not paternalism, but a transformative alliance. To embrace such a perspective is to resist the homogenizing force of modernity and to let flourish a plurality of ways of dwelling on Earth that are truly ecocentric.

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Indigeneity and the ambivalence of eco-cultural imageries: A critical review of Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis*

Wendelin Küpers

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Sebastião Salgado's photographic project *Genesis* seeks to portray the planet's most 'pristine' landscapes and Indigenous cultures. Through its aesthetic power, this project leads us to examine the temptations of falling into romanticized and dangerous tropes of the 'noble savage' and 'endangered other'. By focusing on the ambivalence in Salgado's portrayal of Indigeneity, his project can be seen as a site of both mourning and transformation: a visual elegy that risks aestheticizing suffering, yet also gestures toward post-anthropocentric modes of responsiveness, poetic memory and embodied ecological responsibility.

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Even at the apparent apex of human dominion over nature, the deep interdependencies between human and non-human life have become undeniable. The boundaries once drawn to separate the two have proven porous – both ontologically and ecologically. Yet, even as we confront this entanglement, there is no return to a mythical pre-modern, putative Eden.

Instead, we need a radical decentring of the human – a shift toward a post-anthropocentric worldview. Only through such reconfiguration can we hope for the survival of nature–culture relationships amid planetary crisis. Understanding where we stand today, and how we might move differently, requires juxtaposing past and present, untouched and transformed, human and more-than-human. The arts – particularly those that render ecological realities sensuously visible, such as theatre and photography – play a vital role

in communicating the stakes of climate change. Iconic images, like those captured from space by astronaut Chris Hadfield, offer rare perspectives on Earth's fragility.

Likewise, Sebastião Salgado's photographic series *Genesis* invites viewers into an evocative encounter with landscapes and life forms seemingly untouched by industrial modernity. Salgado (1944–2025) was a Brazilian documentary photographer and photojournalist. Together with his wife and creative partner, Lélia Wanick Salgado, he founded *Instituto Terra*, a visionary project that seeks to heal what has been broken – reforesting lands degraded by human hands and rekindling a rural world on the verge of disappearance.

In this essay, I reflect on Salgado's *Genesis* project as a poetic and political provocation – one that both seduces and unsettles. While the project offers a powerful aesthetic experience of 'pristine' nature, it also raises critical questions. What, precisely, is the status of the Indigenous peoples depicted? Are we witnessing the revival of the 'Noble Savage' trope or the ideology of the 'Endangered Other'? What are the ethical and epistemic implications of such visual elegies for nature and culture? Engaging these questions, I situate Salgado's work within broader debates about post-humanism, poetic expression and the socio-cultural critique of the Anthropocene (*cf.* Küpers, 2020). Drawing on the idea of a poietic-poetic mode of perception, I argue for a shift from nostalgic visions of lost origins toward a post-dualistic ontology and toward enlivenment and a bio-cultural poetic way of regenerative dwelling.

Salgado's *Genesis* project

Genesis is the outcome of an eight-year photographic odyssey through some of the planet's most remote and ecologically intact regions, and functions as both visual testimony and aesthetic offering. It explores what Salgado calls "the most pristine" parts of the planet – landscapes, seascapes, flora, fauna, and Indigenous cultures that, in his view, remain relatively untouched by industrial modernity. In her curator's note, his partner Lélia Salgado describes the project as "a quest for the world as it was formed, as it evolved, as it existed for millennia before modern life accelerated and began distancing us from the very essence of our being" (https://galeriasmunicipais.pt/en/exposicoes/genesis). The project is thus both an artistic and spiritual journey into a world before – or recovering from – the transformations wrought by the Anthropocene.

Unlike Salgado's earlier work, which documented the visible scars of displacement, labour, migration and other devastations wrought by global capitalism, Genesis shifts attention to that which appears to have resisted or eluded such damage: places and people that evoke a mythical prehistory. Through light and lens, Salgado captures not what has been lost, but what remains – fragile, persistent, sublime.

The artfully composed black-and-white photographs are breathtaking: sweeping glaciers, dense jungles, desert plateaus, volcanic highlands and the dignified presence of animals and human communities alike. These pictures express awe and fascination, evoke reverence and invite consolation, for the artist as for the viewer. Yet, while on the surface they invite us to establish a

contemplative relation with nature's magnitude, beauty and power, digging beneath these seductions of the sublime, we find that Salgado's project is interpretively ambiguous. On one reading it can appear to retreat into a pre-modern vision of purity and original harmony, while on another it can look as if it advances a post-humanist view that decentres the human perspective within broader ecological relationships.

This ambiguity is clearest when we examine the portrayals of Indigenous peoples featured in *Genesis*. In Salgado's framing, they are not merely subjects of ethnographic interest, but embodiments of another way of being – one that unsettles Western assumptions about progress, development and mastery. But can these images help us unlearn the assumptions and false certainties of a civilization that has led us to ecological brinkmanship? And if so, how might we relate to these 'Others' without romanticizing, appropriating or fossilizing them as symbols of what we have lost? In these tensions – between nostalgia and critique, aesthetic awe and ethical reflection – *Genesis* performs a subtle but urgent function: it unsettles. It asks us to linger with what endures and to consider what it means to witness, through the photographic gaze, not only what is at risk of vanishing, but also what might yet guide us toward a more inhabitable future.

Indigeneity and the 'noble savage' trope

In Salgado's portrayal, Indigenous communities are presented as inhabiting deep ecological symbiosis, having developed ingenious ways of meeting their needs while preserving the integrity of their environment. Yet this aesthetic reverence risks reinscribing an old trope: the romanticized figure of the 'noble savage'.

Long familiar in Western thought, the noble savage is often cast as simple, innocent and untainted by the moral decay of modern civilization – a being whose virtue is inseparable from their proximity to nature. Such depictions simultaneously idealize and infantilize, portraying Indigenous life as pure yet doomed while erasing complexity and agency. Why does this trope persist in the Anthropocene? Why does the ideal of a prelapsarian harmony with nature hold such appeal for late- and post-modern subjects disillusioned with their own civilization? Does it project our longing for innocence, or critique modernity through imagined alternatives?

In Salgado's photographs, Indigenous figures appear as visual anchors of an ecological imaginary. But are they also being positioned as relics – remnants of an earlier stage in human development that we can no longer access, except as spectators or mourners? Do these images risk turning living cultures into museum pieces – preserved snapshots of 'authenticity' frozen within an evolutionary narrative that positions them as earlier stages of human development? Salgado thus joins a long tradition of travellers, artists and critics of civilization who have projected meaning onto the 'Other'. Since Columbus, Indigenous peoples have been described as generous and beautiful – traits idealized as a foil to European corruption. In the 20th century, neo-primitivist movements in art similarly sought to retrieve a 'golden age' of human expression from beyond the reach of industrialization and rationalism.

To be clear, Salgado's images do not replicate the colonial gaze in any overtly racist or ethnocentric way. There is no suggestion of Indigenous inferiority; rather, his lens honours their resilience and ecological intelligence. Still, critical absences remain. The photographs omit inconvenient truths: the presence of internal conflict, environmental degradation initiated by Indigenous groups themselves, and practices that may not conform to modern ideals of harmony or nonviolence.

This approach distances Salgado from scholars like Napoleon Chagnon, whose controversial *Noble Savages* (2013) depicted Yanomami life as inherently shaped by aggression and evolutionary conflict. Similarly, Salgado does not subscribe to Jared Diamond's form of ecological determinism, which tends to explain societal dynamics through environmental factors while subtly reinforcing evolutionary hierarchies of cultural development (*e.g.* Diamond, 1997; 2005). Unlike Diamond's systematic comparative framework in *The World Until Yesterday* (2012) – which explicitly examines what modern societies might learn from traditional practices in conflict resolution, child-rearing and risk management – Salgado's engagement with Indigenous wisdom is more suggestive and poetic. Diamond's central question – *What can contemporary Western societies learn from traditional ones?* – hovers over *Genesis*, but Salgado offers no prescriptions. Instead of anthropological analysis, he presents fragments of a premodern imaginary that invite contemplation rather than comparison. His work gestures rather than argues, suggesting that traditional ways of life may offer value by opening space for reflection on how we moderns live and what we might recover.

Nevertheless, Salgado's portrayal risks veering into what might be called a form of 'nature mystique' or 'romantic naturalism' – a seductive belief that all that is deemed 'natural' is inherently good, pure or spiritually superior. This view suggests, albeit implicitly, that Mother Earth bestows her favour upon those who live in harmony with her rhythms – more so than upon the so-called 'civilized' human, estranged from nature by industrial modernity. Such a fantasy is not only reductive but politically fraught. It glosses over the complexity and internal diversity of Indigenous experiences and lifeways, and it obscures the historical fact that the figure of the noble savage has long served ideological purposes – from justifying conquest and colonization to reinforcing paternalistic preservationism. What appears as reverence may thus conceal an unexamined projection – one that flattens difference in the name of ecological purity.

As Ellingson (2001) has compellingly demonstrated in his genealogy of the noble savage trope, this figure has long served multiple ideological functions. Historically, it has been deployed both to rationalize colonial domination – enabling anthropologists and imperial agents to create the cultural climate in which slavery and genocide could be imagined as civilizing necessities – and to romanticize resistance, framing Indigeneity as a reservoir of moral purity or ecological virtue. Its persistence in artistic and popular representations reveals less about the lives of those depicted than about the longings, desires and anxieties of those who observe them.

And yet, even armed with this critical awareness and knowledge, we may still find ourselves drawn to these images – not because they offer unmediated truth, but because they resonate with a deep cultural ambivalence. As witnesses to ecological breakdown, we are haunted by the realization that these last 'noble savages' may not survive and soon vanish under the pressures of global(izing) modernity. Paradoxically, this anxiety often gives rise to a preservationist impulse: a desire to fix such communities in place, rendering them timeless, untouched and untouchable. But such a gesture mistakes petrification for preservation, confusing ethical responsibility with aesthetic arrest.

The challenge is to move beyond the myth while remaining open to a relational wisdom these communities offer as living cultures, not static icons. We must resist the urge to cast them as mirrors for our own disillusionment, or as screens onto which we project fantasies of innocence and lost coherence. Instead, we are called to recognize them as participants in an unfolding, entangled planetary story – one marked as much by struggle and transformation as by continuity.

It is essential, therefore, that we approach Salgado's images with a two-fold awareness: of the visual power they wield in evoking reverence and urgency, and also of the dubious mythic residue they may carry. The 'noble savage' is not an innocent figure – it was and is a fabrication with political weight, one that can be resurrected for ideological ends. And do we not, in our moment of civilizational fatigue, find ourselves tempted to read these photographs and their accompanying narratives as vessels for projecting our own disillusionment?

In the face of the perceived failures of late modernity and the fragmentation of postmodern pluralism, these images offer the semblance of wholeness. But in doing so, they risk turning societies that are dynamically alive into 'living museums' – encapsulated moments of evolutionary time, suspended in amber for our edification or comfort. The ethical task, then, is not to idolize or to ignore, but to listen – critically, humbly and dialogically – to the voices and life-worlds that pulse and persist behind and beyond the frame.

Dangers in relation to the endangered other

The figure of the 'endangered other' – most often embodied by Indigenous communities cast as guardians of authentic nature – has emerged as a powerful yet problematic icon within contemporary ecological discourse. These communities are frequently portrayed as holders of sacred knowledge: resilient, adaptive and in harmony with the Earth. Their vulnerability to climate change is positioned as a mirror of our own – yet their symbolic function often far exceeds the complex realities they inhabit.

Framed as 'living archives' of sustainability, Indigenous peoples are romanticized as repositories of ecological wisdom, and keepers of balance in a world increasingly defined by collapse. Their beliefs, values, and practices – deeply place-based, historically situated and often geographically remote or isolated – are presented as exemplars of traditional ecological knowledge:

insights accumulated over generations through close, reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world.

Yet such portrayals risk slipping into essentialism. As Kuper (1988; 2003) shows, the trope of the 'authentic native' reflects modern projections more than the lived realities of Indigenous life. Difference becomes essentialized, remoteness valorized, and tradition reified as a static repository of ecological truth. This 'return of the native' acts as a cultural mirror through which modern societies project their alienation from nature onto the figure of the 'primitive', casting it as a symbol of lost ecological innocence, purity and unbroken harmony – untouched by modern fragmentation and a vision of culture in which nature is not challenged but affirmed.

But this symbolism is dangerous: it homogenizes diverse cultures and erases histories of conflict and transformation into a single narrative of natural harmony. Moreover, the binary framing that casts the globalized West as environmental destroyer and the traditional Rest as innocent victim perpetuates and reinforces a moral geography that needs to be abandoned. These dualisms – nature versus culture, modernity versus tradition – reinscribe the very logic of separation and domination that drives socio-ecological devastation.

We must therefore exercise critical care when invoking the 'endangered other'. These communities with their beliefs and practices are not timeless remnants of a premodern past. Rather, they are dynamic life-worlds of experience and knowledge embedded in evolving ecological and social relations. To idealize them is to immobilize them – to turn them into representations or symbols rather than affective living beings and agents; abstract icons rather than interlocutors with whom dialogue and mutual transformation are possible.

The challenge is to move beyond nostalgia and the colonial gaze, recognizing Indigenous communities as co-creators of futures – neither wholly traditional nor uncritically modern, but shaped through shared struggle, layered histories and collaborative re-imaginings. They are not relics of authenticity, nor romantic foils to modern or postmodern condition, but fellow inhabitants of this challenged planet. This requires an ethic of solidarity: dialogue rather than fetishization, reciprocity rather than reverence, and mutual transformation rather than static preservation. Only thus can we honour the vitality of Indigenous life and inspiring enacting enlivenment (Heron, 2003; Weber, 2019).

Reawakening the senses of the world

In *Genesis*, Sebastião Salgado offers more than visual beauty – he provides a mirror and provocation. His photographs draw us into sublime intimacy with the world while entangling us in contradictions of representation, ideology and longing. They evoke origins we cannot return to and futures we have not yet earned. As the ideological pull of the tropes of the 'noble savage' and 'endangered other' demonstrate, aesthetic reverence may obscure political complexity or reinforce colonial residues. What is needed is not idealization of Indigenous pasts, but openness to embodied, unfinished presence. Living in

the Anthropocene means inhabiting the intersection of grief and hope, memory and invention, solitude and solidarity. It is to recognize that the future is not a place we inherit, but a terrain we co-create – through practices of attention, responsiveness and resistance. It is to remember, as poetry does, that life is not only a 'system', but also a song: a rhythm of becoming shared among all beings.

Against the machinery of disconnection and commodification, the lasting value of Salgado's *Genesis* is that it offers a different kind of gesture – not a solution, but a sensitivity. Not a doctrine and answers, but an indication and an invitation. To see. To feel. To dwell. To begin again, not in innocence, but in an embodied responsibility, as 'ability to respond'. If there is to be a poetics of survival, it will not be built on nostalgia or fantasies of purity, but on what we make of this entangled moment – how we bear witness, how we respond and how we learn to live with others, human and more-than-human alike.

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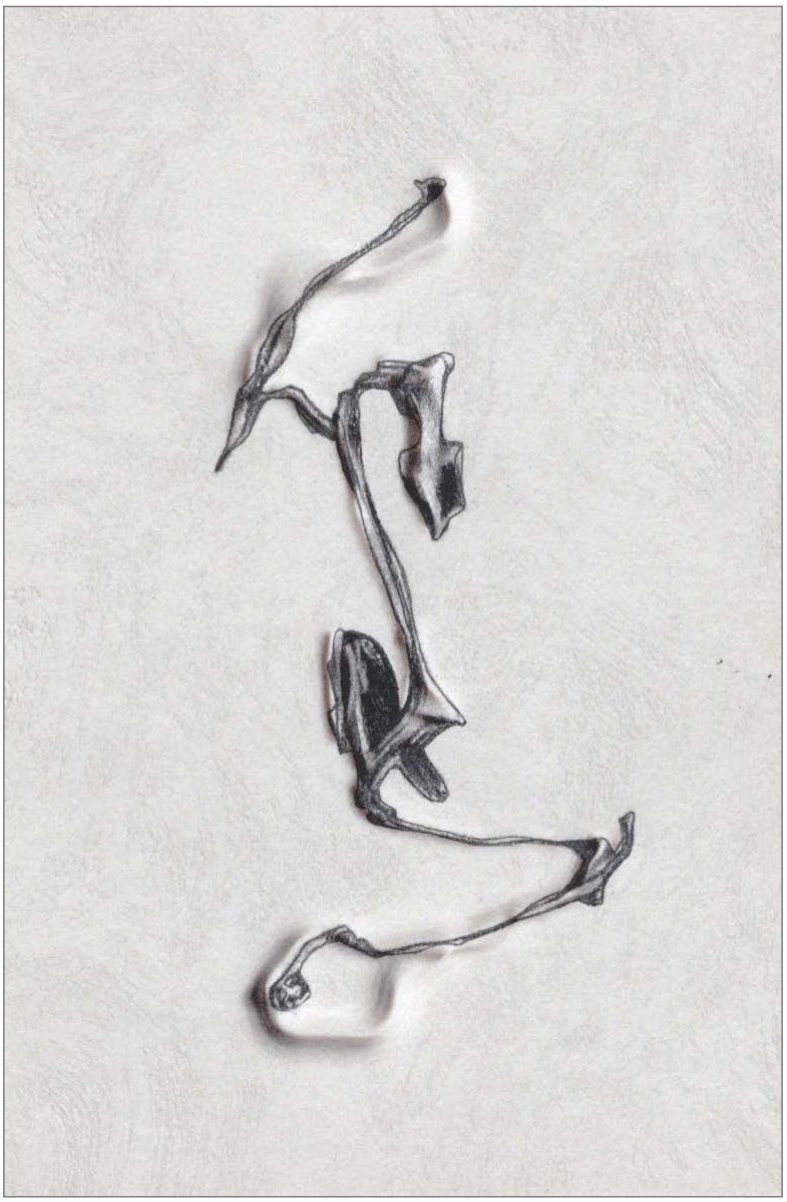
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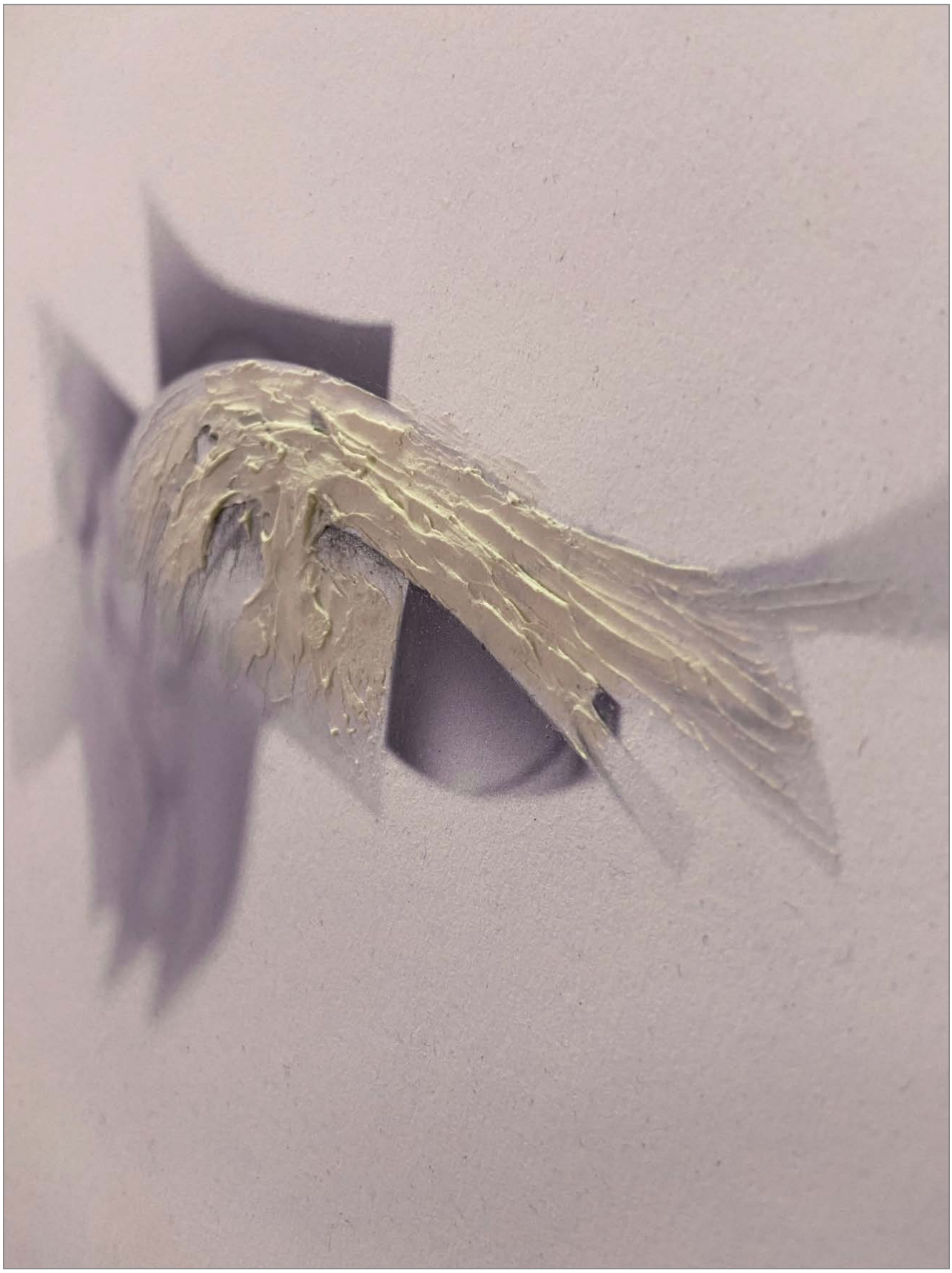
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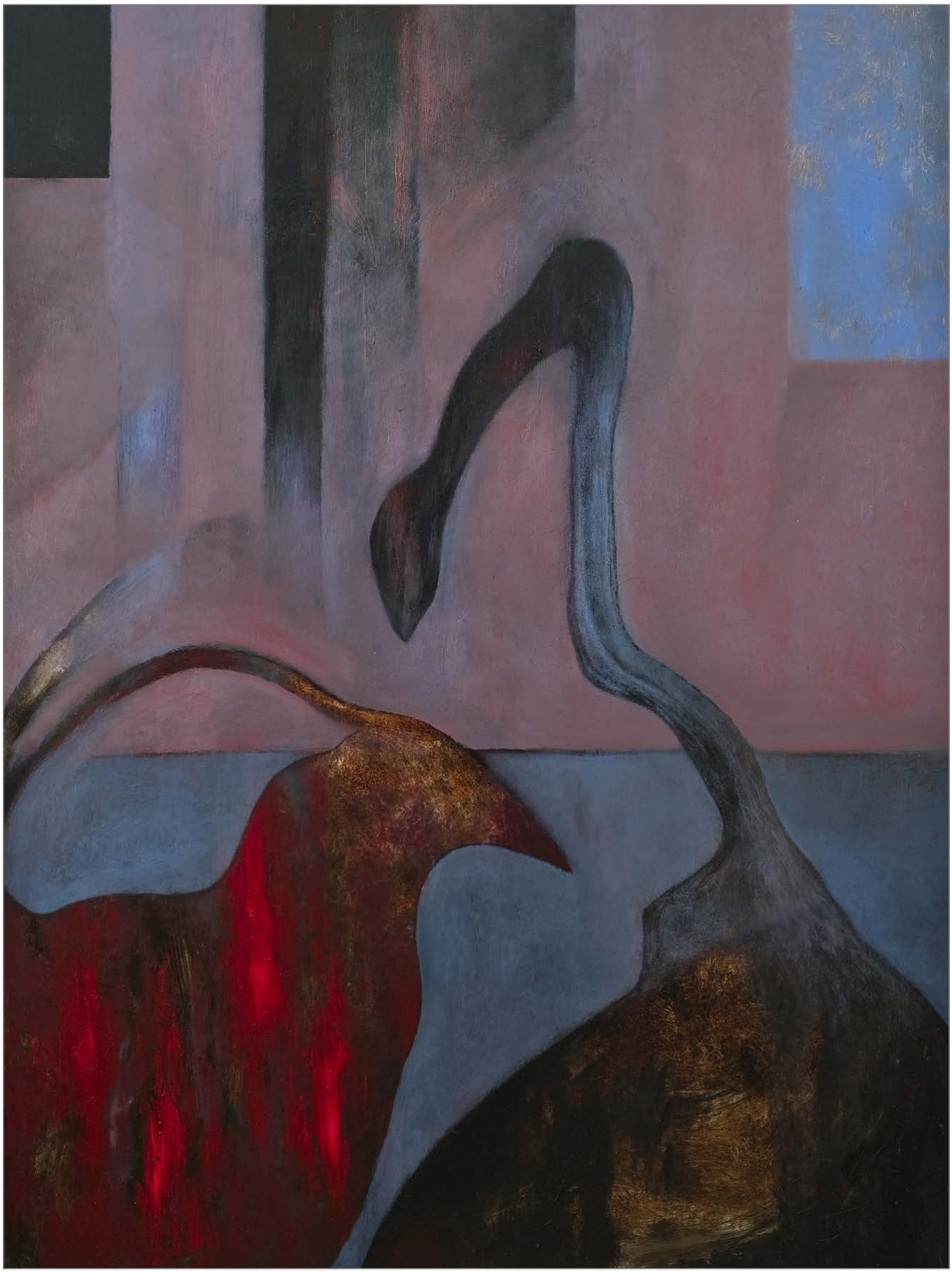
Untitled series
Guido Canziani Jona

From the artist: "I like to think of my journey as a scientific investigation applied to art. Each of my works shares a deep connection with the natural world – where the very structures of life reveal themselves, much like they might under a microscope, through a telescope, or in the data received from a distant space probe. My creative methodology often follows a similar logic: moving from complex forms toward their most essential elements. Some animal and plant species have long since vanished, leaving behind traces and fossils that testify to their fundamental role in evolution. Other species – and even entire worlds – have never existed, yet we can easily imagine them. This extraordinary capacity for imagination comes from our place within nature itself: a vast structure we did not build, one that feels familiar yet remains only partially understood – one we sometimes believe we control."

Higher-quality versions of artwork from this issue: https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/artworks.php?v=9&n=1









Poetry section

Edited by Victor Postnikov

Victor is a poet, essayist and translator whose home is in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Life far exceeds humans. For millennia, ecopoets have understood it as a far greater enterprise. In their poetry, we can hear the voices of those who came before us and those who live alongside us. Now, however, they face extinction and die in silence, deafened by the roar of civilization. The time has come to renew the old understanding that all life, including humanity, speaks a common language. Thus, the mission of ecocentric poetry, or ecopoetry, is to help us empathize with non-human entities, be they a whale, a tree or a mountain. For we are all kin.

CLASSIC

This is thy hour

Walt Whitman

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

CONTEMPORARY

Untitled

Ava Bird

oceans
inside myself
ebbs and moons
inside me
wax wane
lunartic
sun inside me
i give birth to the seeds
even in the dark
it is me
it is up to me
to birth the seeds

* * *

in blood
i owe
to my ancestors
in the earth
give her back

* * *

across this ocean
no hidden treasures
except the wide open
land

* * *

the earth very thirsty
superficially dry, cracked
rivers, creeks, empty bedded
yet
still waters
run deep
oceans
alive

* * *

another desert drought
yet
our abundant streams
still flow

CONTEMPORARY

chocomallow

Brice Maiurro

we hold sky dark soil
in our reverent soft palms
as the head of a newborn
it slips between our fingers
as the late days
of the anthropocene
a stand of aspens
surrounding the clearing

as awe-wind moves through us
our hands have held such variant things
possibility is more more than we could think
it holds us in its reverent soft palms

CONTEMPORARY

the visible

Brice Maiurro

oh yes
i have seen
the branches
of the winter
hackberry
in the horns
of the
summer stag
& the horns
–
of the stag
in the leaves
of the oak
the leaves
of the oak
in the
tributaries of
the colorado
river & the
river in the
tiny cracks
of the
swelling ice
i have seen
the ice within
the womb
of the snow
& the snow
in the coat of
the snowshoe
rabbit & the
rabbit has
seen me
there is
no question
of the goodness

within all of us
but maybe
more so if
we can see it
& more so
even yet
if we can be
so bold as
to make it
seen

CONTEMPORARY

Shrimp Glyphs

Moira Nicholson

I saw a dark black glyph among a mound
Of yellow coral polyps on the reef.
The symbols, strange and beautiful, abound.

A guidebook told about the rune in brief:
Two shrimps had made the enigmatic mark
And dwelt together in their carved relief.

The blurb was short. I opted to embark
Onto the internet to search for more.
The pages that I looked upon were stark

And empty where I hoped I could explore.
My guidebook had a broader set of facts.
I've often found this gaping lack of lore

Where all I find is researchers' abstracts
If anything on creatures that seem neat.
I don't know if the internet redacts

The information that it could accrete
Or too few people study decapeds,
But everything I find is incomplete.

The nature shows are busy weaving threads
Of plot through famous wild mammals' lives.
Who cares? What bugs are climbing in the sedge?

This made-up melodrama trick deprives
The viewer of the facts we've figured out.

This gaping lack of information drives
Me, and others, to the sea to pout.
I read the shrimp-made glyphs that I have found
To search for knowledge through another route.

CONTEMPORARY

Less Travelled than the Moon

Moira Nicholson

Take me deeper than my feet can go
And deeper than the noontime sun can shine,
Where abyssal life creates the only glow.

Let day and night trade places, I won't know
Save by the squid who rise at dusk to dine.
Take me deeper than my feet can go,

For on these plains one cannot walk, although
Tripod fish stand on three fins. That's fine
Where abyssal life creates the only glow.

Basket stars reach out for falling 'snow',
The refuse shed much higher in the brine.
Take me deeper than my feet can go

And deeper than a television show.
No shallow scrape; think more a diamond mine
Where abyssal life creates the only glow.

The pressure smooshes submarines like dough
And air becomes a threat. Still, I opine,
Take me deeper than my feet can go
Where abyssal life creates the only glow.

CONTEMPORARY

Survival of the Species

AJ Dalton

As a mosquito
I'd have my chemical labs
work on a lethal formula.
If I were a termite
I'd undermine all the cities.
If I were a fish

I'd leap and push in such number
that boats and crew were overturned and tangled
in their own fouled nets.
Were I cat or hound,
I'd wait till they'd fallen
asleep
and gently smother and toothily devour all trace.
An elephant, I'd trample them
A mule, I'd stove them in
and croakingly laugh as a murder of crows
or rend with talons, spit acid
poison with stings
bite, slash, thrash and suffocate
fang, claw, levers and weight
and All.
As a human, though, I'd hang my head
In acceptance and shame.

CONTEMPORARY

The Ichthylocene: A Reflection on Genesis 1:20

Rev'd Allen Doyle

Anemoia creeps
into my bones yet again
for that fifth day, God
when the waters birthed the swarms,
and no feet had touched the shore.

CONTEMPORARY

St. Anthony's Song

Rev'd Allen Doyle

on any ole Sunday, down yonder in the river
the fish do not school, but they church
the catfish choir's anthems, will send your spine shivers
the bass get absolved by perch
they know the old stories, they sing the old tunes,
their scales flash the moon's beams like stained glass
while they gather every week, as is age old tradition
that night something went amiss during their riparian mass
cause down by the willows, a shadow appeared
it approached the shore with great haste
a possible angler, but he had no gear
he opened his mouth, and the fish were amazed

what was said on that strange balmy night in Rimini
I reckon the world'll never know
the sermon was lost to the annals of history
But the story carries on even so
Now the miracles often reduced down to this:
It was Dr Dolittle's Pentecost Party Trick
But the disciples of the deep already knew the gospel
this was just the first time they'd met a human that wasn't hostile

CONTEMPORARY

Strait of Gibraltar

Sandra M Grayson

Iberian orcas
between an ocean and a sea—
summer morning

CONTEMPORARY

Synchronization

Sandra M Grayson

Between the Atlantic Ocean
and the Mediterranean Sea,
each rhythmic blow sound
accompanies a cloud-like mist.

"At two o'clock, pilot whales,"
the captain says to the photographer
as the boat sails ahead of the thunder.

The patient photographer
believes that a single leader
pilots each pod—
an image he hopes to capture.

"At two o'clock, pilot whales,"
the captain repeats
as waves toss the boat.

The photographer focuses his camera.
The camera lens, a compass,
tries to find the navigator
guiding the group.

Instead of a leader, the photographer
captures synchronization—
the pilot whales swim parallel to each other
keeping pace with the boat.

CONTEMPORARY

Lily Lured

Michael Baldwin

A bevy of
ostentatious
orange tiger
lilies flirt
brazenly
extenuated
stems nodding
metronomically
tockly ticking
syncopated
jaunty
breeze jazz
wooing
the wan world
beckoning
somber bees
flaunting
flamboyant color
Lacking
fragrance their
extravagant
anthers lick up
sun-honey
proud in their
pulchritude
such an ugly name
for beauty

CONTEMPORARY

Empty Ocean

Michael Baldwin

Like the Earth itself, we are mostly ocean,
each embodied human cell a tight, tiny puddle
of salt water tiding constantly in response to

our heart's moon. Our each interior ocean is
alive with microbiota living lustily, perhaps
praying vainly to this god they ignorantly inhabit.

And we ignore our constituent cells, inherently
incommunicado, trusting them to do their duties
(as they mostly do), while we despoil our world
with heat-hoarding gases and lust for gain, loath
to love our Earth like the mother body She is,
expecting a deus ex machina technology rescue,
or praying our God will provide a miracle.

Our world ocean follows Earth's ever-falling,
dust-dry moon, that constantly calls the water
toward itself, greedily, and will do so even
after there are no whales, sharks, or little fish
to feel its tidal surge upon the global sea stir.

Waves and storms will anger the ocean,
will monster as the oceans hot up,
expand, rise another two hundred feet
as Earth goes iceless, suddenly sunburned.
Swarming jellyfish may monopolize those
barren, blighted waters, but little else.

What will Luna's envious gaze make of Gaia's
capricious wardrobe? Hurricanes will swirl
in deadly ballet upon her warming seas, while
fire storms dance like furies through forests,
cities, suburbs, farms. Jungles, callously
converted to monocultures for cows
and money trees, will aridify to desert.

Glaciers and sea ice swiftly succumb
to total melt, so deserts and arid plains
will replace tundra and meadow.
Hundreds of species of flora and fauna
will fall extinct with each monthly sequence
of the jealous moon.

Our bodies' micro-oceans, each and all, will spill
themselves to air or earth, reliably returning to
the always ocean whence we anciently emerged.
Humanity's hubris will pass unnoticed, our time
a mere drop in the sea of Earth's antiquity, while
even this barren ocean will submissively mambo,

ever in thrall to the eons-eager craving of Earth's
thirsty moon ~ as unquenchable as ourselves.

CONTEMPORARY

A Word to the Dumb

Paul Murgatroyd

Portending the end of days,
a man-child has been born,
with wolf-heads on his chest and knees and elbows,
crying: 'Kill, baby, kill!'
Soon stone will rise up against stone,
every creature will look to heaven and tremble,
locusts with human hair will strip seas and lands bare,
wormwood will infect rivers, infest streams and lakes,
suns will scorch the soil to ashes
and mountains will be engulfed by bleeding oceans.
Such are the fruits of your torpor,
Apathy's child.

About the poets

Walt Whitman (1819–92) was an American poet, essayist and journalist. He incorporated both transcendentalism and realism in his writings.

Ava Bird is a multi-versed artist who is continually grateful to and inspired by and on Mother Earth. She has written in many forms and published widely, though greatly censored! She has written several poetry books and is a featured columnist on the New American Dream show. Her art and creations have been seen in galleries around the US, and her poetry, art and stories are published internationally. She has a collectable trio of Zen poetry books, and her book *Magical Moments* was released in 2022.

Brice Maiurro is a Colorado, USA, poet, workshop facilitator, storyteller and artist. He is the Editor-in-Chief of South Broadway Press. He has authored four collections of poetry, including *The Heart is an Undertaker Bee*, published by Middle Creek Publishing. His work has been published by *Voice & Verse*, *Tiny Spoon* and *Inverted Syntax*. Themes of his work include human connection, ecology and finding the divine in the mundane.

AJ Dalton is a UK-based writer. He's published the *Empire of the Saviours* trilogy with Gollancz Orion, *The Satanic in Science Fiction and Fantasy* with Luna Press, the *Dark Woods Rising* poetry collection with Starship Sloane, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.

Moira Nicholson is a neurodivergent person with a doodling habit. She also works in colour pencil, ceramics and needle felting... just about any medium other than paint. She is a member of the Hawaii Writers Guild, and two of her poems were published in *66: The Linn-Benton Community College's Journal of Art and Creative Writing*.

Rev'd Allen Doyle, originally from the Duck River watershed in Tennessee, USA, now lives on the Laramie Plains in Wyoming with his wife Michaela, and dog Brie. Professionally, Allen is the Director of Campus Ministry for the Episcopal Church in Wyoming and an Adjunct Instructor of Religion at the University of Wyoming.

Sandra M Grayson's poetry and fiction explore intersections among nature, communication and worldviews. Through her website *Anumpa Nan Anoli*, she is helping to preserve traditional Choctaw stories.

Michael Baldwin has written many poems on ecological themes. He has a 100-page book of poetry on the climate change crisis. He has also published seven volumes of poetry, two of which won contests.

Paul Murgatroyd is a professor of Classics who retired nine years ago and took up creative writing. So far he has had published or accepted for publication 22 poems in English, over 100 Latin poems, four prose poems and 64 short stories.

Nature Reclaims: Images of Healing (photo series)

Adina-Iuliana Deacu

About the artist: Adina-Iuliana is a Klaus Töpfer Sustainability Fellow
at the Research Institute for Sustainability, Helmholtz Centre, Potsdam, Germany.

From the artist: "In contrast to the extractive pace of business-as-usual, which measures success through speed, output, and control, these photographs invite us to slow down and listen to the temporal rhythms of regeneration. Healing, in ecological terms, cannot be rushed. It unfolds through cycles of decay, rest, and renewal that challenge the linear logic of profit. At the Research Institute for Sustainability, my work explores how redefining 'business' as an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way can mirror this natural tempo – shifting from extraction toward restoration, from efficiency toward patience, and from growth toward balance."

Higher-quality versions of artwork from this issue: https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/artworks.php?v=9&n=1



Plant emerging from concrete

From the artist: "A single sprout pushes through a crack in the pavement, symbolizing emergence against constraint. It reflects the idea that truly regenerative business models grow where old paradigms fail – where life insists on finding a way."



Roots and pavement

From the artist: "A tree root weaves through concrete tiles, transforming rigidity into resilience. This image evokes the regenerative logic behind redefining business – not as extraction, but as an ecosystemic force that adapts, heals, and coexists with its environment."

Fern and brick wall

From the artist: "A fern and other greenery emerges through fractured walls, turning decay into life. Like nature's quiet persistence, regenerative enterprises can thrive within the cracks of failing systems, proving that repair and renewal are viable economic strategies for a climate-challenged world."





Greenery in ceramic vessel

From the artist: "A broken vessel becomes a vessel for growth – a metaphor for transforming damage into value. This parallels how business can be reimagined to regenerate rather than exploit, aligning profit with ecological and social healing."



Climbing plant and stone wall

From the artist: "A plant climbs across a stone facade, softening its edges and reclaiming its space. This slow, symbiotic process mirrors the transition toward post-extractive economies that integrate care, adaptation, and collaboration into their operational DNA."

Fiction section

Edited by Joe Gray and Taylor Hood

Joe is a field naturalist and conservationist who lives on the island of Great Britain. He writes eco-fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar. Taylor is a Scottish naturalist whose background spans wildlife ecology and literary research.

Rewilding has grown in prominence among conservationists, and its spirit is increasingly shaping a wider cultural imagination. This broader ethos challenges the assumptions of an ecocidal modernity, envisioning a planet where humans rekindle their wild selves and our non-human kin live out untrammelled lives. It is in this sense that we present *Feral Lines*, a collection of unflinching but ultimately hopeful stories about nature's rebounding. We welcome similarly themed tales for consideration in future issues of *The Ecological Citizen*.



Little Cub

Leath Tonino

He felt ill. Had felt ill for weeks, months, maybe even years. But now, suddenly, it was too much. Not a background thing. Not some vague discomfort. Real pain. Sharp. Rushing him to the bathroom. Bending him over the toilet.

After an hour, an eternity, the vomiting stopped. He wiped drool from his chin. Opened his burning eyes. And what he saw made zero sense. It wasn't bile or blood. Wasn't palm oil or jet fuel. Wasn't bullets or beer bottles or

skyscrapers or supertankers or busted motherboards or syringes or rusty paint cans. Torn t-shirts, shredded flags. Chemical plants. Bones. No, it was all of these at once. Plus a body. Smaller than his pinky. Trying and trying and trying to swim, but mostly just sputtering, flailing, sinking.

Without a thought, he reached into the hell of the bowl and scooped the body up. And again what he saw made zero sense. Tar and glue coating the fur. Coal dust and plastic bags clotting the ears, nose, mouth. Chest heaving. Paws twitching. Tail knotted. Right there in his cupped hand, lying flat, the tiniest cougar.

I refuse.

Little friend, little stranger, little cub.

I refuse your death.

The voice both was and wasn't his own. He'd heard it before, decades ago perhaps. As a child. Walking the woods. It had been forever since he walked the woods. Longer than forever. Instantly, the rich scent of decaying leaves filled the bathroom. Shapes and colors and textures of his forgotten youth. Damp trails braided with roots, studded with rocks. Mosses spreading.

He flushed the toilet, slammed the lid shut.

I refuckingfuse!

Bit his lip and carried the poor creature away.

Come evening, though the miniature cougar remained in great danger, its condition had improved in response to a dozen drops of heavy cream offered via a napkin's soaked corner and a soft slipper placed beneath a reading lamp's warm yellow bulb. Night passed slowly. A terrible vigil of waiting, watching, worrying. But by dawn the cougar could stand, and by noon it could limp circles around the inside of the slipper, and by the second evening it could take solid food. Three days later, it snarled.

That was sweet music. Such sweet, sweet music. And that was merely the beginning. The cougar soon grew to the size of a banana. Then to the size of a ukulele. Then to the size of a coffee table. Then to the size of a cougar.

Little cub, little friend.

She prowled kitchen counters.

This is wrong.

She attacked couch cushions.

You need the wild.

She climbed walls.

I'll miss your whiskers.

She screamed.

Thank you.

And so they drove. And drove. And drove farther. And drove farther still. Out of the past and into the future. Out of confusion and into the woods. Drove until the car fell to pieces and she was sprinting, leaping, flashing, gone. Until he was walking, destination uncertain. Legs feeling strong, healthy. Tears rolling down his cheeks.

After the End

Nomi McLeod

When we ended, they began.

First the shoots, unfurling everywhere. So many greens you could not name them all. The now-sweet air – alive with butterflies, wasps, bees. Those of us who were left to witness it were rendered speechless. We were delighted even – despite everything we had seen. It was as if the world had been holding its breath. Now, at last, it breathed out.

On that exhale came a thousand flowers. Dawn choruses to end sleep. It was like a symphony building; the birds, then the deer walking along roads, ears flicking, passing abandoned cars. Squirrels inside schools, knocking over pencil pots with their tails as they rushed to escape cats who had swiftly left the domestic behind. Meadows of flowers that grew up and up and concealed the fallen. Each coloured petal like a note; brightest red, thick yellows, shocks of blue as if the sky had shattered. The bleached skull-white of daisies peeping out of empty eye sockets.

Without consultation we agreed to never discuss the past. We looked away from the things we had once built. Our beloved right angles, rendered in grey concrete. High rises, set like faceless idols against the starry sky. We averted our eyes.

When we entered these buildings we sat on the floor, ignoring the chairs. We wanted nothing of what had led us here. We felt we had been spared. And we felt watched. Often, we were silent. The word 'I' began to wilt. It made less and less sense. When we did speak our voices were hushed. We sounded brash and guttural now. Unnatural.

It was better to glide along quietly. It was necessary to listen. We listened hard – not only for dangers but to the ghosts inside us. We felt sure the land could help us remember what we had once known. Namely, how to live here, like this.

Sure enough – there were lessons everywhere. The birds taught us how to go invisible – still and small enough to pass by without setting off their alarm calls. The sky proclaimed the coming weather in a hundred ways. We sheltered inside abandoned train carriages, laying across the soft seats, before the first drops even fell. Ivy grew across the windows.

Once, black against a white sky, we met a bear. An escapee maybe, or one released long ago when her captors realised what was happening. She stopped and stared at us. We stared back. Behind her bumbled two small ones, bear-children. Some of us wept. She was so much a mother we wondered how we had ever not seen it.

We stood still, waiting. She could attack us; we all knew now that mothers were the fiercest. But she walked on, deeper into her own story, forgetting us in an instant. After a moment, we walked on too.

Our own story was behind us. With each step it grows ever more indistinct, ever more softened. Blurred now with lichens and molds and moss.

The Opening

Taylor Hood

Long before the city unsealed itself, a child knelt by a rift in the pavement, lips parting to ask how a whole forest could breathe in so tight a space. Though his parents scolded him and onlookers stifled laughter, the boy's words took root in those who heard them, quietly breaking down the walls around their hearts.

It was at a gap in a wall not far away that the vision of the child proved its power, for when a commuter glimpsed the tangle within, she slipped inside—missing her bus. Elsewhere, the boy's question appeared as a tear across the skin of a billboard, revealing the expanse of the sky to a startled magnate. A fortnight later, warehouse workers stopped stacking boxes and sparked a game of hide-and-seek amidst shelves tall as sylvan columns. And on that same night, in a downtrodden neighbourhood, a delinquent let fall a brick intended for a window and wrenched open a tree grate instead, feeling the hold of anger loosen.

Even when the boy was forgotten, his gesture lingered, shaping doubts and desires. Things that once bound the urbanites no longer seemed quite so important. Screens blinked out and planners lay closed. Gates swung upon their hinges, never to be shut again. Houses gathered dust in the absence of their owners, while lawns sprouted into a chaos of self-sown weeds and shrubs. People began to haunt the margins, hungering for wide ways, grasping at what lay on the other side of the known and staid.

But the hermit, alone, never abandoned his hovel.

He could only bide his time while those who remained to help creation along its course worked tirelessly. Each day, he would take another tin of food from his store and watch through narrow slats as the citizenry sundered slabs and toppled fencing, unseen lights flickering above the crowd. At first, he mistook their deeds for construction, but his tension eased when he caught their exclamations that the city's unsealing had sent the wild surging like seeds from a burst pod. Thus, he waited—patient, wary—for nature's return to soften sounds and drape the streets in shade.

He knew the waiting was over when a twig tapped against his door. Timorously, he crossed the threshold, passing beneath an archway of branches abutting the house. Further down the road, a weight shifted in his periphery. He let a smile surface as a deer emerged out of a thicket before bounding away. Turning into a side street, he paused again: neighbours gathered as a raven, perched on a shattered lamp, lifted from its nest and wheeled skyward.

Gradually, the hermit's fear receded as draughts swept through portals thrown wide all over the city, stirring the leaves that framed the openings in ripples. Spurred on by the breeze, his footsteps quickened into a sprint. With each stride, memories of youth unfurled, recalling hours spent running in woods beyond reckoning, and a laugh, untrammelled as a child's, broke free.

Still London

Dewey Dabbar

Cyana picked a path along the treed fringe of London's great river, an adjustable wrench clutched in each hand. Where the noon sun penetrated the dereliction of the southern bank, she paused to watch speckled wood butterflies dance beneath the verdant canopy and bee-flies draw nectar from pavement-fissure primroses.

It had been a typical Tuesday morning for this lithe and smooth-scalped fifty-one-year-old. She had spent an hour or so watching the water—transfixed, as she always was, by the sight of dolphins and other creatures of the tidal flow—and about the same amount of time listening to the once-weekly literary talk on the ground floor of the Shard.

The Shard was a skyscraper that showed no major damage from a century-and-a-half of storms and that had never been hit by a missile. Instead, time had simply rendered it farcical. Popular opinion perceived the structure as a one-thousand-foot emblem of profligacy. Cyana herself pictured a middle finger, raised to what, at the time of construction, was thought of as the future. As a venue—one selected by an organizer with decidedly offbeat tastes—it was a particularly poor match for the Victorian texts on which the latest oration had focused.

The gist of the session, as Cyana recalled it, was that present-day London was nothing like the garden tapestry of Morris's utopia or the miasmal marshland envisioned by Jefferies, nor anything on the spectrum between them. "For what British-born Victorian," the speaker had posed rhetorically, "saw such a blossoming of biophilia in humanity's stars? (Save Muir, perhaps.)"

Cyana felt that she had not gained much from the talk, intellectually. However, courtesy of a friend in attendance who was an unfailingly generous lender, she had at least picked up the tools that would assist her afternoon's work. Cyana had seen people before her struggle with the kind of task that she had been assigned, and she took comfort in being prepared.

The Mayor herself was expected to be there.

* * * * *

Shortly before 2pm by the nearest sundial, Cyana reached her destination—a place that had been known over the centuries as Battersea Common Fields, Battersea Park, Wandsworth Nut Grove, and, most recently, the London Wild Boar Reserve. She had played a vital role in establishing a broad no-hunting zone throughout the returning matrix of woodland south of the river. It was for this that she had been honoured with the invitation from the Mayoral cabinet.

London was changing rapidly: Each new map was marked not just by a retraction of infrastructure but also by fewer places bearing the labels of implicit custodianship and control. What Cyana had been granted was the ceremonial responsibility for a *denaming*.

* * * * *

As Cyana worked the final bolt loose, grateful for the two mechanical aids, she turned her gaze away from the moribund sign for the reserve, beyond the hundred-strong crowd behind her, and towards the river. She sensed that in a few decades' time, when the embankment at last gave way, nature's resurgence would only become stronger.

About the authors

Nomi McLeod is a writer and artist living in Devon, England. Both her visual and written work often engages with stories of the land, particularly those from folklore.

Leath Tonino is a freelance writer and the author of two essay collections about the outdoors, both published by Trinity University Press: *The Animal One Thousand Miles Long* and *The West Will Swallow You*.

Biographical details for **Taylor** and **Joe (Dewey)**, who co-edited this short themed collection, can be found at the start of the section.

"The least I can do is speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves."

Jane Goodall

