

WHEN FIRST UNTO THIS COUNTRY, A STRANGER I CAME: LAND, MAMMALS AND THE REDISCOVERY OF PLACE

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It is a pleasure to offer my talk today in this land of mammalian eccentricity. I will discuss continuities and principles among North American storytellers who have thought with landscape and mammals and discuss what they have learned. The storytellers are: Raven Mackinaw, Cree (Alberta) elder; Grey Owl (a.k.a. Archibald "Archie" Belaney), Canada's best internationally known champion of habitat conservation, (Northern Ontario); Ernest Thompson Seton, wild animal story author, champion of aboriginal causes and conservationist (Manitoba and New Mexico); and scholar and ethno-biologist of the Arizona-Sonora Desert, Gary Paul Nabham (Arizona). I might add that Elder Mackinaw is the sole Native Canadian.

The principle under address here is representation. Landscape, in a child's early life, is learnt on their own at a perceptual level and through physical engagement and movement. Later, landscape is learned with cultural assistance, whether that be walking with a grandparent or being told to fetch something from afar. As a cultural representation, landscape is learned according to protocols. A cultural existence both in memory and story, landscape must be represented so that when one is not in that land its description remains accurate for the good of those who need to know what it looks like.

Memory's source, contact with landscape, subsequently organises itself into story. But North American aboriginal landscape representation is not *only* mimetic. That representation we call "story" is built upon a need for authority, validity and legitimacy across cultural and ecological domains. The mental representation of things not actually present is consistent with the Greek, "a making visible" and related to the Late Greek "to imagine, to show."¹ That is, story can be understood to be authoritative representation, even if it at the same time it permits caprice and whimsy.

WILDERNESS AND STORYTELLING

In Winter, 1994, Cree elder Raven Mackinaw told me, "If environmental education wants to 'get it right', we need to understand that wilderness and storytelling are the same thing." What he meant, in part, was that learning to be indigenous to Turtle Island (continental North American) meant knowing the land by divining the stories that live "in" and "as" the land. Put differently, geo-specific identity and knowledge are vested in landscape, and specific stories have phenomenological presence in places on the land. Far be these stories from fiction. Instead, they are spiritually resonant entities, perhaps better understood as intelligences, composed "of", "within" and "by" ecosystems. In other words, stories are the spiritual and cognitive dimension of natural systems in which humans are ecological members. This is to claim that ecologies communicate. The narrowed sensual perception of the literate modern has elevated what the eye can see to the level of near absolute truth and sole arbiter of the "real." Oral culture, conversely, has a listening and holistically sensual relationship to the phenomenological, and stays true to the integrity of both the perceptual ecology of the senses and the communicative ethic of the land.

Language, in the realm of the North American Indian, serves to unify those perceptions/experiences into the medium of story. Speech serves to harmonise and transcribe nature's phenomenological reality into the phenomenological reality of the story. These stories have material reality as their epistemological root, and their telling create an ontological structure judged as either "getting the words right" or not. This is to say, narrative has an essential presence in healthy ecosystems and, by implication, those cultural systems sensitive to this relationship. Developing landscape so biodiversity is eviscerated makes a ghost of ecological intelligence and the communicative ethic once composed by that place.

LANDED INTELLIGENCE

I do not know how long it takes settler cultures to understand that there are stories in the land. Part of their discovery has to do, I believe, with the Aboriginal methodology of paying enormous attention to the complex inter-relationships between place (in time and space) and co-incidental experiences, thoughts or events. Place is also a central theme in North American Indian concepts of cultural development and continuity with the ancestral past. These narratives thereby also live in time. Speculating at the risk of not knowing the answer, What if the discovery of these narratives, taking roughly five generations,² were somehow short-circuited? Immigrant English colonials to Canada, Grey Owl (Archibald Belaney) and Ernest Thompson Seton, were respectively influenced by Ojibwa/Iroquoian and Saulteux (Plains Ojibwa) and as young men were advised by traditionalists on how to hunt and trap; they were doubtless also told appropriate stories about their new territory. It would then make sense that these authors learned that landscape's narrative qualities were as much a part of knowing the land as knowing its animals, land and water.

Grey Owl and Seton became storytellers writing about places in an adopted landscape *after* they lived on the land with Ojibwa traditionalists. There is no mistake these colonial settlers abandoned their paradigms in favour of indigenous cultural representation while learning to become conservationists. Both composed their stories from the land on which they lived, and featured mammalian protagonists such as Grey Owl's beaver and Seton's wolves and moose. Would it be too bold to suggest they were telling truth rather than fiction? Does working with animal intelligences *require* that one represent them in the narrative form? Was the textual sensibility of these Christians overwhelmed by the oral cultures afoot the aesthetic sublime of the Western frontier? Can their experiences be seen by dominant culture as lessons in "getting the words right"? Was the harmony between indigenous tradition and their writings *only* the result of cultural

transactions? I ask these questions not to provoke confusion, but to attempt to understand how these literate Englishmen discovered landscapes as the epistemological substance of Ojibwa orality through their thinking with wildlife. Be certain, I do not equate the Ojibwa with wildlife.

MAMMALS

Grey Owl's championing of endangered beavers began after hand-rearing pet beaver kits called "Rawhide" and "Jellyroll". He developed his conservationist thinking before his marriage to Iroquoian bride, Anahareo his partner in beaver conservation. We learn from his biographer, Donald Smith:

Archie mentioned Misabi, a man "so old that he had hunted beaver on the Don River when Toronto was a muddy village where he sold his fur." From the Tema-Auguma Anishnabai elders like old Misabe, Archie learned of their belief that everything around them, the animals, fish, birds, trees, and the rest of the natural world, had souls or spirits, just as human beings did. The Indian should treat everything he saw or touched with the same respect as he would a human. In Misabi's youth, for instance, the old Ojibwe Indians told the young that they should avoid cutting down living trees, to save the trees from pain. When green trees were cut, the elders explained, you could hear them wailing from the axe's blows. Only through their language could Archie gain a greater knowledge of the Ojibwa's closeness to nature, and he worked to become a fluent speaker.³

For Grey Owl, learning Ojibwa meant something other than fluency *per se*. Leaving the frame of reference in noun-rich English for verb-rich Ojibwa, Belaney was also able to understand the epistemological rootedness of language in the landscape. Learning to name the new things he encountered was followed by learning the belonging of those things in complex ecosystems. In other words, experiencing landscape was not identical with understanding landscape, but by learning Ojibwa, Belaney understood that indigenous description/representation was more suited to the cognitive complexities of this landscape. Ojibwa culture has built a language mutually based on cognitive and ecological principles, yet is one of least understood intellectual accomplishments within oral culture.⁴ Whether Grey Owl understood these characteristics of oral language and culture is not so important as the fact that he lived their cognitive

consequences experientially because these same conclusion as myself that these same adjectives fundamentally describe the dynamics of ecosystems.⁵

What he learned in fluent Ojibwa was an experiential, nature-based vocabulary and a system of representation requiring deep familiarity with landscape as a precursor to the revealing of that language's many levels of meaning; and subsequent implications for human belonging in the complementary, transactional realms of nature and cognition. Hence, he understood the need not only "to get the words right" for things in nature, but additionally, learned to speak of them in a grammar consistent with their ecological relationship with the rest of nature.

In undertaking the creation of a new identity, Grey Owl – as the Ojibwa that he was not – represents a reversal of the cultural recapitulation ideologies that dominated the Canadian colonial era. The source of bitter, public disappointment with learning that Grey Owl was a white man rather than an Indian probably lay in their readiness to "characterise the history of our cultural development and individual, educational development in similar terms."⁶ It was laudatory for an Indian to improve himself educationally by becoming a writer. Grey Owl reconfirmed colonial notions of the now literate noble savage. The transgression of fakery was grievous not because the Englishman rejected colonial superiority, was faithless to unidirectional cultural evolution and walked away from modernity itself. No, the heresy was in the verisimilitude of his identity as an Indian; the fact that he revealed "Indian-ness" in every white reader exposed something in all those who were disappointed. The difficulties of postcolonial theory and scholarship are made manifold here because that "something" he revealed was the very presence of the land "in" them. This quality was one that colonial mentality had long believed was an aboriginal, vestigial sensibility, but it suddenly confronted them as an unresolved, virtually unrealised but apparent truth. The land also dwelt in their hearts. But did or didn't that make them Indians too ?

Taken seriously as one who heard the spirit of the land, was Grey Owl not also presaging the now emerging theoretical literature on the linguistic, philosophical and spiritual roots of the environmental crisis? Saroj Chawla

suggests that "English is not conducive to a holistic and caring attitude towards the natural environment", and follows with what might be Grey Owl's sentiments, "a change in our attitudes and behaviours to the environment will need to begin at the perceptual level reflected in language."⁷ In earlier scholarship concerning the ontological and philosophical dimensions of the Ojibwa language, anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell chose the analytical discourse of the essay to make explicit what Grey Owl had, I believe, attempted to make implicit in his stories and made explicit by example in understanding the ecological and mythological language of the Ojibwa and translating from it what needed to be heard by other whites. Hallowell examines a fieldwork encounter in which he was trying to determine differences in noun classifications concerning the *animate* and *inanimate* in Ojibwa language. I quote his results and analysis and ask that you accept these insights may have been akin to those of Grey Owl:

Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, "No! But *some* are." ... The Ojibwa do not perceive stones, in general, as animate, any more than we do. The crucial test is experience. Is there any personal testimony available?... A white trader, digging in his potato patch, unearthed a large stone similar to the one just referred to. He sent for John Duck, an Indian who was the leader of *wabano*, a contemporary ceremony that is held in a structure something like that used for the Midewiwin. The trader called his attention to the stone, saying that it must belong to his pavilion. John Duck did not seem pleased at this. He bent down and spoke to the boulder in a low voice, inquiring whether it had ever been in his pavilion. According to John the stone replied in the negative.

It is obvious that John Duck spontaneously structured the situation in terms that are intelligible within the context of Ojibwa language and culture. Speaking to a stone dramatises the depth of the categorical differences in cognitive orientation between the Ojibwa and ourselves... Simply as a matter of observation we can say that the stone was treated *as if* it were a "person" not a "thing," without inferring that objects of this class are, for the Ojibwa, necessarily conceptualised as persons... Above all, any concept of *impersonal* "natural" forces is totally foreign to Ojibwa thought.⁸

Clearly, the cognitive orientation of the Ojibwa was persuasive in Grey Owl's ability to systematise the spiritual relationship he had discovered in Turtle Island's domain. Using narrative traditions as well as the grammar that authoritatively intellectualised Ojibwa land, he understood why language was a necessary component to cultural complementarity with area ecology. After tens of thousands of years of presence (and more) in their

specific North American territory, Ojibwa language and intellectual tradition maintained intact ecologies. After less than five hundred years of European presence, speaking a language whose epistemological bias is fragmentation and separation of the "real" from the "unreal" and object from context, it is no wonder ecological degradation was forthcoming. If postcolonial theory is to overcome the extreme anthropocentrism of its focus, it must accord an influence to the land in the formation of identity and culture. How will postcolonial theory comprehend and allow for the recognition of the intelligence of the natural world as being as fundamental a force as culture ?

ERNEST THOMPSON SETON

Perhaps the case for historical origins in this matter can be learnt, in part, from the example of Ernest Thompson Seton, who began writing animal stories after years of botanising the prairies of Manitoba. He clearly understood and experienced ecosystems, but broke with conventional scientific traditions when he used this knowledge to foreground narrative. Using his understanding of charismatic mammals to tell anthropomorphic stories, he explored totemic beliefs and in the process revived a European oral storytelling tradition that spoke of the land after lives spent living on that land. Seton Thompson and Grey Owl shared that experiential relationship to land with bush and plains Ojibwa hunters, even if they missed full cultural belonging to the historical and cultural make-up of these peoples.

Both writers maintained the primacy of the experiential relationship to nature as precursor to writing throughout their entire lives. Clearly, thinking about nature is also thinking about creation and the shared, if different, monotheism among North American Indians and Christians. However contentious those differences, monotheism was also a source of agreement. In Ojibwa tradition, those who told authoritative stories were subject to a system of checks so the validity, authority and legitimacy of the story could be determined and maintained. The enormous over-reaction

against Seton was revealed in the American "Nature Faker" green purge of 1903, where the severity of dominant conceit against the possibility of nature possessing intelligence roared into national controversy. Seton's stories were among those expunged from public holdings through no less than a Presidential fiat by avowed sportsman and hunter President Theodore Roosevelt and contributing senior naturalist John Burroughs. They decried the embodiment of traditional ecological knowledge in the form of the anthropocentric animal story by denouncing the genre's many authors as "sham" naturalists guilty of "subjective" portrayal of animals. But as importantly, they denounced Seton Thompson for falsely giving to animals emotions and intelligence they "did not possess."⁹ Most interesting is how the denouncement of storytelling as a genre compelled a blurring of lines between human and non-human nature, at a time when the Indians and Irish alike were scientifically conceived to be but marginally human.¹⁰ Hallowell describes Ojibwa thinking in the matter:

Thus, both living and dead human beings may assume the form of animals. So far as appearance is concerned, there is no hard and fast line that can be drawn between an animal form and a human form because metamorphosis is possible. In perceptual experience what looks like a bear may sometime *be* an animal and, on other occasions, a human being. What persists and gives continuity to being is a vital part, or soul... The bearwalk idea fits at once into this dreamworld – literally a dream world, for Ojibwa go to school in dreams.¹¹

From this passage one can understand the potency of the experience for a young colonial naturalist to be thinking with animal intelligences, especially in the knowledge that the animals may be Indian ancestors attempting to close the gap between Eurocentric and Ojibwa sensibilities about knowing how to understand both indigenous culture and the spiritually permeated landscape upon which they now lived.

Turning to the Ojibwa creation story, for example, it was the muskrat who was the heroic animal that swam to the bottom of the Great Flood and returned to the surface with enough mud to assure the re-birth of Turtle Island. Previously, the beaver had been the first to have been asked to dive and failed. Yet for Grey Owl (whose heritage was English rather than Ojibwa), learning indigenoussness was both a material or bush undertaking

as well as a cultural and spiritual pursuit. Thinking *with* the beaver was a step toward understanding creation and thereby comprehending the narrative within nature. The beaver was good to think with, and Grey Owl was thinking with an animal whose role was central in the creation myth of his adopted culture. In fact, watching the beavers build their huts from mud and wood continued the meditation of a primordial world built from mud. Aware of the religious importance of the beaver and the plunder of its stocks that had built the political economy of colonial Canada, it makes additional sense that he would be working on behalf of the beaver both as emblematic of his solidarity with mythological, ecological tradition and as an attempt to correct the enormous damage done to nature by the exploitation of the mammal. The amphibious beaver was, like Grey Owl himself, at home in two worlds. One can understand how the volitional act of returning a tender and compelling belief system to an animal and a native culture conceived to be senseless and emotionless throughout the colonial and modern era offers a strategic victory. For his stories duplicate the unities between nature and culture he had learned from the Ojibwa, yet also firmly made cultural restoration consistent with his beginning the white Canadian ecological restoration movement of beavers and beaver habitat by first re-mythologising them and their landscape. That the landscape had been anything short of mythical in their dimensions in the pre-contact era is described by historian and water scientist Alice Outwater:

Today, the beaver have returned in part, but its numbers are nothing like what they were, and we have forgotten that beaver wetlands once enlivened the now arid rangelands of the West. The total land area of the contiguous United States is 2.96 million square miles. Since the arrival of the Europeans, the beaver population of the United States has dropped from perhaps 200 million to ten million. The decline in beaver population, and in beaver dams, caused the first major shift in the country's water cycle. If each of those pre-Columbian beavers had built only a single acre of wetlands, then an area of more than 300,000 square miles – a tenth of the total land area of the country – was once a beaver-built wetland. Now these wetlands are gone. The river of life has receded, and the primal splendour of the land disappeared with the beavers demise.¹²

Grey Owl thought with the amphibious mammal that was not successful, perhaps out of respect for the sacredness of the muskrat, or out of clan prohibitions within the Ojibwa community where he had settled with

his Iroquoian wife, Anahareo. If this was the case, did his enculturation require him to both write down this lesson in anti-colonial achievement as well as live its continuity within Ojibwa oral culture? Did he presage the incursions of English as a language that would corrupt Ojibwa traditions and seek to write these insights in a medium that served to continue that tradition he understood as endangered? If so, then English language publication may have helped to extend the ethos of his concern for endangered culture and bioregion, if we give him the benefit of the doubt. Yet, from the post-colonial vantage, how does one comprehend appropriation of identity if, in fact, the land is the central shaping force behind this transformation of identity? Having heard the call of nature, Grey Owl had the common sense to understand that he was not alone, and consulted authorities whose very cultural etiology hinged on identity with land.

Grey Owl, in spite of denunciation from within dominant culture for "faking" Indian identity, was doing his thinking in the ways and on the land of the Ojibwa who have said of themselves, "the wisdom of the land is in our people." His thinking with nature could thereby be paralleled broadly and anecdotally by a later lesson illustrated by Thomas Buckley from a Yurok elder. Buckley was required to understand how without understanding "fact" one could hardly understand "meaning". If Grey Owl's paradigm of understanding held, then I am sure that to indigenous peoples there is a necessary lesson that needs to be learned when uprooted people either ignore the land or farm and comment upon it in the ways of the uprooted. He writes:

To see the facts is to see the meaning of the facts: no distinction can be made; a fact *is* a meaning. I was once sitting with another older man by our fire. When he'd eaten he held up a piece of wood that we'd gathered. "What's this?" he asked. "Piece of firewood," I answered. He looked sad, disgusted; put down the stick, silent. I thought more. "It's wood, a piece of a tree." He brightened a shade. "When you can see each leaf as a separate thing, you can see the tree; when you can see the tree, you can see the spirit of the tree; when you can see the spirit of the tree you can talk to it and maybe learn something."¹³

Here I would ask whether Grey Owl's thinking and writing was strategically chosen. Did he satisfy the need for factual observation and

subsequent incorporation of that "fact" as a right of passage for learning to be indigenous to Turtle Island... or at least understand how the Ojibwa had managed their understanding on this point?

Finding stories is similarly an act of divination: that is, learning how "facts" create meaning. Stories live in landscapes, of course, but their presence is visible to those who know how to perceive them. This is an acquired skill, as Thomas Buckley learned. In this context then, Grey Owl's efforts can be regarded as an attempt to learn how to be indigenous to a place by finding the spiritual within the material. That is to say, long resident cultures are more familiar with these stories due to longer experiential and cultural presence in their landscape. For newcomers, especially those whose sense of story is modified either by equation with "fiction" or biblical reference, time is usually required to understand the spirits/stories of the new terrain. Gary Paul Nabam illustrates what it may have meant for Grey Owl to have been made a confidant of local indigenous peoples.

I recalled the time nearly a decade ago when Luciano surprised me by showing me the remains of the *Ne:big*, which he had sequestered in a place where mischievous kids and casual visitors were unlikely to find them. He unwrapped a protective cloth and showed me the stuff from which legends are made. If I were a paleontologist, I might have examined those bones to discern what species they represented. But I had no such professional inclination. They could have come from an animal unknown to Western science, and they could have just as easily have come from Ice Age mammoths or last century's bighorn sheep. All I was sure of was that they were sacred and belonged with the O'oodham, where I hoped they would stay.

As I listened to Luciano that day in 1981, I was not so impressed by the bones themselves as by the flesh that Luciano's story wrapped around them. As he talked softly in Spanish spiced with O'oodham, the mythic animal came alive. Luciano was restoring animal stories to their central place in what it means to be human. He was letting creatures run wild in our dreams again.¹⁴

Clearly, bones from the ancestral past are potent in their contemporary meaning to indigenous peoples precisely because the bones contributed to the soil as equally as the ancestors. Located in time and space, it is no wonder sacred ground is a source of sacred story. To literate, settler culture the absence of deep ancestral time/presence in a place tends to make for cynicism with regards to the authenticity of the experiential link between culture and landscape. Grey Owl comprehended, I believe, that even with emigration, his own life contained no compelling narrative except solipsistic

recombination of colonial ideologies useless to a trapper and bushman. In re-settling among the Ojibwa he became invested in a tradition of grand narratives indigenous to his new land. The experience of modernity was, for him, sufficiently devoid of mythic meaning that his encounter with the First Peoples of Canada was grounds for a conversion. Wherein he re-gained a grand narrative his own culture had lost from its ancestral past.

CONCLUSION

Assumptions that limit what aboriginal culture can relate after tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of years to the meaning of life in Turtle Island makes postcolonial theory consistent with past mistakes and derivative in its arguments by neglecting what is a shared jurisdiction of human relatedness to nature and indemnifies a life threatening ecological condition. Recovery of grand narratives found in the varieties of ecologies that make up Gaia is not to denounce post-colonial contentions, for they have handsomely contributed to the reclamation of identity from the persuasive influence of imperial colonial identity. However, where stands the place of ecology in the production of an ethos of sustainable health in environment, culture and economy? Is there any role for landscape in the development of an identity with place? If not, postcolonial theory amounts to little more than Popeye's, "I yam what's I yam, cause that's all what's I yam," and in so truncating human relation to nature makes all that is not itself, "other" and all that is still left, "empty." Nature abhors a vacuum.

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- ⁴ Sheridan, 1991. The Silence Before Drowning in Alphabet Soup. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 18:1: 23-31.
- ⁵ Sheridan, 1994. *Alienation and Integration: Environmental Education in Turtle Island*. unpublished doctoral thesis. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta: 8-18. Further reading see: Ong, Walter. 1982. *Literacy and Orality: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen. These terms are: additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than

analytic, redundant or "copious", conservative or traditionalist, close to human lifeworld, agonistic.

⁶ Egan, Kieran. 1991: *Primary Understanding*. New York: Routledge. 167.

⁷ Chawla, Saroj. 1991: Linguistic and Philosophical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis. *Environmental Ethics* 13: 254.

⁸ Hallowell, Irving A. 1975: *Teachings of the American Earth*. Tedlock, Barbara and Tedlock, Dennis, eds., New York: Liveright Books. 148-153.

⁹ Lutts, 1990.

¹⁰ Further sampling of readings in Canadian governmental relations with First Nations see: Canada. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa. Minister of Supply and Services Canada. 1996.

¹¹ Hallowell, 1975: 162, 163.

¹² Outwater, Alice. 1996: *Water: A Natural History*. New York: Basic Books. 32, 33.

¹³ Buckley, 1989: in *I Become Part of It: Sacred Dimensions in Native American Life*. Dooling, D.M. and Jordan-Smith, Paul eds. San Francisco: Parabola Books. 43.

¹⁴ Nabham, Gary Paul. 1998: *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture and Story*. San Francisco: Counterpoint. 170.