



“Of Avians and Indigenes”: Preliminary Notes on the Orientalization of the New World Native and Natured Others

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Abstract

“Of Avians and Indigenes” combines colonial discourse theory and ecocriticism to demonstrate how the New World bird and the New World “Indian” have been similarly othered in the discourse of Western imperialism. As a result, the Passenger Pigeon and many Native American tribes have suffered a similar fate: extinction. But via the ironic co-evolutionary history of the native House Finch and the introduced English Sparrow – and spanning American literature from John James Audubon to Joy Harjo – the author offers a Native reading of this colonization, through which both avians and indigenes “speak back” against the onslaught of Euro-American ideology, as a veritable “return of the Native.”

My bird is a genuine little savage, doubtless, but I value him as a neighbor. . . . [Nature] is an Indian maiden, dark, subtle, dreaming, with glances now and then that thrill the wild blood in one’s veins.

– John Burroughs¹

[R]econsider Indian history. Whites were advancing not only on the Indians but on the chickadees listening, the bird unconcerned, the deer scratching.

– William Bevis²

In one of the first books by a Lakota, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933), Luther Standing Bear’s titular homeland is appropriately dubbed that of the “Spotted Eagle,” not that of his human Oglala tribe – to reflect, no doubt, “the Lakota belief that man did not occupy a special place in the eyes of Wakan Tanka, the Grandfather of us all,” that both humans and birds were *oyate*, or “people.” Standing Bear later finds another parallel between Native Americans and other species in terms of the European settlers’ attitude towards both: “Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people.” And such infestations needed to be removed:

I know of no species of plant, bird, or animal that were [sic] exterminated until the coming of the white man. . . . The white man considered natural animal life upon this continent, as “pests.” Plants which the Indian found beneficial

were also “pests.” There is no word in the Lakota vocabulary with the English meaning of this word.³

It is no surprise, then, that bird species such as the Passenger Pigeon and many human Native tribes have met the same fate at the hands of European expansionism – extinction – and that the remaining Native tribes, like the buffalo, have just barely avoided a similar end. Standing Bear’s Lakota contemporary, Black Elk, notes another avian–Native similarity, with similar tragic ramifications: “Our tepees were round like the nests of birds,” which were set “in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. . . . But the Washicus [whites] have put us in these square boxes,” and so “the power is not in us any more.”⁴

Certainly, most Native American worldviews themselves entail an ideology of familial alliance with birds, a consideration crucial to any discussion of the subject. For instance, the traditional Lakota faith in the close relation of the human tribe to such birds as the Golden Eagle and the Western Meadowlark, and the many claims of actual interspecies conversation, especially during vision quests, may be seen, on first sight, as the same conflation of the animal and the Indian performed by colonial ideology. However, the originating worldviews and, just as importantly, the resulting cultural lifestyles are vastly different. The Euro–American attitude is one of belittlement, distance, and difference; the Native attitude, one of kinship and positive regard. And while I might not be able to make any claims for the literal truth of talking birds that would make sense in this academic context, I can appeal to sheer pragmatism and ask, with Lawrence Buell, which approach to “nature” and the animal is more conducive to biodiversity and at last to the ecological viability of our planet:

If like Thoreau one imagines animals as neighbors; if like Muir or traditional Native Americans one imagines life-forms as plant people, sun youths, or grandmother spiders, then the killing of flies becomes as objectionable as the killing of humans.⁵

But it is the fact that both feathered beings and feather-wearers have long been othered as comparable objects in Western colonial-imperialist discourse that I want to address in some detail. Historically, the English language itself offers further lamentable correlatives. Both Others, for example, have been deemed close kin (for far different reasons), as “tribes” fit for “reservations”: by both poets and ornithologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, birds were often referred to as the “(feathered) tribes”;⁶ and in the early twentieth century, bird reserves were also called “Reservations.”⁷ According to Deep Ecologist Paul Shepard, “Enclaves [such as zoos] ‘protect’ the defeated [animals], as they did American Indians, by assigning them to reservations and then eliminating them outside the sanctuary.”⁸ At last, in Western discourse, the animal is framed through the bars of the “zoo,” as it were; the Indian, through the borders of the “reservation.” and thus the ostensible peculiarity of my article’s title, which would appropriate both

“nature” and “native” as its subject matter. For, in much of nineteenth-century American literature, the “native” is “nature” – wild, and in the raw; and to refer to the bird as “native” – as in Burroughs’s “genuine little savage” – is hardly a greater leap, given its intrinsic *animal* relationship to the very land and (above all, for my purposes) the long Western cultural conflation of Indians and birds that is my gist, epitomized in the eagle feather of popular iconography, and in the words of Black Elk himself:

The life of an Indian is just like the wings of the air. . . . The hawk swoops down on its prey; so does the Indian. In his lament he is like an animal. For instance, the coyote is sly; so is the Indian. The eagle is the same. This is why the Indian is always feathered up; he is a relative to the wings of the air.⁹

But again, this positive identification, from a different, indigenous worldview, plays against the backdrop of the Western demonization of such species as the raven and the wolf – and the human “primitive” and indigenous native: “genuine savages,” all. Indeed, earlier cultures’ “superstitious” awe of the avian and the animal positions such people firmly in the same “bestial” realm. And if not ostracized as “animal,” both are conversely idealized as “spiritual,” as abundantly evidenced in the imagery and metaphors of the Western literary canon. The bird is incorrigibly either some etherealized skylark or oriole, or some chthonic owl or raven; so, too, the Western imagination can only “see” the Indian as a heathen-savage id, a Jungian shadow figure – or, in typical bipolar fashion, as a nostalgically redemptive “Noble Savage.”¹⁰

This is one of the dominant themes of Frantz Fanon, who finds a Western conflation of shadow figures that include “the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, [and] the Savage.”¹¹ The raven and crow can easily be added to this abbreviated list of villains, as “infernal” confreres of the devil, and the savage. In North America in particular, the wolf and raven are – or should I say, were – often partners, in both myth and reality. In her essay, “Deify the Wolf,” Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan also acknowledges “the psychological fact that wolves carry much of the human shadow,” and in describing her animal subject, she notes that the wolves she is watching are accompanied by a group of “gypsy ravens,” who are “thought to direct the wolves to their prey,” to partake in the leftovers; and sometimes, “a person happens across a coal black raven standing inside the wide arch of those ribs like a soul in a body.”¹² This dark avian spirit of death, then, is another shadow image in Hogan’s essay, although, as a Native American and champion of eco-awareness, Hogan refuses to vilify either wolf or raven: they are simply there, fulfilling their roles in nature, and the truly fearful things are humankind’s untoward projections regarding them. It is fitting, too, that Hogan, as Native American, would defend and resignify these alter-species shadows: like the wolf, raven, and the human of Fanon’s *Black Skin*, the Native American has long been an unwilling bearer of the Western collective shadow.

This Western “shadow,” of course, immediately calls to mind Edward Said’s formulation of the discourse of “Orientalism.”¹³ It is readily apparent that Said’s general ideology of othering inherent in the very concept of “Orientalism” is equally applicable to the central ideological framing device of the New World, the Euro-American imperialism and colonialism regarding the indigenous here – both human and non-human. The correlative New World version of Said’s Foucaultian notion might readily be dubbed “*Indianism*” – all the more happily, given the Orientalism still ironically implicit in the very origins of the word.¹⁴ The general discourse of othering non-humans as “lower” life forms fit for exploitation has already been aptly defined as *speciesism*,¹⁵ and my own contribution to this line of thought is to emphasize how crucial – and yet largely ignored – this lamentable Orientalizing of other species has been to the ecology and biodiversity of the planet.

More interest is evidenced in the history of the Passenger Pigeon and its fate than in that of any other North American bird. Once the most abundant species, in its flights and on its nesting grounds, ever known in any country, ranging over the greater part of the continent of North America in innumerable *hordes*, the *race* seems to have disappeared during the nineteenth century, leaving no trace.¹⁶

The terms “hordes” and “race” might be said to encapsulate centuries of Euro-American pathological objectification of both the New World avian and indigene. Regarding such a dual denigration, M. L. Pratt has undertaken one of the most earnest applications of the Foucault–Said critical thread to the Americas. As a prime example of Pratt’s “contact zone” of colonizer and colonized, North America was the victim of a scientific “anti-conquest” in which the native environment was “written as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricized, [and] unoccupied” – a *tabula rasa*, then, for both socio-economic and Linnaean imperialism. That is, in addition to guns and a racist political ideology, the Europeans brought their own “nature” with them, including a full-blown avian nomenclature, along with predictable attitudes towards the bird. Pratt finds it not coincidental, then, that such a scientific “systematization of nature coincides with the height of the slave trade and the plantation system, colonial genocide in North America and South Africa, [and] slave rebellions.”¹⁷ Indeed, colonialism’s will-to-power and science’s will-to-knowledge were two sides of the same coin. What Pratt describes as a “Victorian discovery rhetoric” applies equally to the earlier colonization of North America: the rhetoric was an othering of nature that included a “sprinkling” of the native scene “with some little bits of England.”¹⁸ And certainly contemporary American stereotypical understandings of the eagle, crow, robin, etc., still bear in large measure the weight of their Old World counterparts. But

worse yet, as Hogan has noted, this scientific imperialism was accompanied by actual irrational and genocidal violence towards other species, evidenced early on by the burning of Mexican aviaries by Cortez and his men, “fires that burned the green hummingbirds and nesting blue herons, burned even the sound of wings and the songs of the white egrets.” At last, the colonization of the New World was also “a relentless, ongoing war against” nature itself, a two-pronged attack against both Natives and land: “what happens to [Native] people and what happens to the land is the same thing.”¹⁹

Rather than the eagle and crow, I might have referred instead to the Passenger Pigeon and the House Finch, for there is a story there, of avian and “native” return, markedly analogous to the Native American experience of the last two centuries. At the same time that the Native American was making a forced retreat to near extinction, the Passenger Pigeon, whose numbers just two centuries ago made it “perhaps the most numerous of all birds,”²⁰ became the New World Dodo in the span of a century. Even the bird-loving John Burroughs, noting this bird’s disappearance and mourning the “greed and cupidity of man” in the bird’s “[d]eath and destruction,” admitted his own culpability:

The last time that my eyes beheld a passenger pigeon was in the fall of 1876 when I was out for grouse. . . . I killed it, little dreaming that, so far as I was concerned, I was killing the last pigeon.²¹

The last Passenger Pigeon actually died, in captivity, in 1914. The bird’s inclusion in Pearson’s monumental ornithological tome *Birds of America* (1917) is especially troublesome, then, for a book on bird *life*. Accompanied by a pathetic zoo photo of that last surviving member of an already extinct species, the text reads like a surreal obituary. (The monographer Forbush’s claim that this species’ “story reads like a romance” makes one wonder what tales of gothic cruelty made up *his* early reading.) After several pages describing the birds’ incredible numbers before 1850, Forbush has the nerve to write, “It often is asked how it was possible for man to kill them all,” and his subsequent ruminations on potential vulnerabilities due to the species’ nesting habits, etc., hardly serve as a satisfactory answer. Forbush’s conclusion is an incredibly muted aside about the bird’s diet – much like an anthropologist’s report on a now-defunct indigenous tribe – that renders the entire monograph all the more ironically poignant: “They were fond of currents, cranberries, and poke berries”; however, “We know little of their food habits, for no scientific investigation of their food was ever made.”²²

A return to the early nineteenth century is illuminating. Audubon reports, circa 1813, that the “multitudes of Wild Pigeons in our woods are astonishing”; and, “when the woods are filled” with them, “they are killed in immense numbers, although no apparent diminution ensues.” As for the fear “that such dreadful havoc [that is, hunting] would soon put

an end to the species,” Audubon had blithely reassured himself, “by long observation, that nothing but the gradual diminution of our forests can accomplish their decrease, as they not unfrequently quadruple their numbers yearly.” So much for the dramatic ironies of one naturalist’s foresight.²³

In his visit to the Missouri River basin, however, Audubon does have some cause to fear the extinction of the indigenous humans there, if for no other reason than the “small-pox” brought by the Europeans. But these same journals also evince such a scorn for the Native tribes that he likely would have not lamented *their* extinction overly much: “This morning the dirty Indians, who could have washed had they so minded, were beating the tambour and singing their miserable scalp-song.”²⁴ To say that the gradual near-disappearance of both Native tribes and avian species was the result of Euro-American greed, malice, and ignorance may be saying so much as to say nothing at all; but at last, it is noteworthy that indigenous peoples whose cultures were so closely tied to the bird should be even more tied to them, eventually, through a similar dismal fate.²⁵

The story continues with the “native” House Finch, and its relationship with the House – or English – Sparrow, the latter brought to the New World and intentionally set free in the wild by a New York museum in the 1850s.²⁶ By 1884, Burroughs can already note their “rapidly increasing” numbers and even foresee the need to “wage serious war[!] upon” this species. But Burroughs admires them nonetheless, above all for their “Old World hardiness and prolificness” – much like his own European colonial forebears, no doubt. And the “poor native birds” being driven out by the House Sparrow? They are “less shrewd,” “less quick-witted,” and “less sophisticated”²⁷ – like their *human* Native cohabitants, no doubt. Homi Bhabha speaks of the “objective of colonial discourse” as the construction of “the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin.”²⁸ With apologies to postcolonial theorists who would apply such dictums exclusively to the human socio-political realm, such an Orientalization of the avian has certainly long been at work, too, in the colonizing agenda: via “race” – i.e., species, that biological difference from which the notion of “race” itself arose, and via “degeneration” (loosely speaking), in the sense that the “lower” animals have traditionally been abjected as brute and instinctual “beasts.” Burroughs’s distinction above between English Sparrows and native birds is complicated by the imposition of human racial divisions upon another biological order: and so the former are both praised as hardy European types and reviled as pugnacious, quick-breeding *animals*; the latter birds are mere naïve “also-rans” in the battle of evolution through their status as both other-species animals and other-racial *natives*.

The immediate result of this Old World sparrow’s rapid adaptation to U.S. urbanization, as has already been suggested, was a drastic population reduction and range redistribution of native sparrows and finches – including the House Finch – to the widespread laments of ornithologists.²⁹

(And of course, Native Americans suffered an even more severe reduction and forced redistribution of their population.) However, in the latter part of the twentieth century, due to the vagaries of natural selection and changes in urbanization, the House Sparrow has actually declined in urban areas, being largely replaced, once again, by the native House Finch.³⁰ And just so – if I can be indulged a wayward fancy – has the dominance of the Euro-American worldview, in roughly this same time span, met with some new and firm contestation from human “native” worldviews, both from Native writers themselves and from a strong discursive network of non-Indian sympathizers. Indeed, it is as if the calls for and predictions of a “return of the Native,” as it were – so eloquently formulated in Leslie Silko and Joy Harjo – are now being realized in both the human and non-human spheres. Thus Native poet Wendy Rose can write,

One way or another
we'll get somewhere soon
for I have seen crows
dance on Manhattan snow,
a hawk on Henry Street,
smoke plumes from the lips
of street kids,
mesas along the Hudson.
I am getting ready.³¹

Likewise Silko has been “getting” us all “ready,” in her revival of pre-Columbian prophecies in *Almanac of the Dead*, apocalyptic predictions frequently uttered, by the way, by that novel’s two “spirit” macaws.³² One might even venture to say that the many speaking animals of contemporary Native novels and poetry are concerted attempts to reinstate a previous state of “animal grace,” as in Joy Harjo’s “promise” of a vision in which “We once again understood the talk of animals.”³³ And this promise reflects an ongoing faith that such “talk” still greatly matters.

However, this revolution that I perceive is problematized by its inextricable relationship to the West’s already centuries-old romanticization of the Indian-as-Nature’s-Child. Thus Norma Wilson tells us that “close attention to the environment and particularly the animals that inhabit it” is a dominant feature of “Native writing.” Happily granting this, one then treads, however, upon the dangerous ground of offering this ecological vision as a “universal and cosmic truth,”³⁴ an idealization that I see as an unwelcome surrender to – an unintentional co-optation by – the totalizing tendencies of Western metaphysics and monotheism: another form, at last, of Orientalism and “Indianism.”³⁵ I would immediately offer my own alternative “misreading” of the Native American relationship to “Nature” and “religion” by denying such compartmentalized categories as much as

possible. The central problem in any critical reinscription of a “Native way” lies in the nearly inevitable imposition of a Western metaphysical dualism that has inveterately distinguished between “spirit” and “matter” and, moreover, posits the concept of religion as a specific experiential realm distinct from work and art. I find the traditional Native view to be, instead, a quite *naturalistic* one, in the sense that “spirit” and “matter” are “one,” with a preference (semantically speaking) for “matter,” in its best, naturalist sense. For one thing, the belief in an individual afterlife – those hallowed “happy hunting grounds” – seems more the exception than the rule in traditional Native American “religion,” until the syncretistic mergings with Christianity in the nineteenth century. And I would assert that even the vast majority of Native conceptions of so-called “spiritualism” are thoroughly immanent and materialist – even “animistic,” if you will, without the connotations this last term has as some primitive, outdated way of seeing,³⁶ and with the implication that an emotional and intuitive – dare I still say “spiritual”? – communion with other species is a positive thing.

But the desperate need by the West to posit a metaphysics separate from the physical realm is reflected in A. Grove Day’s introduction to his well-known compendium of traditional Native poems (or rather, *songs*), *The Sky Clears*: “Even what seem at first to be poems descriptive of the beauties of nature are often found to be connected in the Indian mind with religion and worship.” Day can only conceive of nature description per se and religious worship as two very separate ontological realms in need of connection. And so, for Day, “symbolism is the key to Indian poetry,” since the apparently incredible privileging of other natural beings, such as eagles, coyotes, etc., *must* be “symbolic” (of human “spiritual” strivings), not a “mere” celebration of these beings themselves and their essential roles in the biosphere. Day goes on to admit that “Chippewa songs,” for instance,

reveal a knowledge of nature . . . derived from the Indian habit, born of necessity, of scanning his environment with eyes that missed nothing. . . . [H]owever . . . there are almost no poems to be found . . . which reflect in a lyrical manner the delight in nature for its own sake. The sort of white-man poetry exemplified by Wordsworthian passages . . . cannot be found among the North American Indians. . . . [I]t was foreign to him [the “Indian”] to scan a landscape seeking literary raw material.³⁷

But such a culturally specific Euro-literary “seeking” is not necessarily a laudable thing; and in no way were the usual results of this “white-man poetry” – as I have argued extensively elsewhere – some pure “delight in nature for its own sake.” But Day must impose a Western division between aesthetics and religion, and he also cannot conceive of a vision in which “nature” and “spirit” are conjoined as one immanence. And maybe the term “immanence,” itself is too Western a term for what I would posit as a naturalist-materialist philosophy that yet allows for the “magical” synchronicity, numinosity, and even symbiosis, if you will, that often characterizes

the relationship between avian and Native. This is the sheer-wonder-of-physicality – or what might be called the “*natural & supernatural at once*”³⁸ – that the Westerner must translate as “spiritual.”

This mistranslation via metaphysicality is nowhere more brazen than in the recent adaptations of traditional Native American songs by Gerald Hausman, who apparently channels the “spirit[s] of the past without the intermediary of interviewer, anthropologist, or scholar,” so that his new version of a traditional lyric is “in harmony with its origin.”³⁹ Quite a feat, indeed. Instrumental as they have been in the revival of appreciation for things Native American, many manifestations of the various New Age movements have themselves been a folly of misreading – aided by many Native *poseurs* who make up what Vine Deloria calls the “New Age/Indian medicine man circuit.”⁴⁰ And the common conception of a central “spiritual” aspect in Native views is most certainly an Orientalist interposition, again, of a Euro-American metaphysics that turns such expressions of immanence such as the Lakota *wakan tanka*⁴¹ (the “big holy” – and even that translation grossly misleads) into the Westernized and transcendental “Great Spirit,” with its cross-cultural resonance with the Holy Ghost, *et al.* It is an *immanent* “spirituality,” rather, that pays such close attention to the “environment and particularly the animals,” for, in such a naturalist (anti-)“theology,” that is all there is to pay attention to: to turn John Keats’s idealizing on its head, “That is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” As the Lakota medicine man Lame Deer puts it, “We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one”; or, in the words of Linda Hogan: “What does god look like? These fish, this water, this land.” and Hogan again:

They think heaven is so far away,
beyond the farthest towns,
not beneath the mortal sky,
not the radiant fields of potatoes
brown with dust,
not the gold-eyed eagle perched
in a tree,
with perfect feathers and bones of air. . . .⁴²

And so are the omnipresent crows in the poetry of Joy Harjo very much of *this world*, self-composed creatures free from the “fierce belief” of ideological wars:

[T]hat fool crow, picking through trash in the corral, understands the center of the world as greasy scraps of fat. Just ask him. He doesn’t have to say that the earth has turned scarlet through fierce belief, after centuries of heartbreak and laughter – he perches on the blue bowl of the sky, and laughs.⁴³

Yes, Harjo’s interminably laughing crows reflect an ideology, too, including not only connotations of the Native trickster, but also an abiding belief that other species can actually communicate with humankind. But,

again, this is far different, and more ecologically sound, as I have argued, than the converse imperial assumption that other species (and other races) are mere “dumb” animals.

I return, then, to the European colonizers’ assumptions about that other race. Besides the “sameness” imposed by Western modernizing appropriation,⁴⁴ there is the converse (yet correlative) Orientalist gesture of “differencing,” of othering Native American cultures as utterly alien in their primitiveness. Far from marvelling at the poetic beauty of Native American songs, for instance, the early colonizers of the New World found such “hellish . . . yelling” to be a “satanic threat,” just as early European “responses” to the New World landscape often included “horror and revulsion”⁴⁵ – as the uncanny calls of the New World Whip-poor-will and Great Horned Owl, one might guess, likewise sent shivers up their spines. But this differencing also includes the positive Romantic idealization of the “noble savage.” Indeed, early translations of Native American “poetry” were fostered by the British Ossian craze that had “stimulated an interest in apparently primitive poetry”;⁴⁶ and this literary impetus achieves its climax in American literature through Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*, in which Gitche Manito becomes a mutant hybrid, if you will, between the Old Testament Yahweh and some transcendental Oversoul.⁴⁷ At last, this attraction to the “primitive” still invariably necessitates the appropriative reduction to the “same” discussed above, for hand in hand with the attraction is a great deal of fear and loathing in need of such defense mechanisms,⁴⁸ consisting largely of rendering the New World “animal” and racial, mattered *body* as an Old World disembodied “spirit.”

This Orientalizing inventiveness is clearly evident in Western Civilization’s rationalizations regarding the relationship of the “primitive” to nature and the animal Other, like Wallace Stevens’s imperial “jar” making all around it “no longer wild.” Here are the psychoanalysts Jelliffe and Brink, writing in 1917: “It seems” to be “the typical neurotic attitude, *like that of the savage*, to accord to animals a consideration and reverence, even a fondness.”⁴⁹ Likewise Carl Jung, in his condescending championing of the primordial and the “primitive,” explains what has later been dubbed eco-egalitarianism as follows: “In primitive society one does in fact find that this assumption [of ‘psychic uniformity’] extends not only to human beings, but to all the objects of nature, the animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and so on. . . . even trees and stones can speak.”⁵⁰ However, this human projection of “psychic uniformity” – resulting, at last, in species equality – is “a vestige – but a very potent one – of a primitive frame of mind which is based essentially on an insufficiently differentiated consciousness.”⁵¹

It is painful to learn that the evolution of human consciousness entails a separation – indeed, alienation – from the rest of the biosphere.⁵² To revise Jung a bit, one might conclude that such a “differentiation” of consciousness may have been a survival strategy necessary for several eons

of human history; but if the human collective psyche still aims, above all, towards species preservation (following Jung himself), it is high time that such a limited human-egohood-in-blinders ends its hubris-ridden ways. and rather than continue to appropriate other cultures and other species into such a worldview of ego inflation and ego alienation – and the Orientalizing strategies that inevitably accompany such a view – one might better adopt an attitude of “consideration and reverence” for both the Native and animal Other.

As a final thought, perhaps my frequent appeal to “talking” animals has not been the best strategy in arguing for such a “reverence.” Maybe a redefinition of *language* itself is in order, as in the sheer phatic brilliance of a cardinal’s song, or in the ever-changing semiotic patterns of migrating geese in flight. In Joy Harjo’s well-known “Eagle Poem,” such “language” is at the poem’s core, and is said to transcend even sound: there are “languages / That aren’t always sound but other / Circles of motion.” Such language is epitomized here in an eagle’s flight:

Like eagle that Sunday morning.
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.

An avian “cleansing” occurs here, via a vibrant and alive circular motion – a reconfiguration of Black Elk’s communal “sacred hoop,” as it were; and the *real*-ization of the circle is at last an inner one, a conscious awareness of biological cycles, a knowledge that we live

and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
inside us.⁵³

Harjo has stated elsewhere that the “Eagle Poem” is “most obviously a prayer. You could look at all poems as being a prayer for our continuance.”⁵⁴ The “continuance” in this poem is both an ecological one, emblemized in an eagle’s flight, and a “spiritual” one, an eco-therapeutic internalization of all that the “circle” and “sacred wings” entail. For our current century of potential apocalypse, there may be no better *language*, this translation of the bird by the Native, for us to hear.

Notes

¹ J. Burroughs, *The Birds of John Burroughs: Keeping a Sharp Lookout*, ed. J. Kligerman (New York: Hawthorn, 1976) pp. 49 and 134.

² W. Bevis, “Native American Novels: Homing In”. In *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, eds. B. Swann and A. Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 604.

³ L. Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978 [1933]) pp. 22, 38, and 165. In more incendiary tones, Vine Deloria, Jr. highlights Western

religion as a major ideological culprit behind such an attitude: "The Christian environment is always a ruined and destroyed, a totally exploited, environment." See V. Deloria, Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, ed. J. Treat (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 159.

⁴ J. G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961 [1932]), pp. 199–200.

⁵ L. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 303. In a similar pragmatic vein is Buell's (ultimately anthropocentric) question, "Who is more likely to treat other people like machines, a person who has trained herself to feel that plants and animals are fellow beings or a person who looks at them as convenient resources?" (p. 217).

⁶ E.g., William Cowper, whose barnyard fowl in *The Task* are transformed into the "feather'd tribes / domestic." See W. Cowper, *Poems of William Cowper* (New York: Dutton, 1931) pp. 307–428, 5.62; John James Audubon, who speaks of the Wood Thrush as his "greatest favourite of the feathered tribes of our woods." See J. J. Audubon, *John James Audubon: Writings and Drawings*, ed. C. Irmischer (New York: Library of America, 1999), p. 275; and John Mudie's early "bird guide," *The Feathered Tribes of the British Isles* (1834). In the eighteenth-century Linnaean classification scheme, "tribe" stood between order and genus, analogous to today's taxonomic "family": its use in English in the sense of a group of related animal species or genera dates back to 1640 (*OED*). In a similar vein, "race" – taxonomically speaking – has been a synonym for sub-species to this day.

⁷ G. T. Pearson *et al.*, eds., *Birds of America* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1936 [1917]), 1.xiv.

⁸ P. Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C.: Island, 1996), pp. 233–4.

⁹ R. J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 317.

¹⁰ One is almost amused, then, to note the totemic aspect of various professional sports-team names in the U.S., as if the combatants were in need of the spirits of Bear, Lion, Falcon, Eagle – and of Redskin and Brave (wielding a "tomahawk chop"), totemic figures, all, of brute force and mindless courage: a further example of the conflation of the animal and the indigene ubiquitous in Western ideology.

¹¹ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967 [1952]), p. 146.

¹² L. Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Simon, 1996) pp. 71 and 65.

¹³ E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), pp. 1–4.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn posits an "Anti-Indianism," which she uses in a sense similar to anti-semitism. See E. Cook-Lynn, *Anti-Indianism in America: A Voice from Tatekeya's Earth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. x and 3–4. I offer here the term "Indianism" instead, as a term parallel to "Orientalism."

¹⁵ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random, 1975), pp. vii, x, and 7.

¹⁶ Pearson *et al.*, *Birds*, 2.40 (emphases added).

¹⁷ M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 51 and 36.

¹⁸ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 204. For example, the "thrasher" was originally the British Song Thrush; but it is now (also) "an American word denoting New World species" (not even of the same family) – the name having been "carried abroad by early settlers." See W. B. Lockwood, *The Oxford Book of British Bird Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 154. The transference of name from the European Robin to the American species is probably the best-known example: "Wherever [sic] the English have settled... the prevailing attitude toward the robin appears to be similar to that in England" – in sum, both the European Robin and the American thrush of the same name are domesticated and "regarded as a person." See B. Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), p. 153.

¹⁹ Hogan, *Dwellings*, pp. 43, 44, and 89. For the burning of the Mexican aviaries, see also L. M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Simon, 1996), p. 141. The

inverse corollary of my call for colonial discourse theory to incorporate the exploitation of the land and animals is the perceived need for ecocriticism to more fully acknowledge the human Natives who are “of the land”: for at last, as Joni Adamson Clarke has proclaimed, the “issues of [human] race and human rights must be brought into any satisfactory ecocritical discussion of ‘nature.’” See J. A. Clarke, “Toward an Ecology of Justice: Transformative Ecological Theory and Practice”. In *Reading the Earth: New Directions to the Study of Literature and Environment*, eds. M. P. Branch *et al.* [Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1998], p. 10.

²⁰ Pearson *et al.*, *Birds*, 2.39.

²¹ Burroughs, *The Birds of John Burroughs*, p. 94.

²² Pearson *et al.*, *Birds*, 2.40, 2.44, and 2.46.

²³ Audubon, *John James Audubon*, pp. 262, 265, and 267. Audubon writes in one of his journals, “I call birds few when I shoot less than 100 per day” (quoted in J. Kastner, *A World of Watchers* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 70). For a discussion of the controversy surrounding Audubon’s “gun-toting” naturalism, see C. Irmscher, *The Poetics of Natural History, from John Bartram to William James* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 214–6. In contrast to such superfluous slaughter are Luther Standing Bear’s words: “Killing for sport was unknown to the Lakota. His attitude toward living creatures would not permit him to slaughter a species until it was exterminated” (p. 69; see also p. 165).

²⁴ Audubon, *John James Audubon*, pp. 641 and 668.

²⁵ Thus Linda Hogan refers to the tragedy of Ishi, “the last Yana Indian” – living his last years alone and among an alien race, like the last Passenger Pigeon – as a “story” that “speaks of loss and of emptiness that will never again be filled, of whole cultures disappeared, of species made extinct” (Hogan, *Dwellings*, pp. 110–1).

²⁶ F. Gibbons and D. Strom, *Neighbors to the Birds: A History of Birdwatching in America* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 214. This interloper was joined by the European Starling by the 1890’s, thanks to the efforts of an eccentric who was “determined to introduce into America all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare” (p. 216). And, according to *The Birder’s Handbook*, “North American birds and people have been suffering ever since.” See P. R. Ehrlich, D. S. Dobkin and D. Wheye, *The Birder’s Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds* (New York: Simon, 1988), p. 633. Also see Annie Dillard’s *Tinker at Potter’s Creek* (New York: Perennial, 1998 [1974]) for a semi-humorous treatment of starlings’ continuing status as great plagues on civilization (pp. 37–42); but Dillard’s own view is, above all, an utter admiration for their hardness.

²⁷ Burroughs, *The Birds of John Burroughs*, pp. 44–5. See Kastner, *A World of Watchers*, pp. 39–47 for the particulars of the controversy that came to be known as the Great English Sparrow War.

²⁸ H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70.

²⁹ Pearson *et al.* make frequent observations on the undesirability of such European imports as the starling and the House Sparrow, this latter a “persistent enemy of many native birds” (Pearson *et al.*, *Birds*, 3.18); but with all the moral objections raised by these authors, it is curious (or symptomatic) that no parallel between human colonizers and colonized is ever made.

³⁰ Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye, *The Birder’s Handbook*, pp. 632 and 646. I have witnessed this species displacement in my own lifetime, in the expansion of the House Finch’s range both from the western U.S., into Rapid City, SD, and from the eastern U.S., into Vermillion, SD, with a concurrent decline in the previously ubiquitous House Sparrows.

³¹ W. Rose, “Leaving Port Authority for Akwesasne,” in *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems 1965–1993* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), p. 67.

³² For Silko’s macaws as talking oracular spirits, see *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1992 [1991]), pp. 339, 468, 472, 475–6, 511 and 711.

³³ J. Harjo, “Grace”. In *In Mad Love and War* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), p. 1.

³⁴ N. C. Wilson, *The Nature of Native American Poetry* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) pp. 18 and 13.

³⁵ Indeed, the eagerness that ecologists “of all stripes including the self-appointed ‘Deep Ecologists’” have displayed in “claim[ing] a kinship with traditional Indian beliefs” makes Vine Deloria “wonder whether” Native Americans actually *won* “the Indian wars” (p. 261). Ecocritic Gretchen Legler notes the irony here: “The programme of cultural genocide aimed at getting

the simultaneously *savage* and *noble* native off the land in the early part of this century, has turned into a veneration of the primitive"; she then refers to Gerald Vizenor's assertion that "American Indian spirituality" has become "the fashionable solution to environmental crises." See G. Legler, "Body politics in American nature writing: 'Who may contest for what the body of nature will be?'" In *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, eds. R. Kerridge and N. Sammells (London: Zed, 1998), p. 79.

³⁶ "Many times the Indian is embarrassed and baffled by the white man's allusions to nature in such terms as crude, primitive, wild, rude, untamed, and savage," when, in actuality, "birds, insects, and animals filled the world with knowledge that defied the discernment of man" (Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, p. 196).

³⁷ A. G. Day, ed., *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964 [1951]) pp. 7, 19 and 147. Joseph Kastner's history of birdwatching reveals a similar blind spot regarding the Native relationship to nature – and regarding the colonizers' penchant for the Foucaultian will-to-power of making lists:

they had great curiosity about nature and understood it well, the Indians satisfied their curiosity more by being descriptive than by being analytic. . . . For all their skill as observers, the Indians do not qualify, in modern terms, as birders. . . . The Indians, as far as anyone seems to know, did not keep [birding] lists. The white man, as soon as he came to America, did. (Kastner, *A World of Watchers*, p. 7)

³⁸ J. Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990 [1971]), p. 15. Likewise Paula Gunn Allen: "American Indian thought makes no such dualistic division . . . between what is material and what is spiritual." See P. G. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), p. 60.

³⁹ G. Hausman, *Meditations with Animals: A Native American Bestiary* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1986), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Deloria, *For This Land*, p. 261.

⁴¹ James R. Walker is less than reassuring for anyone who would conceive of *wakan tanka* as akin to a Judeo-Christian monotheistic deity. This was "the Great Spirit," no doubt; however: "He did nothing. . . . Indians did not know much about him." See J. R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 102. The problem with Western attempts to perceive *wakan tanka* as a "single being," as Raymond DeMallie tells us, is that such an identification "has no parallel in recorded Lakota religious tradition" (Demallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, p. 91). When Lame Deer asked a Lakota medicine man about the "Great Spirit," he received a pointed reply: "The Great Spirit is no old man with a beard!" See J. Fire and R. Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon, 1972), pp. 39–40; rather, that "Spirit" is very much of this world, a pan-physical "spirit splitting itself up into stones, trees, tiny insects even, making them all wakan by his ever-presence" (p. 114). It does sound much like Wordsworth's earlier immanent "pantheism," no doubt. One is even tempted to wonder whether Standing Bear's (editor's?) definition of *wakan tanka* – as "a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things" (p. 193) – doesn't have "Tintern Abbey" lurking somewhere in the backwaters of influence.

⁴² J. Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. J. Stillinger (Cambridge: Belknap, 1982); Fire and Erdoes, *Lame Deer*, p. 109; Hogan, *Dwellings*, p. 98; Hogan, "Gate". In *The Book of Medicines* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1993), pp. 77–8. Linda Hogan again: "The Western belief that God lives apart from earth is one that has taken us toward collective [ecological] destruction" (Hogan, *Dwellings*, pp. 85–6).

⁴³ "My house is the red earth." See J. Harjo, *Secrets from the Center of the World* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), p. 2.

⁴⁴ Eric Cheyfitz frames this general Western appropriative gesture of imposing the "self" upon the "other," the "same" upon "difference," as follows: "Anglo-American imperialism has alienated the world outside the West in the form of the other, so that it could dream the other's redemption in the form of the self." E. Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*, expanded ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xiv.

⁴⁵ B. Swann, *Wearing the Morning Star: Native American Song-Poems* (New York: Random, 1996), p. xi; S. R. Sanders, "Speaking a Word for Nature". In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in*

Literary Ecology, eds. C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) p. 184. Likewise Muscogee poet Joy Harjo: "The Western viewpoint has always been one of the land as wilderness, as something to be afraid of." See J. Harjo, *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 71.

⁴⁶ W. M. Clements, *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), p. 89; see also H. Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789–1936* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 60 and 68. Carr even suggests a two-way circuit of influence, in which "the language of Ossian may also have [already] been influenced by (translated) Native American models" (p. 61). Kenneth Lincoln traces an entire lineage of "cultural romantics" in love with the New World "noble savage," from Rousseau, Schiller, and Coleridge, through Cooper and Whitman, to Snyder, Merwin, and Bly. K. Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890–1999* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 39.

⁴⁷ Or, as Gerald Vizenor expresses it, "Hiawatha became the sycophant of manifest manners in the literature of dominance." G. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), p. 39. The Finnish origins of *Hiawatha's* rousing "tom-tom" trochaic tetrameter has often been noted. Worse yet, the first actual translation of a Native American lyric, in 1765, was rendered in heroic couplets. See B. Swann, "Introduction". In *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, ed. B. Swann (New York: Random, 1994) p. xxi.

⁴⁸ See Bhabha, *The Location*, for a neo-Lacanian analysis of the approach-avoidance mechanisms of colonization's "frontier/border" mentality (e.g., pp. 69 and 72).

⁴⁹ Quoted in S. Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 214 (emphasis added). And years later, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim: "In animistic thinking, not only animals feel and think as we do, but even stones are alive" (quoted in Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, p. 123).

⁵⁰ Regarding the consciousness of animals, at least: "The Indian does not regard awareness of being [i.e., consciousness] as an abnormality peculiar to one species" (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 60).

⁵¹ C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, 20 vols., eds. H. Read, M. Fordham and G. Adler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953–78) 10: §280.

⁵² But I must defend Jung by pointing to what I consider his better "Self" – when he reveals his own "primitive" (and thoroughly Romantic) vision of interconnectedness: "At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons." See C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. A. Jaffé (New York: Vintage, 1965 [1961]), pp. 225–6). Compare *Lame Deer's* similar feeling, often after a vision of speaking birds: "Sometimes I feel like the first being in one of our Indian legends. . . . All of nature is in me, and a bit of myself is in all of nature" (Fire and Erodes, *Lame Deer*, p. 137).

⁵³ Harjo, *In Mad Love and War*, p. 65.

⁵⁴ Harjo, *The Spiral of Memory*, p. 123.

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