

The Emergent Land: Nature and Ecology in Native American Expressive Forms

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If we are to make any progress in the reading and analysis of nature writing, if we are to make any progress in understanding 'nature' in itself in any other context besides the nostalgic and romantic, those two nearly useless positions which serve largely to freeze aesthetic and intellectual progress, then we must divest ourselves of the notion of nature as a 'source of insight and promise of innocence,' and instead entertain the idea that nature itself is not only the whole playing table of history and politics, but a player itself. (Gretchen Legler, quoted in *Writing the Environment*, pp. 71-72).

National identity [...] would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland. (Simon Schama, pp. 15 & 19).

For the Native American, nature and ecology represent and include what are often the most important elements of an aboriginal lifestyle. Fundamentally, the earth is the creator, a spiritual being containing a multitude of natural deities. In this way the land is the source of all sustenance — a powerful source of stories and tribal history, and also a definer of identity, both tribal and individual, whilst also providing physical sustenance. To these ends the term 'nature' in itself is virtually superfluous in a description of the Native American approach to the land. In western thought nature evokes a vision of a physical world that is separate and distinct from the individual, a world where mankind is placed above the entirety of creation. Ecological surrounds are not paramount within such western conceptions. Acknowledging this insufficiency of western terms to describe the Native American's cognisance of the environment and its constituent parts, Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko has outlined the term 'landscape' as it is interpreted by her Pueblo tribe:

the term *landscape*, as it has entered into the English language, is misleading. 'A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view' does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow *outside* or *separate from* the territory he or she surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on. (Silko, 1996, p. 27. Emphasis added.)

For Leslie Silko's tribe the person represents a constituent part of the natural world. And her description goes further, with the individual being interpreted as *equal* to the landscape and the natural world.

Silko herself is not by definition solely a 'nature writer' nor would it be fair to describe her work in any similarly narrow manner (including Native American). However, her work, like the work of many Native American writers, has as its informing principle a relationship with land and nature in some form. Whilst the work of these authors may not always be particularly 'Indian,' the influence of Native American expression, whether emanating from a unique tribal or geographical experience or from a distinct narrative culture, is often present. That influence is largely formed by the significant landscape tradition of the Native American.

The extent of that tradition is of vital importance in the comprehension of the relationship which the Native American had, and continues to have, with the American landscape. The distinct 'belonging' that Silko speaks of is evident in Native American oral and narrative forms. Native American stories and myths, and in particular Native American creation stories, accentuate and develop the Native American landscape tradition. This process is often recognised in the association of particular tribes with what Alfonso Ortiz has termed "precise spatial referents." (Ortiz, 1969, p. 135). This process of association embodies a particular form of identification, acknowledging specific tribal grounds not only as home, but also as the creator of the people and therefore endowed with parental qualities. Silko has spoken of this identification, with particular reference to the Emergence Place that is recorded in Pueblo Creation stories:

The small spring near the Paguete village is literally the source and continuance of life for people in the area. The spring also functions on a spiritual level, recalling the original Emergence Place and linking the people and the spring water to all other people and to that moment when the Pueblo people became aware of themselves as they are even now. The Emergence was an emergence into a precise cultural identity. (*ibid.*).

The Emergence Place is for the Pueblo people the precise location from which they originated. It is their birthplace, and it is the birthplace of all living forms. Therefore everything the spring has created is equal; hence man and nature are brothers. Silko's description also evokes other qualities that the spring possesses. The spring is a physical necessity for the Pueblo tribe as it is the only source of water for the people of the village. The Emergence Place is therefore functioning on two vastly important levels — the spiritual and the functional. Together they constitute "a precise cultural identity." In Native American spirituality, the earth as creator and actual physical sustenance are closely related, and all are of equal importance.

Such integration is explicit in Alfonso Ortiz and Richard Erdoes' collection of Native American stories, *American Indian Myths and Legends*. Here, as in Silko's description of the Pueblo Emergence Place, the land is very often mapped out or explained by the stories via a tangible link between natural phenomena and the events in

Indian cultural past and tribal formation.ⁱ Such an explanation is evident in the creation story of 'How the Sioux Came To Be.' In this story Unktehi, a water monster, brings about a great flood, from which the Indian people — the ancestors of the Sioux nation — try to escape by climbing a nearby hill. However, as the teller, Chief Lame Deer, explains:

The water swept over the hill. Waves tumbled the rocks and pinnacles, smashing them down on the people. Everyone was killed, and all the blood jelled, making one big pool. The blood turned to pipestone and created the pipestone quarry, the grave of those ancient ones. That's why the pipe, made of red rock, is so sacred to us. Its red bowl is the flesh and blood of our ancestors, its stem is the backbone of those people long dead, the smoke rising from it is their breath. I tell you, that pipe, that *chanunpa*, comes alive when used in ceremony. You can feel power flowing from it (Ortiz, 1987, p. 94).

The story quite literally associates the Sioux ancestors with the land by effectively encapsulating them within a distinct geographical feature of the area. Consequently the pipestone quarry becomes a natural environment that is sacred and revered by the Sioux. In entombing the ancestors, the land itself has become an ancestor by association, and as such is seen to contain great wisdom and power. Simultaneously the topography of the landscape has been orally recorded, thereby explaining and bringing about an understanding of the quarries' status in Sioux dogma. The geographical existence of the quarry has been elaborated, and for the tribe personalised, making the landscape around the Black Hills especially sacred for the Sioux. This type of interaction between the landscape, the myth, and consequently the spiritual and personal beliefs of the people, is crucial to Native American cosmogony. That this is so becomes clearer as Lame Deer's story continues. As punishment for her actions the Grandfather Spirit, Tunkashila, pushes the water monster, Unktehi, whereupon she falls in such a position that

Her bones are the Badlands now. Her back forms a long, high ridge, and you can see her vertebrae sticking out in a great row of red and yellow rocks. (*ibid.*).

With the description of Unktehi's death the story rationalises the origin of the "Badlands" whilst simultaneously the Badlands are the impetus for the tale. Both are related in a fundamental manner.

The depth of this relationship had the effect of intertwining the essential reality of the landscape's natural topography with the beliefs and stories of the Native American. The stories became crucial to an understanding of nature and its constituent parts, just as those constituent parts became crucial to the act of telling and retelling the stories. They were therefore co-dependent. What this entails is an oral charting of the American landscape, a process that is embraced and enlivened by the storytelling process. There was a certain expediency in the active appropriation that occurred centuries ago of the earth's natural form by the first Americans. Essentially, spiritual belief was centred on the natural earth, encapsulating the entirety of creation and treating each creature, plant,

and animal as equal and of intrinsic self-worth. It is this appropriation that has resulted in the doctrinal views that Lame Deer and Silko have expressed. Appropriation of this kind has allowed place, and particularly tribal lands, to become critically important to the Native American's oral narrative, and simultaneously to Native American spiritual practices. Emphasising that appropriation Silko tells us that

Location or 'place' nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives [...] the places where the stories occur are precisely located, and prominent geographical details recalled (*ibid.*).

The result is that "the landscape [...] takes on a deeper significance: the landscape resonates the spiritual or mythic dimension of the Pueblo world" (*ibid.*). Native American spirituality and storytelling therefore play a significant role in an understanding of the landscape — in the understanding of nature as "a player itself."

Nature was also "a player" in other areas of Native American life. Not only did the environment influence the formation of creation stories but quite often the natural topography of an area also dictated the organisation of Native American ceremonies. Just as creation stories "appropriated" natural rock formations or sources of water and sustenance to construct a vision of Native American ancestors and create an affinity with the land, Native American ceremonies were also shaped around the local environment. The Salt Pilgrimage undertaken by the Papago Indians on the West Coast of the American continentⁱⁱ is an example of this. In this instance the form that the ceremony took was decided by the physical existence of the landscape in a very precise and detailed way. Elaborating this fact, one source explains that:

There were two accessible salt deposits, reached by different routes. One route led straight south, through Quijotoa and Sharp Mountain, requiring only two days and a half [travel]. However, this meant forced marches, when the men had sometimes to travel half the night in order to reach the one camp that had water. The village of Akchin, which followed this route, took the minimum time for ceremonials and recited no long speeches. The other route led west to Ajo Mountain and then south, past the Pinacate. This took four days; Santa Rosa and Anegam, which followed it, had long rituals for each of the watering places (Tedlock, 1975, p. 46).

It becomes obvious that the length of the journey regulated the pattern of the village's ceremonial passage. Yet the solemnity or gravity of the trip remained unchanged.

Such adaptation to the natural surroundings suggests an awareness of the physical reality and stark necessity of form imposed by the natural environs. As a result the Papago ceremony was shaped into a unique spiritual pattern; created — or at least regulated — by the land. Oral narratives and Native American ceremonies alike accepted the land as a preordained source of power and magic, and in so doing formed a strong union between culture and nature. The land was in this manner the forming principle, and the origin of all things. That reading is commensurate to Silko's explanation of the significance of the Emergence Place for the Native American people. Just as Lame Deer's retelling of the origin of the Sioux nation placed an emphasis upon the strength

that his people gained from possessing a bond with nature, so too does the Salt Pilgrimage rely on the environment to provide certain strengths. The pilgrimage was a spiritual and physical test for a man, and as such could be utilised to gain respect:

Young men with their careers before them volunteered for the expedition, especially if they had not had a chance to go to war, for salt gathering ranked almost with war as an opportunity for dreaming and acquiring power (*ibid.*).

Significant, then, is the attribution of rigid social values to the process of interacting with the landscape and thus improving or strengthening the self, all of which may be achieved through a ceremony that takes place through, and is shaped by, the land. However, the Salt Pilgrimage, like the Creation story, also serves to demonstrate that for many Native Americans the actual ceremony was, at the very least, of equal importance to interacting with the land. For example, the salt that was collected at the end of the pilgrimage had no attributed spiritual value outside of being the pilgrimage's final goal. Indeed, "during the ritual the salt is ceremonially spoken of as corn. Yet it is not, in itself, sacred, any more than are the crops" (*ibid.*). The conclusion to be drawn is that the personal gain from the ceremony was more important to the Papago tribe than the opportunity to praise and become closer to the landscape. This is similar to the manner in which the pipestone quarry presented for the Sioux an opportunity to engage with the tribal ancestors and thus become spiritually stronger. Furthermore, the appropriation of natural surroundings in this almost utilitarian fashion demonstrates that nature and the landscape were not 'worshipped' as simplified forms. Rather, they were part of the complex Native American relationship with the natural environment.

The direct interaction that has been seen to occur between the Native American and the natural environment in both Creation stories and ceremonial practices occurred in other areas of Native American life also. Just as the Native American attributed particular 'sensibilities' or qualities to the land itself, so too were certain sensibilities recognised in the earth's 'other inhabitants', namely plants and animals. Seeing the earth as a parent, and therefore the creator of all things, inspired much of this rationale. Humans, plants and animals all had an equal position and an equal responsibility to the creator:

The belief of the Indian is that everything on the earth was created by one person [...] the grass and the sagebrush and anything that grows and has a root and that grows on the ground was made or created by this one person which has meaning of life, and that's the root of Indian religion. [...] The tree represents life. The leaves represent life. (Cash, 1971, p. 39).

Again a co-dependency existed between the Native American and the ecological surroundings. Likewise the environment had a responsibility towards the population that it sustained. Like the Salt Pilgrimage, which provides an opportunity for personal achievement, the earth provides healing and spiritual powers, alongside a means of essential sustenance. In this way nature's provisions may be used to "cure certain diseases, certain sicknesses" (*ibid.*). The earth as creator, and plant, animal and man as

created, all co-exist whilst simultaneously retaining their own particular values. Such was the animistic view held by the Native American, a view that gave rise to the Native American respect for the natural environment. However, this was not a respect that was indiscriminately applied to everything that existed, as may be seen in the beliefs of the Ojibwa Indians:

At the level of individual behaviour, the interaction of the Ojibwa with *certain kinds* of plants and animals in everyday life is so structured culturally that individuals act as if they were dealing with persons who both understand what is being said to them and have volitional capacities as well (Tedlock, 1975, p. 160. Emphasis added.)

The Ojibwa approach to nature displays the people's perception of natural objects as individuals and their treatment of them accordingly. However, and importantly, this perception is only of "certain kinds of plants and animals." Therefore the cultural structure that the speaker identifies does not apply to natural objects indiscriminately, but is instead retained for certain parts of creation.

That structure is again evident amongst the stories of Alfonso Ortiz's collection, many of which highlight the animal/human relationship. Ortiz, in an introduction to one such story, explains that:

The Indian hero relates comfortably to the natural world; he speaks to animals and they speak to him, often revealing knowledge or aiding him in other ways. He assumes their shape, and they carry or hide him. Often the hero himself is an animal, or rather a human who is at the same time an animal, like old man Coyote, Bear-Man, Spider Woman, or the ferocious Man-Eagle (*ibid.*, p. 179).

The "Indian hero" that Ortiz speaks of is typical of the kind that appears in Native American narratives. By often physically becoming an animal or communicating with the animals on a fundamental level, these heroes display the close bond that the Native American has with the other beings of creation. Rabbit Boy is an example of one such hero. In one particular tale he is formed from a blood clot that a rabbit kicks until it becomes a baby. The rabbit and his wife raise Rabbit Boy before he leaves for the human side of the earth, where he has "strange power [...] wisdom and generosity," which is at least partially due to his relationship with the natural environment (*ibid.*, p. 6).

There are many examples of this interaction between mythical figures possessing animistic qualities and the ecological elements. This interaction effected not only the Native American perception of animal beings but also the manner in which the Native American approached the taking of an animal during the hunt. Indeed it also affected the actual hunt itself. Carolyn Merchant explains that "during the hunt, humans and animals confronted each other as autonomous subjects, not as subject and object" (Merchant, 1989, p. 47). The use of the definer 'autonomous' echoes Gretchen Legler's wish that the Native American be seen as a subject in relation to the landscape. Furthermore, Merchant's explanation describes the animal as a subject also; therefore both the hunter and the hunted, animal or human, are of equal importance and merit in the realm of the

natural world. Because of the shared consciousness between the animal and the Native American, the categories of the hunter and the hunted are broken down; there is no attribution of a higher position to either. For this reason:

Hunting depended on mimicry. In participatory consciousness, all the senses are fused with the body motions in mimesis. [...] The hunt fuses touch, hearing and the active eye. In hunting for survival, the gaze is active and participatory. [...] In the meeting of like with like, distance as space between is collapsed. Communication is direct and immediate (*ibid.*, pp. 47-8).

“Distance as space between is collapsed,” therefore there is an intimate identification and relationship between the Native American and the animal beings of the earth. This is seen in the story of Rabbit Boy, who has not power *over* but rather the power *of* all sentient beings.

For this reason the act of hunting, or more precisely the taking of the sacred game that offers itself up to the Native American, is a process of understanding and communication between the animal and the individual. In many ways the hunter must almost ‘be’ the game, an exchange of identity aided by the Native American perspective of the union between nature and culture:

The caribou walked along well like me. Then I walked as he was walking. Then I took his path. And then I walked like the caribou, my trail looking like the caribou trail where I saw my tracks. And so indeed I will take care of the caribou. I will give them to the people. [...] he who obeys the requirements is given caribou, and he who disobeys is not given caribou (Calvin Luther Martin, 1992, pp. 19-20).

Mimesis of this type allows the hunter to take the caribou respectfully to his people, but only if he “obeys the requirements.” These requirements are the respect and thanks that the Native American offers to the caribou for giving up his life in order for the hunter’s people to live. Without these elements the caribou will not offer up his body and the people will starve. The consequences of ignoring the need for such respect are detrimental. In a Southern Ute legend the hero, again Blood Clot, leaves his wife when she calls upon the hunters to kill a buffalo calf. Her husband had already explained that the calf must not be killed because Blood Clot belonged to the buffalo tribe, and therefore was part of the calf just as it was part of him (Ortiz, 1987, pp. 8-11).

Nature’s parenting qualities were, then, vital to the sustenance of the Native American and were recognised as being so. This vision of the earth as provider did, however, differ from one tribe to another, depending on whether that tribe was hunting or agriculturally orientated. For the Native American tribes of the East and Southwest, who were of a planting tradition, those parenting qualities were not as reverential towards the spirit of the animal, but instead focused on the earth and the earth’s bounty. Corn Mother is the personification of this bounty and as such she is the central deity of many myths and stories of those regions and is known as Corn Mother or First Mother in the East and Moing’iima in the Southwest. Amongst the New England tribes the corn was the fruit of

the First Mother's sacrifice for her children. The Creation stories of these tribes explain that with the depletion of wild game First Mother's people had begun to starve. Following her instructions "[her] husband slew his wife [...] [and] dragged her body to and fro [...] until her flesh covered all the earth" (Ortiz, 1987, p. 13). Seven months later they "came back to that place [...] they found the earth covered with tall, tasselled plants. The plant's fruit-corn was First Mother's flesh" (*ibid.*). The corn represented for these agricultural tribes the flesh of their ancestor in much the same way as the Sioux Creation story posits the pipestone clay as the blood of the founding ancestors, or the manner in which the animal is perceived as a relative amongst hunting tribes. Paramount, then, is the association that is made between the people and a natural element of the ecological surroundings.

These natural resources represent a bond between the Native American and an aboriginal culture, a formation that is achieved through the landscape. Encapsulating as they do Native American heritage, the devotion towards the landscape, and the fundamental need to acquire food, strength and power, these resources were a part of the greater paradigm that was the Native American's cognisance of the environment. For this reason they belonged to all Native Americans and were therefore protected and respected. In this manner First Mother's husband told the people to

Take good care of First Mother's flesh, because it is her goodness become substance. Take good care of her breath, because it is her love turned into smoke. Remember her and think of her whenever you eat, whenever you smoke this sacred plant, because she has given her life so that you might live (Ortiz, 1987, p. 13).

Differences in the perception of the landscape and nature specifically portray what the environment and ecological setting represented to the Native American. Simultaneously the land represented a home, a source of spirituality, the holder of heritage, a harsh or benevolent parent, a source of personal and cultural power and was in ways a defining element of its inhabitants. Likewise, the various readings applied to the earth and its natural elements displayed the Native American's articulation of personal and cultural power through their natural surroundings. Very often the earth was worshipped for the results that worship might yield, not for the sake of worshipping the land itself. Similarly, the huge variation in the Native Americans' cosmogony throughout the American continent highlights the diversity of nature's role in accordance with the beliefs of the local peoples. That this is so is evident in the format taken by Native American creation stories, ceremonies and hunting or agricultural patterns. A complete sense of oneness between the Indian and the land should never be taken for granted. Although the two were frequently interactive and interdependent, they remained separate and complex parts of the American natural environment. For this reason space always remained more important to the Native American than constructs of time or history.

It is not until we come to understand the Native American perception of the ecological world as a complex and multifaceted form that we can begin to understand the

effect that this perception has had upon Native American expression. When this is achieved, when all of the stories, ceremonies and traditions have been taken into account, then perhaps nature and the Native American may be separated and recognised individually as what Legler has called “players” in their own rights. This process shall in turn dismantle the boundaries of history and the stereotypes that we have become accustomed to over the last 500 years, hence allowing a redefinition of the environment and the indigenous inhabitants as subject, not object. The creation stories above are evidence of this, existing as they have for thousands of years. Furthermore, in light of this research we may examine and comprehend the Native American understanding of, and interaction with, both plant and animal life. We might also understand just when those forms did or did not form a part of a spiritual or sacred event. Finally, we may begin to realign our perceptions of the Native American as a naturalised individual, somehow capable of ‘talking to nature’ or in touch with the ancient cosmos. If the Native American was ‘connected’ to the land, and it is probably fair to say that this was so, it was in a traditional and comprehensible manner. In light of this examination it is possible to establish, if not the truth, then at least a realistic and knowledgeable picture of the Native American relationship with the land and the environment. Through this relationship the Native American developed a distinct and unique “landscape tradition” and formed a particularly close “union [with] culture and nature.” In order to understand that tradition, and in order to “make any progress in understanding nature” and the Native American’s relationship to the natural environment, it is crucial that we reassess our preconceptions. Only an examination of the myths, ceremonies and lifestyles of the Native American people can make this reassessment a reality.

I am related
in a universe
bigger than
my mind

I travel both earth and heaven
trails
lost in reference
to other lives

to other stars
and songs
of other constellations. [Tauhindali, Wintu poet (Carmichael, p. 23)]

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ⁱ I avoid the term 'history' as an inadequate and incorrect term to describe those events. Rather than representing the 'past' alone these events are organic and alive within Native American tradition today, and in this way continue to form a crucial part of Indian cultural identity.

ⁱⁱ Ruth Underhill undertook a meticulous examination of this Native American ceremony in 1930