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American Indians and Environmentalism: The Problematics of the Land Ethic Stereotype

Lee Schweninger

Representations of American Indians as environmentalists, as keepers of the land, or as worshippers of a Mother Earth goddess can be said to serve as cultural alternatives for mainstream Americans. These sometimes intricately constructed environmental attitudes attributed to American Indians provide a symbolic, if not a literal, means for non-Indians to articulate an alternative response to the pervasive Western, techno-industrial attitudes toward the land and their treatment of it. Joseph Backus maintains that "non-Indian Americans are quick to attribute to the traditional Indian what seems an ideal kind of existence." According to this stereotype, writes Backus,

> The peoples native to this [Western] hemisphere were able to nurture and preserve in its nearly natural state a greatly varied but thoroughly integrated ecological system for countless thousands of years. . . . Current popularity of this ideal is clearly due to disenchantment with narrow rationalism and the ravaging materialism to which that realism gives license. (271)

These alternative perspectives attributed to Native Americans result in large part from representations imposed on American Indian cultures by non-Natives. And these perspectives are at work both in the somewhat facile but popular and long-enduring collections of Native American excerpts, works such as *Touch the Earth: A Self Portrait of Indian Existence* (1971) compiled by T. C. McLuhan**,** or the more recent collections such as Joseph Bruchac's *Native Wisdom* (1995), or Anne Schaef's *Native Wisdom for White Minds*(1995). *Native American Wisdom* (1993), another work, is a tiny, toy-like book which includes photographs by Edward Curtis. Although many of the Curtis photographs were taken in the early twentieth century (Curtis completed his multi-volume study *The North American Indian* in 1930), they are meant to represent the subjects as they supposedly existed in some imagined pristine, pre-twentieth-century state. The photographs are meant to preserve what Curtis saw as dying cultures. Along with the photographs in this miniature publication, are little bits of "wisdom" dealing often with the speaker's response to, or interaction with the land. The first entry, for example, is attributed to Luther Standing Bear: "The American Indian is of the soil. . . . He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings" (18). Such a mass-marketed book, a book the size of its reader's palm, certainly promulgates stereotypes. And such a collection does nothing to problematize notions of Indian interaction with the land. What Vine Deloria, Jr. has to say about religions is applicable in the context of an Indian land ethic: "Indian religions are a hot item. It is [sic] the outward symbolic form that is most popular. . . . Tribal religions have been trivialized beyond redemption by people sincerely wishing to learn about them" (43). The same can be said about belief in a Native American land ethic. The notion of Indians as the land's stewards has

been decontextualized and trivialized to the point of meaninglessness as it has been subjected to the whims of a mass-market culture.

Also serving to perpetuate stereotypes are recent Hollywood film renditions of Indians (inevitably Indians of previous centuries), films that somewhat mindlessly depict their subjects as living—unlike their European-American counterparts—in some sort of natural paradise. Take for example the respective Indian and calvary camps in *Dances with Wolves* (1990); the Sioux camp—as we first see it through the eyes of Lt. John Dunbar (Kevin Costner)—sits beside a tree-lined river in a lush green valley populated with free grazing Indian ponies. This idyllic scene stands in stark contrast to the deserted, barren, brown, and almost lifeless army camp. Indeed, at the camp even the water is contaminated by a large, drowned wapiti buck.

A similar idyllic viewpoint is implied by the natural, almost mystical garden in *The Last of the Dogmen* (1995). This film depicts a group of Cheyenne warriors descended from survivors of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in eastern Colorado. The group, which has retained the lifestyle of the ancestors, has been hiding out in the vastness of a pristine garden, secluded in the wilds of the Montana Rockies. These dogmen, over several generations, have spent a century or more here, virtually untouched by and unknown to the European-American civilization on the other side of the waterfall tunnel, apparently the only entrance to their garden hideaway. They live in the "old ways," of course, and their edenic lifestyle apparently results in no adverse impact on the land.

Regardless of the historical and cultural explanations for and problematics of the concept of indigenous environmentalism, it is thus abundantly clear that publishers and film makers provide mainstream Americans with a romantic ideal, casting pre-twentieth-century American Indians as models of ethical land stewardship that is sorely lacking in their own urban, mechanistic lives. As T. C. McLuhan writes in the introduction to the collection *Touch the Earth:* "We need to establish a right relationship with the land and its resources; otherwise, the destruction of the Indian will be followed by the destruction of nature" (2). The problematics of her conception of the "destruction of the Indian," aside, McLuhan's argument that the "Indians, in a sense, knew this all along" (2**)** is simplistic and, as Deloria writes, full of "maudlin emotions in an already overemotional book" (31). McLuhan asserts that "For many generations they learned how to live in America, in a state of balance" (2). To support this assertion, she draws, for example, on words attributed to an unnamed Wintu woman: "The white people never cared for land. The Indians never hurt anything, but the White people destroy all" (qtd. in McLuhan 15). For better or worse, then, based on these compilations of excerpts, American Indians continue to be stereotyped as symbols of American environmentalism, symbols offering a counter-cultural way of life. Even the scholar Bruchac offers such a collection of Native wisdom that contains "themes in Native American Wisdom, a wisdom I firmly believe is greatly needed today—by all human beings" (1).

These stereotypes imposed by popular culture and perpetuated even by noted literary critics continue to thrive despite the fact that most scholars of American Indian history and culture continue a critical (even philosophical) debate about whether, or to what degree, American Indians were and are environmentalists or worshippers of a Mother Earth goddess. Most notably in this context, Sam Gill argues that the concept of a Mother Earth goddess has been imposed upon American Indians by non-Indian ethnographers and anthropologists (129-143 *passim*). But one must call into question as well other aspects of the stereotype of Indians

as keepers of the land. Certainly even if we establish that a particular individual or particular tribe practices a discernable land ethic, it is dangerous, and can be misleading, to generalize that practice to Native Americans of other regions and to other Indian nations. Aware of the dangers of over-generalizing and writing primarily of Northeastern and Plains Indians in the epilogue to *Keepers of the Game*(1978), Calvin Martin argues that although they did not practice a land ethic *per se*, Native hunters "revered and propitiated" nonhuman nature because they felt that the animals were "inherently deserving of such regard"; the Native Americans "appealed to them for spiritual and aesthetic sustenance" (186). Tom Regan affirms that attribution of a "land ethic" to Native Americans is "to show them a false respect" (235). He argues that Native American relationships with the land must remain ambiguous.

More recently, J. Baird Callicott disagrees with both Regan and Martin, arguing that there is indeed an identifiable American Indian acknowledgement of responsibility toward non-human nature. He states emphatically that "the world view typical of American Indian peoples has included and supported an environmental ethic, while that of Europeans has encouraged human alienation from the natural environment and an exploitative practical relationship with it" (177). In a recent essay on Native Americans and the environment, David Lewis assumes *a priori* that American Indians developed an elaborate land ethic. He writes, for example, that "Land—*place*—remains the essence of Native identity and sovereignty" (440).

Although the formulation of American Indians as environmentalists has in part been imposed from the outside by non-Native ethnographers, anthropologists, historians, and literary scholars, there is ample historical and literary evidence suggesting that members of many tribes across North America did and do indeed perceive their relationship with the land differently from the European settlers. Such renowned spokesmen as Black Elk, Smohalla, and Luther Standing Bear, for example, seem to characterize themselves and Indians in general as having a special connection to the earth. In the 1870s Smohalla is supposed to have stated that "the earth was the mother of mankind" (qtd. in Gill 129). Luther Standing Bear is reputed to have said that the "Lakota was a true naturist—a lover of nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth" (qtd. in McLuhan 6). In John Neihardt's account, Black Elk is famous for supposedly having articulated the need for humans to share the earth with "the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother" (1). One must be careful, however, to distinguish between non-Indian renditions of speeches or comments and what Native Americans actually spoke in particular contexts. Neihardt's creation of an environmentally precocious Black Elk is a case in point.

Perhaps one of the most prevalent stereotypes is the belief or assertion that American Indians worship a Mother Earth goddess. Many statements concerning Mother Earth find their way into these handy, pop publications. As a Winnebago wise saying has it, "Holy Mother Earth, the trees and all nature, are witnesses of your thoughts and deeds" (McLuhan 5). Chief Joseph (Nez Perce), a contemporary of Smohalla, is reputed to have said that "The earth is the mother of all people" (*Native American Wisdom* 95), and Big Thunder (Bedagi) to have said that "The earth is our mother" (*NativeAmerican Wisdom* 39). Of the Indians' responsibility, Don Coyhis (Mohican) said, "You will be the keepers of the Mother Earth" (Schaef 21 April); Franklin Kahn (Navajo) said, "We need to respect Mother Earth and care for the planet" (Schaef 26 April); Phil Lane (Yankton Lakota) said, "We must respect our Mother, the Earth, or we can never grow as human beings, her children"; Little Star (tribe unidentified) said, "All affirmed the central role of . . . the bond between Indians and 'Mother Earth'" (Schaef 17

Oct); and Thomas Banyacya (Hopi) said , "We are children of Mother Earth . . . and were sent to help keep this land in balance" (Schaef 4 Aug).

Coincident with the ubiquitous popularization of such Native American attitudes toward the land, and perhaps building on a tradition begun by Black Elk and Smohalla, many serious contemporary American Indian writers assert that they do indeed maintain a special relationship with the earth. N. Scott Momaday writes, for example, that an American Indian relationship toward the land "proceeds from a racial or cultural experience" ("Native American Attitudes toward the Environment" 80). In the essay "An American Land Ethic," Momaday insists that "In Ko-sahn and in her people we have always had the example of a deep, ethical regard for the land" (105). In the words of Paula Gunn Allen: "We are the land . . . that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest" (191). Louis Owens, scholar and novelist, declares that the ecological perspective is important for him in a way that is typical of many Indian writers. As he explains in the introduction to *Other Destinies*,

> Native American writers are offering a way of looking at the world that is new to Western culture. It is a holistic, ecological perspective, one that places essential value upon the totality of existence, making humanity equal to all elements but superior to none and giving humankind crucial responsibility for the care of the world we inhabit. (29)

The crucial difference between a comment such as Owens's and those images that are mass marketed is this: Owens writes of himself and his contemporaries, not of nineteenth-century ideals; he places himself within a specific, complex, and vital context.

In the essay "Creations," Linda Hogan—like Momaday and Allen—argues that non-Indian American culture has no deep or sincere connection with the earth, and that this lacuna has caused Natives to lose their own sense of the land. She writes that

> Emptiness and estrangement are deep wounds, strongly felt in the present time. We have been split from what we could nurture, what could fill us. And we have been wounded by a dominating culture that has feared and hated the natural world, has not listened to the voice of the land, has not believed in the inner worlds of human dreaming and intuition, all things that have guided indigenous people since time stood up in the east and walked this world into existence, split from the connection between self and land. (82)

Like Owens, Hogan is more interested in the present moment than in the past. She refers to the past as a vague, almost mythical, personified time; whereas the present is immediate and intricate. Hogan's view is not a reductive notion of Indian as keeper of the land; rather she conjoins self, land, and political oppression in a way that implies the connections between oppression of people and of land. Thus, although these writers—Hogan, Momaday, Owens—problematize and contextualize their land ethic, they do espouse a close and viable specifically Native American relationship with the land.

In addition to writers such as Momaday, Allen, Owens, and Hogan (the list could go on), popular singer/songwriters also contend that Indians have a special relationship with the land. In the song "Colors," for example, Murray Porter characterizes the Indian-land-ethic contention in this manner: "Ten thousand years we lived our lives In harmony with Mother Earth Taking only what we need to survive Not using Her for all She's worth." Similarly, in his song "What Is Going to Happen to the Indian?" Lawrence Martin calls Indians "keepers of the earth." ElizaBeth Hill sings that "the Waters are dying and the Great Trees are crying," implying that the people who would take care of them have been put on reservations.

Certainly Joy Harjo with her band *Poetic Justice* emphasizes the importance of a connection with the land; her house is, after all, "the red earth. It could be the center of the world." In a kind of self-help book, *Mother Earth Spirituality* (1990), Ed McGaa (Oglala Sioux) also perpetuates the Mother Earth belief. He describes seven Earth Mother ceremonies that, he admits, have evolved since white interruption. He offers them in the book "to bridge across to the sacred in the natural world" (41).

Ultimately scholars recognize, of course, that American Indians themselves are subject to the same stereotypes and generalizations about their past and present cultures as non-Natives. They are brought up seeing the same movies, watching the same television programs, reading the same books. As Sherman Alexie explains, as for beating drums in the woods: "Hey, Indians gave that up a hundred years ago. Now we're sitting on the couch with the remote" (qtd. in Egan 16). On this level, then, American Indians themselves can be seen as inheriting the same notions of Indians as environmentalists or of Indians as having a special and spiritual relationship with the land. Concerning this special relationship, Alexie jokes: "White people only like Indians if we're warriors or guardians of the earth. Guardians of the earth! Have any of you ever been to a reservation? A guest house is a rusted car up on blocks out behind a H.U.D. trailer" (qtd. in Egan 16).

In "The Tragic Wisdom of Salamanders," Gerald Vizenor also seems to take issue with the ostensible Indian worship of Mother Earth, writing, for example, "Mother, mother earth, the names honored as tribal visions, could become our nonce words near the sour end of a chemical civilization." That nickname, argues Vizenor, "is the mere mother of manifest manners and tractable consumerism" (194).

Despite his refusal to accept the terminology, "Mother Earth goddess," Vizenor—like Momaday and Hogan—does make a point about non-Indians having lost a sense of connection with the land that he feels is of critical importance: "To name the wounded earth our mother, the insinuation of a wanton nurturance, is the avoidance of our own burdens in a nuclear nation" (195), he writes. He finds that an embodiment of this sense of the land is the salamander: "The salamander and the natural mediation of amphibians, for instance, could be an unpretentious signature of the earth, the trace between land, water, and our stories" (194). Vizenor's choice of the salamander is appropriate in that, as an amphibian, it is especially sensitive to disruption. According to Emily Yoffe, "one of the most disturbing things about what's happening to amphibians is that species are disappearing from some of the most remote, pristine places left on the earth" (64). Despite his challenging, postmodern narratives and elusive characters, Vizenor also forcefully argues that "we must learn to hear once more the tragic wisdom of natural reason and survivance" (208).

On some levels, the explanations for these writers' insistence that non-Indian, mainstream American culture commits heinous crimes against nature is not hard to find. Again, according to Vizenor, "We have misused the narratives of natural reason as we have the environment; we have abused the names of the seasons, the weather, salamanders, bears, crows, and ants in our creation stories, and that has weakened our survivance" (208). Vizenor thus identifies a link between misuse of narratives and degradation of the environment.

There are other explanations as well. In his essay on the Mother Earth goddess, Gill suggests, for example, that Native authors appropriate the mythology of the oppressor: "Indians transformed the Mother Earth concept through their own creative mythic processes." Such a transformation allows them, argues Gill, to articulate distinctively "Indian," in contrast to

"white," values and worldviews. Gill also offers an explanation for how non-Indian culture profits from the myth of the Mother Earth goddess. Believing Indians to be worshippers of such a goddess helps "place Native Americans in a schema of the evolution of cultures and religions" that non-Indians can comprehend. Such beliefs also serve to counter the ravaging materialism of Western culture (142). Here Gill echoes Deloria who argues that

> the cherished image of the noble redman is preserved by American society for its own purposes. If most literature on Indians . . . reflect[s] nothing else, it is that there exists in the minds of non-Indian Americans a vision of what they would like Indians to be. They stubbornly refuse to allow Indians to be or become anything else. (*God is Red* [first edition], 50)

In the introduction to *Touch the Earth*, McLuhan offers the explanation that non-Indian Americans can survive only through "a rediscovery of our environment." Non-Indian Americans, she argues, "need to establish a right relationship with the land and its resources. . . . Perhaps now, after hundreds of years of ignoring their wisdom, we may learn from the Indians" (2). The character Lillian Sloan (Barbara Hersey) echoes this sentiment in her role as anthropologist in the film *The Last of the Dogmen* (1995): "I've spent half my life teaching others," she says; "now out here with these people, I'm the student." Perhaps the script writers are making an oblique reference to words attributed to Rolling Thunder: "When you are ready," he says, "come to me. I will take you into nature. In nature you will learn everything you need to know" (Schaef 14 April).

Given the force of all this pop culture insisting that non-Indians have much to learn about Native American attitudes toward the land, several lingering questions come to mind. The literary scholar must address questions about how knowledge of the stereotype helps one better read and more fully respond to those authors who do profess an ethical relationship with the earth both in fiction and non-fiction. These brief comments suggest that the issue of an American Indian land ethic in literature is complex, and deserving of focussed and careful investigation, while also defying reductive analysis.

A second question has to do with whether or not the belief in themselves as keepers of the land, either individually or tribally, actually influences Native Americans' own treatment of the environment. Certainly, Alexie maintains that it does not. Momaday, Allen, and Vizenor seem to argue that it does, that it in fact must. Even Deloria argues for the importance of heeding a land ethic. He quotes Luther Standing Bear as he comments on the Euro-American's psychic distance from the land. Deloria himself writes that by virtue of being truly indigenous, American Indians cherish a "relationship to the earth upon which we walk and the plants and animals that give us sustenance" (*God is Red: A Native View of Religion* [revised], 61).

Another question has to do with whether popular belief in American Indians as guardians of the land and acknowledgment of the need to learn from such an ethics can benignly influence Indian-white relations. One must wonder how the respect for those who possess such wisdom manifests itself. Or is this stereotype, like others—especially that of Indians existing only in the nineteenth century—one for which one sheds a few silent tears in the dark of the movie theater (to borrow from Michael Dorris's review of *Dances with Wolves*, "Indians in Aspic"), but for which one otherwise does nothing?

Given Dorris's suggestion, not much has changed since 1973, for example, when Deloria could write that books "about Indians have been notably bereft of the ability to invoke sympathy. Rather they have been dependent on an escapist attitude for their popularity" (*God is Red* [first edition], 40). The implication, of course, is that the culture's viewing American Indians as keepers of the land is simply an escape mechanism that does not manifest itself in any actual behavioral change. Again Deloria's words of twenty-five years ago still ring true in this context: "Many whites have discerned in the historical Indian response a quality of life distinctly different than what they have come to experience in their own society that makes them return to the Indians of yesteryear instead of confronting the contemporary Indians" (*God is Red* [first edition], 55).

A final question concerns the stereotyping, theoretical adopting, and co-opting nature as a goddess. Did the stereotyping of Indians as keepers of the land ultimately change or affect non-Indians' behavior toward non-human nature? Or, do non-Indian members of mainstream America make well-intentioned resolutions as they sit in the theater, but then go blithely about their heedless business of destroying the very planet on which they live? To use Vizenor's terms, are they "orphans who have lost their stories of survivance?" (205).

In hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of suburban theaters across America, in order to watch a movie about Native Americans as guardians of the land, we must drive our fossil-fuel-consuming automobiles to and from the Cinemaplex. We must park in one of hundreds of spots painted onto several acres of the impervious asphalt that surrounds the theater. Concrete storm drains carry oil-coated water into nearby creeks. The theater, in my community for example, is itself built on land cleared of long-leaf forest, former habitat of the threatened fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Dendrocopus borealis*), the rare tiger salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*), and perhaps even the nearly extinct magnificent rams-horn snail (*Planorbella magnifica*). This whole land itself likely constitutes a former hunting ground of the Catawba and Tuscarora Indians. And that suburban theater is heated and cooled day and night by electricity generated alternately by a coal burning plant up the Cape Fear River or a nuclear power plant down the river. Air-conditioning units the size of pick-up trucks pump artificial air into the vast darkness.

Do we change our behavior as a result of the movies we see here under these conditions? Do the tiny, toy books of American Indian wisdom inspire action beyond that of turning the pages? Or, do we simply tip our hats in bereaved acknowledgement of our unthinking, unconscionable, transgressions against the earth and think, "Ah, those Indians had it right! If only it were 'back then.' If only I were Indian, I could truly practice such connection with the mother"?

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