Cherishing the Impaired Land: Traditional Knowledge and the Anthropocene in the Poetry of Gwen Westerman.

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In the first chapter of a historical narrative about the Dakota homeland, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate poet and artist, Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, emphasize the centrality of land in Dakota cosmologies:

> Mni Sota Makoce. The land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds. This land is where our grandmothers' grandmothers' grandmothers played as children. Carried in our collective memories are stories of this place that reach beyond recorded history… No matter how far we go, we journey back home through language and songs and in stories our grandparents told us to share with our children. (*Mni Sota Makoce* 23)

Not only do the stories affirm the significance of Dakota places but they also explain complex and reciprocal relationships among human and non-human beings, originating from environmental conditions and rendered in the Dakota. Similarly, the connection between the land and all beings features prominently in Westerman's poetry. In "Morning Song" from the 2013 collection *Follow the Blackbirds*, a blackbird summons spring with his song and celebrates the seasonal return of all his relatives, human and non-human alike. "Waŋna mitakuye hdipi" [Now my relatives are coming home] (53, 70), rejoices the bird. While the world conceived in Westerman's poetry is governed by the principles of harmonious multispecies relationality, it also includes

images of damage and contamination caused by industrialization, its resulting environmental pollution, and climate change, all identified with the Anthropocene. However, Westerman's lyrical world is not one of destruction either. Rather, Westerman acknowledges the changes brought about firstly by settler colonialism and secondly by industrialization and capitalism, and she traces possibilities for a continuation of harmonious coexistence in which human beings occupy neither central nor superior position in relation to their environment. What facilitates the continuation of the relationship with the land is the tribal knowledge built up over centuries about how to respectfully and responsibly interact with the environment.

In this essay I am interested in the value that Gwen Westerman's poetry ascribes to Indigenous Knowledge (IK) as a way to understand and react to environmental changes and preserve Dakota values in these new contexts. As numerous Indigenous scholars emphasize—Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), and Gregory Cajete (Tewa) among them—Traditional Indigenous Knowledge (TK), place-based and attentive to all forms of being, emphasizes adaptability to transformation as a framework to think about climate change and the resultant decrease in biodiversity. I believe that the most significant consequence of addressing the ecological state of the twenty-first-century world with Indigenous Knowledge is a disruption of the Anthropocene narratives which identify humankind as the sole agent of change, the sole author of its scientific explanation, and finally, the possible solution to the problem. Instead, Westerman relies on a more nuanced model, which draws attention to the relational character of interactions with other species and beings (those which biology would refer to as nonlife) and thus decenters man in the Enlightenment narrative of progress. Moreover, Westerman rejects the debilitating language of the Anthropocene which describes affected lands

as "damaged," contaminated," and "impaired." It is this last qualifier that is of special interest to me.

Following an illuminating presentation by Disability Studies scholar Sunaura Taylor, "Disabled Ecologies: Living with Impaired Landscapes," given at the University of California, Berkeley, on March 5, 2019, I would like to draw attention to how definitions and descriptions of well-functioning ecosystems depend on how useful they are for human beings. These inherently anthropocentric perspectives introduce hierarchies in which landscapes severely affected by human activity are no longer viewed as ecologically or societally significant. Taylor's research on the Hughes Aircraft lagoon in Tucson, Arizona and the Tucson aquifer led her to explore heavily loaded terminology used in environmental discourse. For instance, according to a definition provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, waters are impaired when there is "detrimental effect on the biological integrity of a water body caused by an impact that prevents obtainment of the designated use" (qtd. in Taylor). Similarly, in the field of ecological risk assessment, an ecosystem is impaired not when it ceases to form meaningful and biologically efficient relations with other ecosystems and beings but when it is no longer significant for *human consumption*. The significance of the metaphor taken from disability studies is certainly not lost on Taylor, who emphasizes how such language perpetuates the idea that impairment is a serious deficiency that needs to be cured or attended to. Taylor draws attention to the fact that Indigenous epistemologies do not sustain such human-oriented perspectives. Instead, they "have long understood the environment as kin or as an extension of one's body" (Taylor). Indigenous scholars have demonstrated this repeatedly and incessantly. Nishnaabeg artist and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, quoted by Taylor, commenting on the pollution on her tribal lands, explicitly articulates her commitment to land: "I can connect myself to every piece of my territory no matter what shape it is in, because *we*

cannot abandon our mother because she is sick" ("I Am Not;" my emphasis). This act of caring for kin, the mother, and all relatives, human and non-human is extensively described in the Indigenous body of knowledge about environments and changes that they undergo. Indigenous Knowledge offers a perspective on the environment that disrupts anthropocentric narratives, with human agents as the makers and transformers of ecosystems.

While the concept of Indigenous Knowledge or Traditional Environmental Knowledge has recently gained a lot of attention in academic circles, it is by no means a new idea in Native communities. As Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor asserts, IK is not an invention of non-Indigenous people nor an academic discipline to be studied and approached in theoretical terms. Instead, IK is a foundational element of Indigenous epistemologies:

> it is regarded as a gift from the Creator and provides instructions for appropriate conduct to all of Creation and its beings. It not only instructs humanity but assigns roles and responsibilities to all of Creation as well. Indigenous Knowledge comes from our relationship with Creation. In an Indigenous context, IK is by nature also environmental knowledge. (389)[1]

Since it is passed on in the oral tradition and community practices, Indigenous Knowledge is often conceived as an accumulated experience and wisdom unique to Native cultures and the environments in which they live. As Melissa K. Nelson (Anishinaabe/Metis) asserts, Indigenous Knowledge is a system of "local knowledges of specific places, geographies, and homelands. They are site-specific, place-based, *in situ* knowledges. Local knowledge is about persistence in place and orientation. This orientation operates on a spatial level with both vertical and horizontal dimensions, among others" (198; emphasis in original). Indigenous Knowledge is hence understood as process rather than content. It is a way of life, manifested in actions rather than

theorized about (Berkes 4-5). Moreover, it is directly related to tribal sovereignty and decision-making processes on a community level and involves diverse areas of tribal governance such as food security, education, human and animal health, management of natural resources, and environmental justice (Settee 61).

If Indigenous Knowledge is a process, it needs to be responsive to changes, be they societal, technological, or environmental. As Eugene Hunn explains, the fact that Indigenous Knowledge is embedded in traditional practices, passed on for generations, does not preclude its ability to adapt to the changing world: "New ideas and techniques may be incorporated into a given tradition, but only if they fit into the complex fabric of existing traditional practices and understandings. Thus traditions are enduring adaptations to specific places" (qtd. in Berkes 3-4). Faced with the effects of climate change, such as declining runs of fish (e.g., salmon and steelhead), declining populations of wildlife and game, loss of water supplies and many others, Indigenous people are addressing regional environmental problems and developing responses based on a thorough knowledge and understanding of environments in which they live (Marchand et al. 179-84).

In the context of climate destabilization and its effects, it is not surprising that Indigenous Knowledge has been appropriated by academia and non-Native scholars and researchers as a reservoir of observations about climate patterns (Williams and Hardison 532) and possible solutions to environmental problems. Simpson draws attention to the political significance of this trend. What is very often forgotten or strategically glossed over is the fact that, although people now look to Indigenous Knowledge for solutions to the detrimental effects of environmental disasters, it had long been the target of assimilationist policies in the US and Canada and discredited as superstition by Western scientists. IK survived only thanks to joint communal efforts and perseverance ("Traditional" 134-35). Moreover, as Simpson emphasizes, Western

scientists are primarily interested in those aspects of Indigenous Knowledge that promise solutions to environmental problems afflicting the modern world, "while the spiritual foundations of IK and the Indigenous values and worldviews that support it are of less interest often because they exist in opposition to the worldview and values of the dominating societies" ("Anticolonial" 374). Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer emphasizes Western scholars' propensity for dismissing Indigenous Knowledge systems as unscientific and superstitious. "Getting scientists to consider the validity of indigenous knowledge is like swimming upstream in cold, cold water," writes Kimmerer. "They've been so conditioned to be skeptical of even the hardest of hard data that bending their minds toward theories that are verified without the expected graphs or equations is tough" (160). This indiscriminate approach to Indigenous Knowledge mirrors the Anthropocene narratives constructed from the perspective of "an unmarked masculine species deriving from the global north" (DeLoughrey 12) and dominating "what is an undeniably *white* intellectual space of the Euro-Western academy" (Todd 247-48; emphasis in original).

This Euro-Western orientation of the Anthropocene discourse is signaled by the gesture of locating its beginnings in the mid-twentieth century, in itself a politically significant act, as Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (Métis/otipemisiw) observe. Rather than relying solely on data from geological strata, Davis and Todd draw attention to the power structure inherent in narratives about progress and the ensuing environmental transformation, and suggest the rise of settler colonialism as the starting date of changes that today result in, among others, climate destabilization. With the emphasis thus shifted, the discussion concerning political implications is expanded to include non-Western epistemologies and societies. More importantly, however,

> to use a date that coincides with colonialism in the Americas allows us to understand the current state of ecological crisis as inherently invested in a

> specific ideology defined by proto-capitalist logics based on extraction and accumulation through dispossession—logics that continue to shape the world we live in and that have produced our current era. (Davis and Todd 764)

Analyzing the rhetoric of the original essay in which Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer introduced the term, Davis and Todd assert that the Anthropocene "replicates a Euro-Western division of mind/thought from land when it is framed as the business of 'research and engineering'" (768). Such a framework stands in sharp contrast to many Indigenous ontologies which reject the view of man as the center and agent of the world. Thus, similarly, the Anthropocene is an extension of a colonial logic of erasing difference, of brutally imposing "the right way of life" through genocide, forced assimilation, dispossession, relocation, and violent transformation of nature. "[F]orcing a landscape, climate, flora, and fauna into an idealized version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland" (769) was an integral part of the colonialist project and today is understood as one of the reasons for climate destabilization and the loss of biodiversity.

Indeed, in the United States, Canada, and other settler states (e.g., New Zealand and Australia), Indigenous people were forced to reckon with anthropogenic transformations long before the word "Anthropocene" entered academic discourse. As Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte observes, for Native people, this highly disruptive moment occurred not in the twentieth century but with the coming of settlers, when many Native communities were forced to discontinue their relationships with plants, animals, and ecosystems. Therefore, if Indigenous people experience the Anthropocene in a different way, it is because after centuries of land dispossession, forced relocation, assimilation, and the loss and/or disruption of cultural continuity, they need to focus "their energies *also* on adapting to another kind of anthropogenic

environmental change: climate destabilization" ("Our" 207; emphasis in original). Moreover, not only did the anthropogenic change dramatically alter the environment through deforestation, industrialization, overharvesting, and pollution, but it also "obstructed indigenous peoples' capacities to adapt to the changes" (Whyte 208). And change, as pointed out earlier, has always been an integral part of Indigenous Knowledge which, based on centuries of observation and interaction with the surrounding world, instructs people how to react to transformations in ecosystems.

Gwen Westerman's *Follow the Blackbirds* features a world that is affected by environmental, cultural, and socio-economic changes. The collected poems portray a landscape of highways, asphalted roads, Walgreens, and wired fences. It is a world transformed by the rule of the Capitalocene, "a way of organizing… a nature in which human organizations (classes, empires, markets etc.) not only make environments, but are simultaneously made by the historical flux and flow of the web of life" (Moore 7). However, it is also a world of blackbirds and the buffalo following their ancient migration routes. The lyrical voice carefully observes the new contexts and offers insightful and often ironic comments which reveal the short-sightedness of projects constructed around the desire to control nature. A responsible and reciprocal relationship with the environment is displaced by consumerism, unchecked extraction of natural resources, and settler colonial practices of land grabbing. Yet, what the poems communicate, imparting Indigenous Knowledge, is that regardless of this violence perpetrated on the land and its inhabitants, environments—following the ancient cycles of destruction and renewal—find a way to seek balance and restoration.

In "Innocent Captives," Westerman pointedly illustrates the scale and scope of changes introduced by capitalist industrialization. The poem traces the extent to which the capitalist economy is responsible for mass transformation of the landscape and the rupture in the natural balance. Moreover, submitting nature to the rules of profit motive

displaces non-human beings that have lived in the area for centuries. The titular "innocent captives" are blackbirds that abundantly populate central and southern parts of North America. Among the most commonly observed species are "red-winged blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), common grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*), yellow-headed blackbirds (*Xantbocephalus xanthocephalus*), and brown-headed cowbirds (*Molotbrus ater*)" (Werner et al., 251-52). The poem emphasizes how blackbirds have been natural and rightful inhabitants of the area, taking advantage of the land's seasonal abundance: "Ancient memory guides them each spring and fall / along river valleys and wetlands" (Westerman 10). However, in the Capitalocene, marshes that feed blackbirds and other beings are "drained and fertilized for increased yield / and prized cash crops and condos grew" (10). The birds are greeted not by sustainable ecosystems but by agricultural fields, artificially enhanced for maximum production. The function of the intervention into the environment is not to counter the effects of earlier interference in ecosystems but to maximize profits.

Indeed, the blackbirds' ancient home has become a site of mass-scale agricultural production whose logic displaces blackbirds and reevaluates their presence in the area. Since the 1960s, North and South Dakota have become the main regions of commercial sunflower cultivation, producing approximately 73% of the total 1.95 billion kg (National Agricultural Statistics Service qtd. in Blackwell et al 818). As expected, the plant "with oil-laden seeds" (Westerman 10) attracts blackbirds, which appear in the area in spring. From the business-oriented angle, it is estimated that the losses caused by the birds' activities in the sunflower fields (red-winged blackbirds are identified as the most prevalent and dangerous to crops) can amount to $2.8 million annually (Blackwell et al 819). To prevent damage, the industry runs programs of baiting during spring with DRC-1339 (3-choloro-4- methalalanine)-treated rice: lured by a treat, the birds ingest the toxin and die (Blackwell et al 818).[2] The rationale behind

the practice is the focus on efficient production, which redefines the birds' ontological status: from rightful seasonal inhabitants of the area, they are turned into a risk to an otherwise economically successful operation. The language used to describe the practice is striking. Justifying the reasons for the use of lethal toxins and their potential effects on non-targeted species, Bradley F. Blackwell and colleagues thus describe the situation: "Concurrent with the growth of the sunflower industry in the Great Plains have been *increased conflicts* associated with bird (primarily red-winged blackbird. . .) *depredation* of unharvested crops in late summer" (818; my emphasis). The apparently military imagery used to describe birds' natural behavior endows them with agency oriented at calculated deceit. The term "depredation" inevitably evokes images of looting, plundering, and destruction, again associated with the disorder characteristic of war zones. Thus the red-winged blackbird, rather than a natural element of the ecosystem, is redefined as an adversary. Not only does the logic of the Capitalocene intervene in a previously sustainable ecosystem but also it dictates which species are allowed to function in inherently altered landscapes.

In the poem, Westerman focuses on the very act of poisoning the birds and offers an acutely painful description of their death. Moreover, she emphasizes the improvement of the baiting method: next to trays with poisoned rice, farmers place caged blackbirds, "innocent captives" of the poem's title, whose role is to attract free-flying birds: "Captured blackbirds call their unsuspecting relatives / to a feast placed away from fields of ripening sunflowers" (10). The cruelty of this practice concerns the ways in which caged birds are implicated in their kin's demise. Their presence is supposed to signal safety whereas in reality, the blackbirds invite their free-flying relatives to a feast of toxins: "On top of cages, brown rice glitters in toxic trays, / a tempting easy meal. / Poisoned" (10). In Dakota cosmologies, all living and non-living beings are intimately interrelated. In view of this, using captured blackbirds as bait is a

violent act that disrupts the reciprocal relationships in the ecosystem and among the species, not only by eliminating animals the industry deems dangerous but also by destroying intraspecies trust.

The scene of the blackbirds' death strongly resonates with the image of human violation of natural laws that regulate the presence of all beings in an ecosystem. The blackbirds need food to build muscles for their future migration and therefore, motivated by the instinct of survival, easily fall prey to poisoned rice. Interestingly, in texts describing DCR-1339's efficacy, the birds' death is presented as quick and painless and the language employed is focused on the reliability of the chemical: "It has been noted that birds may be thirsty and seek water prior to death (a consequence of renal failure; . . .), but this is the only adverse effect recorded. Birds that ingested a lethal dose of the compound died a quiet death; there was no flapping, convulsing, vocalisation or any other indication of pain or distress" (Dawes 1). The impersonal passive voice implies an absence of anyone's culpability; the absence of wing flapping and vocalizing is supposed to reassure the reader that no pain is felt. These deaths are supposed to be silent and invisible. This discourse of efficacy is contrasted with Westerman's closing stanza in which the birds' death, though silent, is by no means without impact: "Husks drop and rice scatters, as darkness falls / blackbirds roost / in a flash of black and red / and they fall / silent / among the blooms" (10). The contrast between blooming sunflowers and dying birds is striking. The abundance, "the blooming flowers," is artificially produced and protected at the price of other beings' lives, all to ensure profits in a capitalist economy. The birds, defined as a danger to profit optimalization practices, are judged expendable and thus killed.

A similar critique of the capitalist discourse is found in "Skin Essentials." Here, Westerman mocks the language of advertisements in which everything can be transformed into a product and become sellable: "Shelves, endcaps, bins spill / over

with essences of everything—/ essential fragrances, essential products, / essential needs. . . ./ Available for a limited time only / at a special introductory price. . . . / Skin Essentials—FREE after rebate!" (48). The discursively produced state of urgency urges the reader to purchase products that most likely are useless but are represented as indispensable. The second stanza of the poem focuses on the ambiguity of the word "essence" and its use in relation to definitions of identity. Westerman emphasizes that some concepts are not subject to the rules of capitalist transactions. What constitutes Indianness is connected with active "being" rather than accumulating objects: "Prayers. / Relatives. / Ceremonies. / Connections to what is real. / There is an essence to who we are. / And a coupon from Walgreens / cannot be redeemed here" (49). Hence Westerman demonstrates the existence of contexts in which the logic of the Capitalocene does not apply.

While Westerman's poems do indeed document anthropogenic violence and destruction, they consistently draw attention to the way ecosystems seek to heal themselves and preserve the original balance, all of it meticulously described in Indigenous Knowledge. Many blackbirds are killed with a man-made toxin but there are other species that resist capitalist-oriented transformation of the land. "Where the Buffalo Roam" is a characteristic example of Westerman's insistence on depicting the perseverance of natural processes. The title already announces two important images that the poem intends to project: that of the buffalo, one of the fundamental species in cosmologies of the Plains Indians, and the idea of "roaming" that evokes associations with free, unobstructed movement of human and non-human beings across the land. As Julia Hobson Haggerty and colleagues observe, "In traditional Assiniboine and Sioux belief systems, buffalo and humans are related through ancestral heritage. In this relational cosmology buffalo can communicate, act and relate with human beings" (23). This intimate relationship was disturbed and almost completely destroyed by the arrival

of Europeans. Overhunting and, later, slaughter of the buffalo calculated to disrupt Native economies and ways of sustenance nearly obliterated the entire species. "The buffalo were killed to near extinction," writes historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "tens of millions of dead within a few decades and only a few hundred left by the 1880s" (142).[3] It is precisely the kind of anthropogenic change that Whyte identifies with settler colonialism that long preceded the invention of the Anthropocene. In the twentieth century, numerous preservation and restoration efforts on the part of Native tribes have brought positive effects in an environmental and cultural sense, reintroducing the buffalo to their original habitats.[4]

In the poem, the buffalo return to the area of the Great Plains, now transformed and artificially divided by interstates, highways, and barbed wire fences. Those travelling along these man-made lines are unaware of the land's ancient heartbeat; they are "hypnotized by lines, lost without maps" (Westerman 33). As if awoken by instinct, a small herd escapes from a Minnesota ranch and is unmoved by human attempts to control its movement. The local press announces: "Buffalo Refuse to Go Home" (32). But what exactly is home? The lyrical voice asserts that the buffalo instinctively return home, which clearly is not an area of the ranch with fence posts, barbed wire, and pens. The buffalo know which direction to go, relying on a reservoir of knowledge, imprinted in their bodies, in the land, and in memories: "pulled by the tide / they return to the / bluestem grass and coneflowers" (32). Evoking the metaphor of the body, the poem compares ancient routes of animal migrations to a pattern of veins that carry blood: "Filled with life, / the ancient trails vein / through the tallgrass prairie / from valley to valley, age to age" (32). Home and routes that lead to it are imprinted on the land, encoded in moon cycles, and remembered in the body.

Describing the buffalo's journey home, the speaker juxtaposes the ancient geography remembered in the animals' bodies with the industrial transformations of

the land. The buffalo cross states, "race across Kansas highways and history," indifferent to artificially constructed borders, and at sunset reach "Okla humma" (32, 33). The invocation of the Choctaw name of the area acknowledges the Indigenous presence on the land and the time when the buffalo, rather than being "managed" and captured in pens, roamed freely. The concept of nature running its course is contrasted with images of land transformations conducted according to capitalist rationality. "Acres for Sale, Prime Development, Master Plan" (33) read the billboards that the buffalo pass on their way. While the speaker does not underestimate the scale of the environmental change, she asserts the significance of natural processes that govern the life of non-human beings and demonstrate the power of regeneration: "From the edge of extinction, the buffalo know by heart / the tracks laid down by the millions / who passed in a dream, on an ocean, on a highway / and they watch over those held back by fences / just waiting, waiting, / waiting" (33). The group of escapees seems to be waiting for their fellow-buffalo to join them on the journey to their traditional lands and thus rebuild a connection severed by settler colonialism.

The dynamic and changing relationship with the land and its inhabitants is an important part of Indigenous Knowledge and is similarly stressed in Westerman's poetry. Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq) and James Henderson (Chickasaw/Cheyenne) explain that

> knowledge is the expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands… To the Indigenous ways of knowing, the self exists within a world that is subject to flux. The purpose of these ways of knowing is to reunify the world or at least to reconcile the world to itself. Indigenous knowledge is the way of living within contexts of flux, paradox, and tension. (42)

The preservation of unity with the world has become even more instrumental and challenging in the context of the anthropogenic transformations which profoundly affect ecosystems. In "Delisted" Westerman asserts the continuity of the Dakota people's relationship with the land and non-human beings despite the harm done to ecosystems. More importantly, however, she reveals the arbitrariness of Anthropocene logic. The poem retells one of many Anthropocene-oriented stories about extinction or near-extinction of species due to industrialization and environmental pollution. In 1940, Congress, alarmed by the dropping population, placed the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) on the endangered species list ("History"). In 2007, after considerable preservation efforts and the reluctantly introduced reduction in the use of persistent organochlorine pesticides (such as DDT), the eagle was delisted and is now no longer under federal protection ("Endangered"). Thus, the criteria which define a species as endangered are arbitrarily constructed and reveal the political underpinnings of addressing ecological transformations and crises. Sadly, they are rarely aimed to directly address preserving natural balance. According to Whyte, the same logic, driven by the desire to manage ideological content, is detectable in Anthropocene discourse. "Epistemologies of crisis," as he refers to the philosophical building blocks of the Anthropocene, address climate change on a linear time frame as an unprecedented and imminent crisis, which obviously is a premise constructed from the Euro-Western perspective. "In thinking through the implications of unprecedentedness and urgency," Whyte asserts,

> climate change, as a concept, is a rhetorical device that people invoke so they can believe they are addressing a crisis without having to talk about colonial power. Epistemologies of crisis are presentist in their narrative orientation… Epistemologies of crisis then mask numerous forms of

> power, including colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and industrialisation. (57)

In other words, like Davis and Todd before him, Whyte draws attention to the Euro- and anthropocentric orientation of discussing climate change and environmental transformations in terms of crisis only. The immediate questions that such a framework raises about the criteria used to identify a crisis and who is counted as a victim are conveniently ignored. Therefore, he juxtaposes epistemologies of crisis with elements of Indigenous Knowledge, here called "epistemologies of coordination." "Different from crisis, coordination refers to ways of knowing the world that emphasise the importance of moral bonds—or kinship relationships—for generating the (responsible) capacity to respond to constant change in the world. Epistemologies of coordination are conducive to responding to mundane and expected change without validating harm or violence," writes Whyte (53). Thus, the relationship with the environment involves *continuous* nurturing of responsible and reciprocal connections, not only in a moment of a subjectively defined crisis but over generations.

In portraying Euro-Western and Dakota approaches to the environment, "Delisted" evokes Whytes's epistemologies of crisis and coordination. The poem begins with placing of the eagle on the endangered species list and then its removal. While saving the bird from extinction appears to be a noble gesture, the speaker is quick to remind us that the reasons it is in danger are anthropogenic and directly result from settler colonialism and its practices: "Forty years later, / the bald eagle has recovered / from loss of habitat, *deliberate* / killing, and DDT poisoning" (Westerman 39; my emphasis). Moreover, by referencing Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, the poem emphasizes that the toxic effects of pesticides were known long before the book was published (Lutts 211-12). Despite vocal outcries, nothing or very little had been done to ban or limit the use of pesticides by 1962, as *Silent Spring* eloquently argued.

It was only when the bald eagle population dropped dramatically, leading to a situation that could be classified as a "crisis," that appropriate legislation was introduced. In other words, what triggers action is a rupture in continuity rather than a concern for continuity itself.

By contrast, the Dakota relationship with the eagle is based on the epistemology of coordination, which organizes "knowledge through the vector of kinship relationships" (Whyte, "Against" 62). The intimate connection between humans and the eagle is forged on spiritual and emotional levels. For instance, as David C. Posthumus reports, bald eagle feathers are often used in rituals and ceremonies and when attached to a person's body the individual "embodies the characteristic attributes and bodily apparatus of the eagle and hence temporarily *becomes* an eagle" (194-5; emphasis in original). Dakota cherish and revere the animal for its beauty and power and in return they receive protection. Thus, the relationship is one of respect and reciprocity, illustrating the relationality of all beings: "For longer than time, / the eagle has been sacred / and in our songs we have / asked it to protect us" (39). The bald eagle is approached as kin rather than a part of the environment that needs to be managed due to pollution. Moreover, each stanza concludes with the Dakota words which celebrate the eagle and acknowledge his significance in the times predating settler colonialism: "Ake wambdi kiŋ hdi" [Again the eagle returns]; "Wambdi kiŋ uŋkicidowaŋpi" [We sing for the eagle] (39, 69). Thereby, the speaker demonstrates the continuity of the relationship between the Dakota people and the eagle, which has been disrupted but not completely broken. Thus, this connection is not established as a response to a crisis but instead accompanies and evolves with the changes induced by settler colonialism.

Despite the changes triggered by settler colonialism, the reciprocal relationships among all beings are encoded in the land, its geography, ecology, in every molecule

and in DNA. In "Quantum Theory," the speaker observes blood oozing from her finger cut by paper. The red liquid contains past generations as well as the promise of the future. Most importantly, "Blood carries stories of our origins from / beyond the stars," thus validating the Dakota people's claim to the land as home. In "Below the Surface," the Dakota land is transformed by human intervention but it never ceases telling stories of its inhabitants. Therefore, the speaker recognizes the blackbirds' song, migration routes, and names of creeks and bluffs, now renamed with English terms. They may be changed but nevertheless they remain the same and retell the story about relational responsibilities of human and non-human beings. This message, located "below the surface" of what is visible, defines the speaker's place in the world and her ontological status of a being that understands the non-verbal language of the land. "I am thirsty and / I know the way home" (65), she announces.

This body of knowledge about the land and its inhabitants, Indigenous Knowledge, lies at the core of Dakota culture and identity. It connects people, non-humans and other beings in a network of interdependencies, which, while not necessarily hierarchical, create a balanced and sustainable system. The longevity and perseverance of this body of knowledge relies on intergenerational transmission. In "Follow the Blackbirds," the poem opening the collection, the speaker recalls the last moments of her grandmother, confined to a hospital bed on the reservation. Her grandmother describes the feeling of discomfort at the realization that death is approaching with an image of drought. The speaker elaborates on this image, referring to her grandmother's body as "evaporating" (3). It is an important comparison: lack of water means death for all organisms, not only humans, which clearly signals an anti-anthropocentric perspective on the surrounding world.

The grandmother's message to her granddaughter is an example of how one's survival depends on and is inextricably linked with understanding the environment and

its inhabitants. It is also a lesson in an epistemology of coordination (and cooperation), which "come to know the world through the state of kinship relationships" (Whyte, "Against" 59). "Grandma told us / to look for / blackbirds, / she said, / that they always / go to the water. / You won't ever / be lost / or thirsty / if / you follow / the blackbirds" (3), reports the speaker. The short, dynamic lines emphasize the urgency of the message as it ensures not only survival in a dry landscape but cultural survival as well. The speaker recognizes the significance of her grandmother's words rendered in the continuation of the water/thirst imagery: "I *drink* in her fluttering voice / trying to *quench* / the imminent drought" (3; my emphasis). Considering Westerman's consistent return to the theme of colonization and forced assimilation in boarding schools, the "drought" may also imply a threat to the life of Dakota culture. Thus, remembering that blackbirds will always lead the speaker to water constitutes a celebration of IK. In another poem, "This Is My Explaining Ceremony," the speaker again recalls the grandmother's teachings: "A grandma's words that can fill a rain barrel or wash away fences and / fields like a flood. / Sounds that bring life ticking on a tin roof, that sting / bare legs and hearts. Sounds of water flowing. Sounds of water falling. / Sounds of water filling" (27). Words about water sustain life, in a physical and cultural sense. The speaker's insistence on repeating her grandmother's words is in turn an act of resisting the absence of Indigenous ontologies in the Euro-American context, which, according to Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar, Kim TallBear, is a denial of Native people's vibrancy, survival, and endurance. "It is a denial of ongoing intimate relations between indigenous peoples," writes TallBear, "as well as between us and nonhumans in these lands" (198). Thus the IK that is contained in the speaker's grandmother's seemingly insignificant words in fact communicates a message about all life's survival on the planet through relational responsibilities.

Gwen Westerman's collection *Follow the Blackbirds*, with Sunaura Taylor's illuminating presentation and Leanne Simpson's powerful call about polluted tribal lands in mind, is an important reaction to the climate and environmental transformations we are facing today. Westerman's poems communicate Indigenous Knowledge about ecology, interactions between human and non-human, and ways of adapting to change, thus offering a different narrative than that of crisis. While undoubtedly the era of the Anthropocene is a moment of irreversible loss, it cannot be forgotten, as Westerman reminds us that there are still well-functioning connections in the environment. They provide instructions on how to deal effectively with anthropogenic transformations and need to be cherished. This body of knowledge constitutes a part of Indigenous epistemologies, for so long dismissed by Euro-Western science. Secondly, as Taylor asserts, human activities that have produced the Anthropocene and disabled environments are not only related to the rise of capitalism and technological advancement but are also related to systemic racism and injustice, and other manifestations of settler colonialism. Westerman's poetry is attentive to all these issues. On the one hand, the prevalent theme is the environment, mimed, impaired, but nevertheless, loved, appreciated and preserved in traditional stories, and thus becoming a building block of Dakota identity. On the other hand, there is settler colonialism and its myriad practices aimed at the elimination of Indigenous Knowledges and people. Yet, despite all these genocidal efforts, Westerman demonstrates how the land remembers its people and how the people revere the land in a kinship-oriented ecology.

Notes

[1] In certain contexts, the terms Indigenous Knowledge(s) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge are used interchangeably, while some see TEK as a part of IK.

[2] On the question of whether the use of DRC-1339 constitutes humane killing see Joan Dawes, "Is the Use of DCR-1339 Humane? PestSmart.org.au, https://pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/06/DRC1339.pdf.
[3] A more complex history of the demise of the buffalo can be found in Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[4] For more on buffalo restoration see e.g., Ken Zontek, *Buffalo Nation: American Indian Efforts to Restore the Bison* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

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