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Land Back: An Exercise in Right Relations

Daniel R. Wildcat

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Forget Not
Ruth Loveland

LAND BACK

AN EXERCISE IN RIGHT RELATIONS

Land Back! — a declaration, a philosophy, a way of life, an idea, a restorative justice principle, a policy proposal, an aesthetic principle and more.

Land Back takes many forms in the minds and lives of the Indigenous Peoples who advocate it, a largely young generation of Indigenous activists and thinkers who are acknowledging the deep reality of our ancestors' embodied love for their homelands. Embodied love is never lost but rather remembered, recollected through our kinship relations with our human relatives and those different-than-human relatives with whom we share our homelands. Embodied remembrance is our customs, languages, ceremonies, habits, songs and oral traditions, including those precious family stories of our Peoples found in our tribal cultures.

At its core, Land Back offers an opportunity to begin, among other things, the necessary discussion and enactment of the cultural climate change we need, to address the physical climate change some of humankind has created in our current appropriately named Anthropocene (age of humans). This is an age that at present seems distinguished by its propensity for the global-scale destruction of plant and animal life and living systems — or we might say life-system communities — in which humankind behaves so badly.

LISTEN TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

If we are to successfully address the climate change destruction we see all around us and the issue of Land Back, Indigenous voices will be among the most important in this century. I say this for a host of reasons. The Earth has been telling Indigenous Peoples and others paying attention that humankind will either respect the natural LAW — the land, the air and the water — or suffer the consequences. We are paying the price for the self-absorbed, anthropocentric, primarily Western-informed worldview and the behavior it promotes with global climate change and the associated destruction it brings.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE BEEN PAYING ATTENTION TO THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE FROM THE MOMENT OF OUR CREATION TO THE PRESENT.

Thus far, the Anthropocene is hardly something to celebrate with its loss of flora and fauna — our kin, as many Indigenous Peoples recognize them. The overall destructive effects of the age of humankind on the land, air and water quality of our Mother's biosphere are shocking. The World Wildlife Fund in

2022 found an average 69% decline in species populations since 1970.

We must remember that until very recently the biological, geological and geographic diversity of Mother Earth was the source of humankind's cultural diversity; we existed in the nature — culture nexus. The destruction of and decline in natural habitats for our different-than-human relatives also ensure a decline in human cultural diversity. Although this decline in both the biological and cultural diversity of the planet started with Europe's colonization activities more than five centuries ago, it greatly accelerated with the Industrial Revolution.

CONSIDER THE PRAIRIE

The landscapes and life systems of the Great Plains are now telling those among us who broke the Earth and her tall and short grass sod to promote a corporatized method of cereal grain production that is an unsustainable system. Wes Jackson of The Land Institute has characterized it as a dying patient clinging to life with large doses of chemotherapy (ammonia-, carbon- and nitrogen-based fertilizers and a host of pesticides) and an artificial life-support system (center pivot irrigation drawing on the Ogallala Aquifer). Agriculture in Kansas has developed into an invasive and extractive system on the land once populated by perennial grasses

and tens of millions of buffalo, just as the Kansas state song memorializes: "Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play."

More than 25 years ago Frank and Deborah Popper proposed the idea of a Buffalo Commons. Their proposal to recreate a Buffalo Commons in the Great Plains has not been well received by the farming and ranching community. Few Indigenous folks, tribes or tribal and intertribal organizations have engaged in this restoration proposal, which is part of a public discussion of federal- and state-expropriated unceded tribal lands. Several factors explain this: First Peoples' marginalization and exoticization, survival priorities and the existential bad faith that colonization instilled with expropriation of tribal lands, to name a few. This silence on the Buffalo Commons is about to change for many converging reasons, but central to these reasons is the issue of Land Back.

RIGHT RELATIONS

Indigenous Peoples have been paying attention to the world in which we live from the moment of our creation to the present. Many have stories about the cost of not paying attention to our Original Instructions: directions for how to live well in a world full of relatives as opposed to one of resources. Indigenous voices have direct experience with the

deadly consequences of colonization and everything it has wrought and some useful insights about what must be done if we are to regain a **right relationship**, as opposed to an extractive relationship, with our Mother, the Earth.

What is right relationship? Based on what I have observed from many elders — not old people but people with a deep mindfulness, an awareness and attentiveness to their tribal traditions and the places they call home — right relationship assumes a position of humility about power and knowing and therefore encourages mindfulness regarding our activities and behavior. Right relationships express humility based on a non-anthropocentric worldview. In fact, my experience with Indigenous wisdom-keepers suggests the notion that the world revolves around humans is foreign to most Indigenous worldviews and may be the most dangerous misstep modern humankind has taken.

CELEBRATE RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Therefore, creating a place, an environment, of **right relations** entails responsible and respectful relations with our community in the fullest sense: a community made up of human persons and different-than-human natural plant and animal persons and features of the natural world, all constituting a system

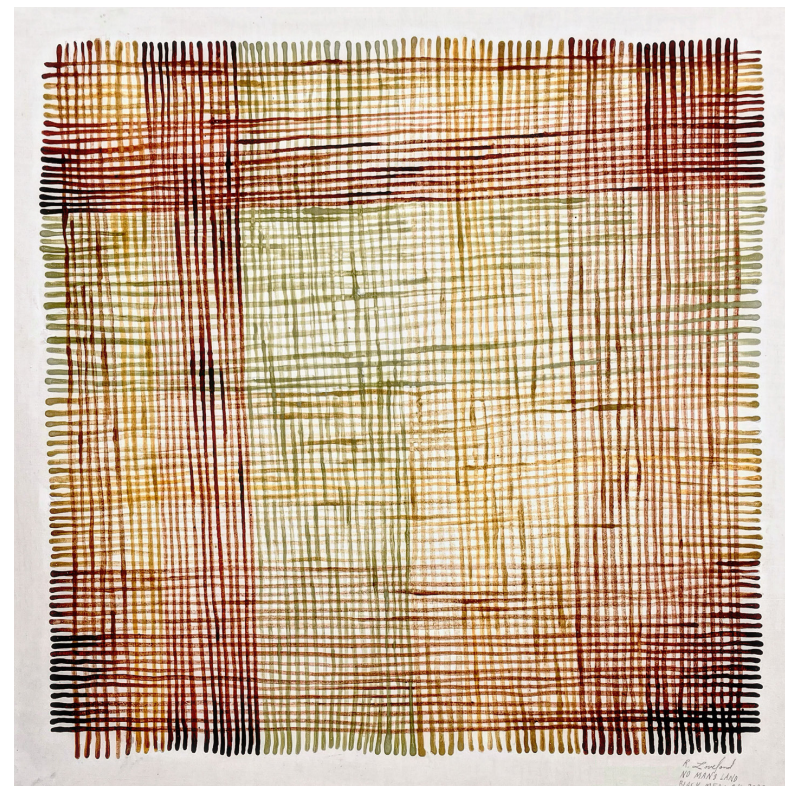
of kinship richer and more complex than a merely human community of persons. The first separation we must challenge is the way in which modern humans have shaped a worldview that has segregated many of our relatives into a realm of resources.

It makes a tremendous difference in one's conduct if one sees the world as full of resources or as inhabited by relatives. The world of humans and resources results in an anthropocentric worldview that inevitably leads us to spend a tremendous amount of time arguing about who has the right to use this or that resource, whereas the world inhabited by relatives shifts our focus to questions of respect and responsibilities.

Daniel R. Wildcat, Ph.D., is a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma. He is a professor and researcher at Haskell Indian Nations University. Daniel is the principal investigator at the Rising Voices, Changing Coasts Research Hub at Haskell. He is the author of "Power and Place: Indian Education in America," co-authored with Vine Deloria, Jr.; "Destroying Dogma: Vine Deloria's Legacy on Intellectual America," co-authored with Steve Pavlik; "Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge;" and "On Indigenuity: Learning the Lessons of Mother Earth."

The right relations I speak of necessarily involve a serious examination of how we live in relationship to the plants, animals and different-than-human persons — our natural relatives — that make up our eco-cultural communities: communities that form a distinct personality or identity emergent from the symbiotic relationship of people and place.

In short, an expression of right relations extends beyond mere consideration of relationships to other humans. Right relations take us back to the natural LAW of the land, air and water on which the biology of the planet depends. As we celebrate the prairie, let us consider how we place ourselves in right relations with her.



No Man's Land
Ruth Loveland