Walking as Embodied Territorial Acknowledgment: Thinking about Place-Based Relationships from the Side of the Road

Ken Wilson

I'm walking due west of Regina, Saskatchewan, following a gravel grid road into the teeth of a windstorm. On the tracks that parallel the road I'm walking on, a train is approaching, a long, ponderous line of double-stacked containers slowly heading east. It has hardly passed when another eastbound train, this one pulling covered hoppers from the potash mine west of the city, rumbles by. On the western horizon, trucks are silently moving along the new Regina Bypass. A stack of railway ties piled beside the tracks fills the air with the stink of creosote. Swallows cast shadows across the road. Passing vehicles throw up clouds of dust and sand; the wind flings it into my face. A pair of red-winged blackbirds plays in the wind, hovering and calling to each other.

I turn south on Pinkie Road. The walking is a little easier, since I'm not heading into the wind, but the gusts shove me toward the ditch. I'm leaning sideways. Someone has dumped a bushel of corn mixed with fertilizer on the shoulder. When Pinkie approaches Centre Road, it arcs west, and I find myself walking into the wind again. On the overpass that carries Centre Road over the Bypass, the wind pulls at my glasses; it wants to tear them away and throw them onto the highway below. I'm bent double, now, like a wing walker in a barnstorming show. I need to get out of this wind, so I turn south on Condie Road, toward Highway 1. The road is a gravel berm laid across the landscape, flat and straight. In a momentary lull in the wind, I hear a meadowlark singing.

The wind is tiring, and I start singing to encourage myself to keep going. My voice startles two grey partridges, which scuttle into the air, complaining. Excess grain rots in a field beside the road; its plastic storage tubes have been torn open by the weather. A truck passes, and I exchange a wave with its driver. I sit in the grass beside the road to rest for a minute, my back against the wind. The city fills the horizon. Between here and there, trucks move along the Bypass. A field of stubble is in the foreground. When I stand up to keep walking, I place my hand firmly on a thistle hidden in the grass. As I pass the right-of-way of the Keystone pipeline, I startle a jackrabbit.

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Verbal land acknowledgments have become commonplace in Canadian academic and artistic institutions and spaces over the past fifteen years, a process that seems to have been accelerated by the release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on Indian Residential Schools in 2015. Acknowledgment, sociologists Rima Wilkes and Howard Ramos, lawyer Aaron Duong, and Lakota scholar Linc Kesler contend, "refers to a recognition and appreciation of another's right to self-determining autonomy and existence" (2017, 91). Yet recognition "is an inherently challenging political project," particularly in settler-colonial states like Canada, which

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"have long used recognition as a means of defining Indigeneity and therefore setting the terms of who is entitled to Indigenous peoples' land" (91). The practice of land acknowledgments developed as a result of the "the work of Indigenous activists and . . . has spread as a result of this work" (92).

Verbal land acknowledgments have been subjected to critique as they have spread, however, particularly by Indigenous writers. Métis legal scholar and writer Chelsea Vowel suggests that when these acknowledgments first began "they were fairly powerful statements of presence, somewhat shocking, perhaps even unwelcome in settler spaces. They provoked discomfort and centered Indigenous priority on these lands" (âpihtawikosisân 2016). But "what may start out as radical push-back against the denial of Indigenous priority and continued presence, may end up repurposed as 'box-ticking' inclusion without commitment to any sort of real change" (âpihtawikosisân 2016). nêhiyaw geographer Michelle Daigle argues that while some land acknowledgments are "respectful and meaningful" if "the people undertaking them—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—do so in a manner which activates the relational accountability that is embedded in this legal and political practice, by calling up one's kinship relations," most land acknowledgments do not meet that standard (2019, 711). Those that fall short are, Daigle writes, merely "hollow gestures of lip service as routine-like territorial acknowledgments are quickly forgotten and brushed aside to resume business as usual, according to well-established colonial and racialized power asymmetries" (711). She argues that settlers making such acknowledgments are more invested in pronouncing names correctly—getting their lines right, in other words—"than actually learning about the place where they live and work, with all of the complexities of historical and ongoing colonial dispossession and violence, elaborate and sophisticated Indigenous kinship networks, and the legal orders and authorities that have cared for that place for millennia" (711). "Indeed, such performances further propagate the myth that Canadians are reconciling their relationship and that everything is okay," she contends (711). Land acknowledgments are therefore part of the "plethora of performative politics" on Canadian university campuses. They have caused "many Indigenous faculty, students, and staff and, most importantly, the original caretakers of those territories, to ask what follows such performances of recognition and remorse, or what should be put in action instead of hollow gestures and performances" (711). Actions speak louder than the words mouthed by settlers, but those actions need to be authentic rather than superficial performance.

It's easy to read the words of a land acknowledgment, Stó:lō academic Dylan Robinson notes, but "we have to recognize that acknowledgment is an irreducibly relational and situational protocol. Everything changes depending on who you are and whom you're speaking to" (Carter, Recollet, and Robinson 2017, 207–8). Most land acknowledgments, he continues, "act as what Sara Ahmed calls 'non-performative'" (208). In "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism," Ahmed reflects on "institutional speech acts" that "make claims 'about' or 'on behalf' of an institution" (2006, 104). "Such speech acts do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person, organization, or state to an action," she writes. "Instead, they are nonperformatives" (104). Ahmed is using the word "performative" according to philosopher J. L. Austin's argument that a performative utterance is one that performs an action; it makes something happen instead of just conveying information (Austin [1962] 1975, 6–7). However, "the speech acts that commit the university to equality," Ahmed suggests, "are nonperformatives. They 'work' precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name" (2006, 105). By describing verbal land acknowledgments as "nonperformative," Robinson is suggesting that their purpose is to make nothing happen. Such statements, then, are substitutes for action; they take the place of decolonizing work instead of furthering it.

A lost toy on a front lawn. Regina, Saskatchewan, July 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

Verbal land acknowledgments, then, according to Vowel, Daigle, and Robinson, are typically either hollow performances or statements intended to do nothing. Is there any other form of land acknowledgment that might address these critiques? Might walking on the land, for instance, as a form of embodied land acknowledgment, be an improvement on verbal acknowledgments? Might embodied land acknowledgments enable settlers to come into a noncolonial (see Garneau, n.d.) and nonextractive relationship with the land where they are walking? I am a settler, born and raised in the Haldimand Tract in southwestern Ontario and now living in Treaty 4 territory in southern Saskatchewan. Over the past year, I have been engaged in an ongoing practice of walking in and around Regina as an attempt to answer those questions, hoping that there is a way, as Métis artist David Garneau writes, for a settler like me "to home in these territories without trying to settle them" (Garneau, n.d.). I'm not the only person thinking about walking as a form of embodied land acknowledgment; I was part of a Canadian Association for Theatre Research working group in 2020, in which settlers and Indigenous people thought about the practice in a podcast that is available online (see Cole and Poll 2020). This essay, based on my PhD research, sets out to ask questions about my walking practice—without coming to definite answers, since my walking project is ongoing and unfinished—and to think about both its limitations and its possibilities.

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I cross the highway—the old Ring Road, built between the 1950s and the 1970s, the precursor to the new Regina Bypass—and walk east along the gravel path that graces Assiniboine Avenue. There is smoke in the air; perhaps someone is burning leaves left over from last fall. Kids are everywhere, cycling on the sidewalks, enjoying the warm spring sunshine. I walk into a neighbourhood where

every street is named after nearby Wascana Creek, the body of water that flows through the city. All the houses are two-storey pink or buff stucco boxes, crowded together on small lots. I remember when this subdivision was built twenty years ago. I pass the city's Mormon Temple at the entrance of this neighbourhood; its tall, golden statue of the Angel Moroni and his trumpet is a landmark.

I walk along Wascana Circle to the McKell Wascana Conservation Park. Wascana Creek meanders in curves and oxbows here, and the land is marshy: a perfect habitat for ducks. I cross the creek on a footbridge and follow a path into what I take to be a tame pasture. When I see the remains of last season's little bluestem, one of my favourite native prairie grasses, though, I wonder if I'm wrong. I listen to the wind and the red-winged blackbirds and meadowlarks. I cross a line of fence posts without wire. A blank sign tells me nothing.

The path peters out in the middle of the pasture. I can see farm buildings in the distance. I don't want to encounter an angry dog while trespassing—getting bitten would mean spending hours in an emergency ward half closed due to the pandemic—so I turn back. Twittering swallows are flying overhead, but I'm not sure what kind; I'm not carrying a field guide and don't know enough about birds to hazard a guess. I wish I did. There are bluebird nesting boxes on the fence posts. I cross back over the creek again and follow its winding course southeast. A row of mansions backs onto the park: the view of the park is an amenity, the creek a spectacle. A jackrabbit flees the tall grass. I wonder if its young are hidden there and turn to walk closer to the houses, where the grass is mown short, so I won't disturb them.

I see an open gate in the steel fence separating the houses from the park and walk through into a vacant lot: one more mansion is needed to complete the set. The streets near the park are strangely silent. Sparrows and my own footsteps are the only sounds. Then I hear two women chatting behind me as they walk their dog. Their voices suddenly bring the sounds of the city—traffic, power washers, lawnmowers, music on someone's radio—back to my ears. I walk out to the highway. I hear frogs and meadowlarks and blackbirds singing during lulls in the traffic.

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Working against the structures of settler colonialism is, according to Canadian academics Emma Battel Lowman and Adam Barker, collective work that must be undertaken in solidarity with Indigenous peoples (2015, 16). My walking practice has been a solo one over the past year, partly because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and so it does not fit that description, but it may offer an opportunity for what Australian scholar Clare Land describes as a self-reflexive examination of my complicity in colonialism, "including by interrogating who we are in terms of identity, culture and history, and the shape of our lives" (2015, 29). That examination, as the French-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi tells us, is difficult, even impossible. Memmi states that the colonizer who wants to refuse to be a colonizer is bound to fail: "everything confirms his solitude, bewilderment and ineffectiveness. He will slowly realize that the only thing to do is to remain silent" ([1957] 1991, 43). "If he cannot stand this silence and make his life a perpetual compromise, he can end up by leaving the colony and its privileges," Memmi concludes (43).

A grain bin beside the highway during harvest. Regina Bypass, northwest of Regina, Saskatchewan, September 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

Memmi's argument suggests the impossibility of rejecting settler colonialism while remaining a settler by birth and citizenship. And yet, many settler Canadians are in the same place: they reject our country's continuing colonization of Indigenous peoples but find it difficult to put that rejection into practice. At best, we end up engaging in the kind of symbolic actions that Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang dismiss as mere "*conscientization*" (2012, 19), actions that feel good but aren't tangibly contributing to the goal of decolonization, which they define as the repatriation of "*all* of the land" to Indigenous peoples (7). No doubt they would describe my attempt at an embodied land acknowledgment by walking as conscientization: trying to come into a relationship with the land is not the same as facilitating its return. If they are correct, the practice of embodied land acknowledgments may be as worthless as their verbal precursors. I'd like to rescue my practice from that conclusion. I may not succeed.

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I'm walking west along College Avenue in the centre of Regina. I pass three boarded-up houses, wooden Craftsman bungalows waiting to be torn down and replaced with something new. Perhaps these houses were seen by their owners as mere income properties, assets on a balance sheet, rather than dwelling-places: as objects, in other words. Who can say? The siding on one has been scorched, and I wonder if the fire happened before or after they were abandoned.

Around the corner, an idling Harley-Davidson fills the air with its rumbling. Landscapers are building someone's front sidewalk. I smell gasoline. I walk through streets of so-called "wartime"

houses, prefabs built for returning veterans in the late 1940s. Dandelions are blooming on the edge of a lawn, the first food of the season for the bees fumbling with the yellow flowers. New grow boxes, not yet filled with soil, are being installed in a front yard; someone is using the pandemic to take up gardening. A demolished porch is waiting to be hauled away. The city is constantly in flux, growing and being torn down.

Grackles clack in a hedge, and a robin sings for a mate in a tall poplar. Ducks fly past, low, in formation; I can hear the whistling sound their wings make against the air. I suddenly see a clawfoot tub, painted bright pink, lying on its side next to someone's driveway, like a resting sow. I think about famous literary pigs: Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*, Napoleon and Snowball in *Animal Farm*, Parson Trulliber's pigs, the Gadarene swine. Those allusions don't fit. This bathtub is just a bathtub: abandoned, like the bungalows, and waiting to be hauled away.

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The urban and rural walks I've been engaged in around Regina over the past year—to use the language of psychogeography, these "drifts" or *dérives*—have been, in part, an attempt to come into a relationship with the land: an effort to develop a nonextractive connection to the land, one that might be impossible for a settler like me to achieve. After all, some critics argue that psychogeography repeats an imperial impulse, that because of the practice's emphasis on "discovery," psychogeographers end up playing at being colonial explorers (Richardson 2015, 15). The critique of psychogeography as colonizing is powerful. Robinson describes the history of walking as an art practice as overwhelmingly "dominated by white male artists, as much as the writing on walking methodologies has been dominated by white male geographers" (2020, 255). In such a context, he continues, "we can understand settler colonial modes of thought as not merely the product of interpellation by the state and educational institutions, but formed and maintained through the rhythms of everyday experience" (255–56). Robinson calls for "a significant expansion of antiracist, queer, feminist, and decolonial proprioception that operates outside of the often teleological form of the walk, and colonial-exploratory modes of discovery enacted through the *dérive*" (256). Still, Robinson cautions against arguing that all forms of walking art are "irrevocably compromised by the normative frameworks" he describes (256). Some forms of walking art resist those frameworks. Does mine? Or is such resistance rooted in identity, and therefore not available to white, cis-gendered men like me? Do the structures of settler colonialism make that resistance an impossibility?

An urban crow. Regina, Saskatchewan, June 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

One way to think about whether walking by a white, cis-gendered settler might resist the "normative frameworks" Robinson is discussing—whether, in other words, such walking, and the learning it attempts to generate, could be considered forms of resistance to the colonialism he sees bound up with many forms of walking art—is to consider the difference between observation and specularity. English filmmaker and film theorist Laura Mulvey raises important questions about the differences between these forms of the gaze. When I look at the space I'm walking through, when I take photographs and notes, am I excited by the idea that what I'm looking at is an object of my own pleasure, or do I see that space as an extension of myself and my place in the world? The first would be a form of what Mulvey, through Freud, calls scopophilia; the second would be what Mulvey, through Lacan, describes as narcissism. Both are ways of relating to space as if it were spectacle; both desire to control that space, to exert power over it. Mulvey's primary interest is the way that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female," the way that women in cinema are displayed as sexual objects for male visual pleasure (1975, 11), but is there a way that colonized space can be displayed for settler visual pleasure as well? Is there something called "the colonial gaze"?

Indian English critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha argues that there is. In his discussion of the pathological colonial gaze, he draws on Lacan's work on the mirror stage, as Mulvey does. "The Imaginary is the transformation that takes place in the subject at the formative mirror phase, when it assumes a *discrete* image which allows it to postulate a series of equivalences, samenesses, identities, between the objects of the surrounding world," Bhabha writes (1994, 77). "However, this positioning is itself problematic, for the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which is simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational. This is the basis of the close relation

between the two forms of identification complicit with the Imaginary—narcissism and aggressivity," and these two forms of identification "constitute the dominant strategy of colonial power exercised in relation to the stereotype which, as a form of multiple and contradictory belief, gives knowledge of difference and simultaneously disavows or masks it" (77).

Colonial discourse, the product of the colonial gaze, Bhabha continues, is "then a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism—metaphor and metonomy—and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary" (1994, 77). In any example of colonial discourse, "the metaphoric/narcissistic and the metonymic/aggressive positions will function simultaneously, strategically poised in relation to each other," and the subjects of this discourse will be "constructed within an apparatus of power which *contains*, in both senses of the word, an 'other' knowledge—a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of otherness" Bhabha calls "the stereotype" (77–78). Such stereotypes are constructed in "regimes of visibility and discursivity—fetishistic, scopic, Imaginary"—and by understanding those regimes, we can "see the place of fantasy in the exercise of colonial power" (79). Garneau goes further: "The colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also by an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and exploit," he writes. "The attitude assumes that everything should be accessible to those with the means and will to access them; everything is ultimately comprehensible, a potential commodity, resource, or salvage" (2016, 23). The inclusion of the word "traverse" here implicates walking in Garneau's critique. Perhaps settlers like me walking along a grid road in rural Saskatchewan can be nothing more than colonizers inspecting stolen property, and my desire to come into a relationship with the land is exploitive and sees the land as just another commodity to be employed for my pleasure, knowledge, traversing.

Bhabha is writing about the colonizer's stereotypes of colonized peoples, rather than the colonizer's way of seeing the land as an object, as spectacle. That distinction is important in relation to my walking practice because I'm alone and rarely see anyone—settler or Indigenous—unless they are driving past me. In addition, even in normal times, rural Saskatchewan's grid roads are not typically considered congenial places to walk. As settler pilgrimage scholar Matthew R. Anderson observes, if you're walking in rural Saskatchewan, anyone who sees you will assume your vehicle has broken down (2018, 153). Instead of people, what I see is the land, including the built environment of the city. Am I engaged in observation or in specularity as I look at these spaces? Am I entering into a relationship with the land as I look at it, or am I treating it as an object? What kind of gaze am I using when I look: one that is loving, or one that is extractive, sees the land as a thing, takes and gives nothing back?

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I walk out to Highway 33. I was here not a week ago, and not much has changed. There's a smell of cedar mulch from bushes planted behind a deer-resistant fence. I hadn't noticed those before. Despite the rain we've had, Chuka Creek, which runs through a culvert underneath the highway and then between the houses to the west and the Bypass, is nearly dry. No frogs are singing. One red-winged blackbird trills from its perch on one of last summer's cattails. A hawk roosts on a streetlight, and trucks thunder southwest on the overpass above. I make a wrong turn and retrace my steps. I see someone sitting in the passenger seat of a junked car rusting away behind a windbreak, along with farm equipment and a pickup truck. Who is it? What is he doing? I look again: no one's there. The seat is empty. I hear the first meadowlarks of the day singing. A fire is burning in the far distance, sending a column of dirty smoke into the air.

A duck is swimming in a dugout next to the service road. The traffic noise recedes behind me. I pass the Intermobil freight terminal. Shipping containers are stacked along the train tracks. Only one gantry is working; the other is silent and still. A rabbit bounces over the grass. To the west, past the highway, I can see the city's downtown. A meadowlark is singing on a rusting earth mover. At a level crossing, a goose waddles away from me down the railway track.

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In an interview with Naomi Klein, Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that colonialism is based on extracting and assimilating, and the alternative to extractivism is "deep reciprocity." That "deep reciprocity," Simpson continues, is "respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility, and it's local" (Klein and Simpson 2013). It's also based in love. In her own territory, Simpson tells Klein, "I try to have that intimate relationship, that relationship of love—even though I can see the damage—to try to see that there is still beauty there" (Klein and Simpson 2013). Simpson isn't the only Indigenous writer to use such terms to describe a connection with the land. Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan, for instance, in a discussion of the sweat lodge ceremony, notes that the participants "say the words 'All my relations'" before and after praying; for Hogan, "those words create a relationship with other people, with animals, with the land" (1995, 40). During the ceremony, she continues, "the animals and ancestors move into the human body, into skin and blood. The land merges with us. The stones come to dwell inside the person" (41). "We who easily grow apart from the world are returned to the great store of life all around us, and there is the deepest sense of being at home here in this intimate kinship," Hogan writes (41). However, the real ceremony begins when "the formal one ends, when we take up a new way, our minds and hearts filled with the vision of earth that holds us within it, in compassionate relationship to and with the world" (40–41). The kind of relationship that comes out of ceremony, and the intimacy of the connections between people, animals, and the land that occurs during ceremony, speaks to a form of connection that is deep and powerful, one that is literal rather than metaphorical. I read Hogan's words and reflect on the much different lessons I've learned about my place in the world, lessons I'm trying to unlearn. I think about the phrase "all my relations"—in Plains Cree, nêhiyawêwin, a language I've been trying to learn as part of my research, the words are kahkiyaw niwâhkômâkanak. This expression is not a figure of speech. It's a literal statement of connection to the world. One of my Cree teachers, nêhiyaw Professor Bill Cook, told us it's even more than that: it's a prayer, one that reflects the "deep reciprocity" Simpson describes. As the late Anishinaabe writer Richard Wagamese stated, "It's a way of saying that you recognize your place in the universe and that you recognize the place of others and of other things in the realm of the real and the living. In that it is a powerful evocation of truth" (2013).

A Cree Elder I know, a poet and a fellow walker—we met on a participatory, convivial walk between Mortlach and Gravelbourg, Saskatchewan, and again on another walk from Humboldt, Saskatchewan, to Fort Carlton, both organized by Swift Current, Saskatchewan artist and historian Hugh Henry—told me, as we trudged down a gravel grid road, that when I'm walking on the land, I'm coming into a relationship with it. Even if the grassland has been ploughed under, even if you're walking past canola fields, she said, you can still feel the sun on your face, see the sky, hear the birds, sense the gentle contours of the land with the muscles in your legs—because, contrary to popular opinion, the prairie is never completely flat. You're not alone when you're walking by yourself, she told me. You are with the land. It is with you.

Her words have stayed with me, and they remind me of Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's notion of "walking-with" (2018, 11). Walking-with, they write, should not be misunderstood as "conviviality and sociality, or the idea that one needs to walk with a group of people. You could walk-with alone" (11). They suggest that what is essential to walking-with is an explicit acknowledgment of "political positions and situated knowledges, which reveal our entanglements with settler colonization and neoliberalism" (11). "Walking-with is accountable. . . . Walking-with is a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges. Walking-with demands that we forgo universal claims about how humans and nonhumans experience walking, and consider more-than-human ethics and politics of the material intra-actions of walking research" (11). When I'm walking on the land, am I also walking-with the land? How close is walking-with to Indigenous ideas about being in relationship with the land?

That is a difficult question. Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts begins her discussion of relationships to the land with creation stories: the Haudenosaunee story of Sky Woman and the Anishinaabe story of the Seven Fires of Creation. These stories "describe a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment—*Place-Thought*" (Watts 2013, 21). "Place-Thought" is the central term in Watts's argument. "Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated," she writes. "Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (Watts 2013, 21).

Long forgotten on the edge of a grid road. West of Regina, Saskatchewan, June 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

In contrast, settlers look at the world abstractly: "How they are articulated in action or behavior brings this abstraction into praxis; hence a division of epistemological/theoretical versus ontological/praxis" (Watts 2013, 22). Haudenosaunee or Anishinaabe cosmological frameworks, however, "are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension of Sky Woman's and First Woman's thoughts; it is impossible to separate theory from praxis if we believe in the original historical events of Sky Woman and First Woman" (22). The complex theories of Indigenous

people, then, and the way they conceive of the world and their connection to it, "are not distinct from place" (22). As Watts explains, Haudenosaunee or Anishinaabe framing is circular: it moves from Spirit to Place-Thought, which determines agency within creation; societies and systems become extensions of that agency, creating an obligation to communicate, which leads back to Spirit. In contrast, Western framing is linear, beginning with a divide between epistemology and ontology, between knowing and being, which separates constituents of the world from how the world is understood, limiting agency to humans, and creating an "exclusionary relationship with nature" (22).

Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie describe the crucial distinction between the ontology of Western place-based paradigms, which (to paraphrase the Cartesian *cogito*) say something like "I am, therefore place is," and the ontology of land-based Indigenous paradigms, which state something like "Land is, therefore we are" (2015, 55–56). In other words, the ontology of place privileges the individual human, whereas the ontology of land privileges land and the life of a collective (56). "This represents a profound distinction that cannot be overlooked," Tuck and McKenzie write. "Understandings of collectivity and shared (though not necessarily synchronous) relations to land are core attributes of an ontology of land" (56). In addition, "the *land-we* ontology . . . is incommensurable with anthropocentric notions of place" (56). The land comes first in Indigenous thought and practice. Ontologies that put humans first, either at the centre of place or as "small and simple cogs in a universal scheme," are incompatible with Indigenous land-we ontologies (56). Indeed, many Indigenous cultures refer to land formations as ancestors (56–57). According to Tuck and McKenzie, that idea is "simultaneously poetic and real; it is both a notion and an action" (57). It is an affirmation of kinship with the land.

In contrast, with our linear cosmology and anthropocentric ideas of place, settlers often see the land as something we can manipulate for our own benefit, from which we can extract value. Settler anthropologist Eva Mackey suggests that settlers tend to see themselves "as outsiders to, and conquerors of, nature. Such concepts of relationship to land in terms of possessive ownership and control are widely believed to have been foreign to First Nations" (Mackey 2016, 45–46). A relationship of ownership is the opposite of one based on kinship. Settlers think the land belongs to them, that they are separate from or above it; Indigenous peoples think they belong to the land, that it is their kin. That's a fundamental difference, encoded in the English language; Potawatomi biologist and writer Robin Kimmerer suggests: "English encodes human exceptionalism, which privileges the needs and wants of humans above all others and understands us as detached from the commonwealth of life" (2017). The Potawatomi language, in contrast, because it considers many nouns to be animate and has no pronoun equivalent to "it,"

> is a language that challenges the fundamental tenets of Western thinking—that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use. Those whom my ancestors called relatives were renamed *natural resources*. In contrast to verb-based Potawatomi, the English language is made up primarily of nouns, somehow appropriate for a culture so obsessed with things. (Kimmerer 2017)

Such linguistic differences help explain why the first thing settlers did when they arrived in what's now called Saskatchewan was to begin ploughing under the grassland ecosystem. Possession of the land was contingent on that destruction, according to the 1872 Dominion Lands Act: breaking the land was considered a sign of its improvement and thus of the inhabitant's possession of it. The land was not a relative; it was a thing, a resource. Nothing has changed; in fact, today, temperate

grasslands are the planet's most endangered ecosystem (Kraus 2016). Almost none remains near Regina, where the heavy clay soil is good for growing grain and oilseeds. Here the grassland is gone.

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It rained briefly last night; the lawns have turned green, and buds on the elm trees are beginning to open. I think of Robert Frost: "Nature's first green is gold." I walk past a crew of city workers standing around an open sewer hatch. Crossing the creek on the pedestrian bridge, I notice all the birds, piyêsisak: grackles, red-winged blackbirds, mallards. I saw a pelican yesterday, gliding overhead. Spring is definitely here.

I walk along side streets and alleys for as long as I can before I have to turn onto Albert Street, the city's main north-south artery. Someone has spilled wheat in an alley. Crows are eating soggy bread in a vacant lot; they fly away when I try to take their picture. Fallen catkins under a poplar tree smell impossibly sweet. On Albert Street, the sidewalks are empty of pedestrians. I'm hungry and bite into the apple I've brought with me.

Just before the Ring Road, where Albert Street becomes Highway 6, heading south to the US border, I notice frogs, ayîkisak, singing in the ditches at the side of the road, unheard by passing motorists sealed in their vehicles. Their companionable music follows me all day.

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I'm aware of the dangers of môniyâwak like me idealizing Indigenous forms of knowing and, especially, trying to participate in them. That desire can become—or perhaps is—just another colonizing gesture, an extractive attempt to acquire knowledge, or a misunderstanding of the fundamental differences between Place-Thought or land-we ontologies and our own settler ways of being and knowing. Nevertheless, settlers need to change the extractive way we engage with our world, our home, if we are to stop the ongoing ecological catastrophe, and perhaps coming into relationship with the land that puts it at the centre of the world would be a way of making that change. I'm not sure that form of relationship is available to settlers, though. Watts discusses radical European and American thinkers who have tried to accord agency to the natural world—Donna Haraway, Vanessa Kirby, Bruno Latour—and concludes that the levels of agency they grant to the land and its creatures "are a product of the epistemology-ontology paradigm," which carries within it "the idea of human ownership over non-human things, beings, etc." (2013, 30). How could settlers rework their way of thinking about the world, literally, from the ground up? How could we shift our thinking from an I-place ontology to a land-we ontology, to use terms from Tuck and McKenzie's argument? That's a tall order; it's not likely to happen by taking a few walks around Regina. Walking might even turn out to be one more extractive, objectifying process.

An abandoned road sign. Regina, Saskatchewan, June 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

In fact, Robinson argues that all settler attempts at learning—about the land, about Indigenous peoples—are necessarily extractive. Our "desire or hunger to know" is, he contends, implied by the Stó:lō word for settler, "xwelítem," which means "starving person": not only starving for food but for gold as well (Carter et al. 2017, 210). That hunger for resources—"for the rocks, the trees, the water, and the land itself"—has been joined by a new form of hunger: a "hunger to do the right thing, to fit the Indigenous into one part of the multicultural mosaic, to understand and make accessible Indigenous 'issues' through settler logics" (210). He's talking about the desire for "reconciliation" with Indigenous peoples, a notion he rejects as insufficient, but by extension, his argument applies to anything settlers do, from walking on the land to learning an Indigenous language. His argument leaves me wondering whether any desire to know or learn is always a sign of insatiable hunger, the kind of hunger that drives the cannibal monster in Cree narratives, the wîhtikow. I learned about wîhtikowak from one of my Cree teachers, Professor Solomon Ratt, and immediately recognized the resemblance between their behaviour and that of settlers. And yet, I find myself wondering if there is any form of learning available to settlers that is not born out of the hunger Robinson describes.

Is there any way that learning by a settler might affirm Indigenous values of "reciprocity, responsibility, and accountability" (Carter et al. 2017, 208)? Is my attempt at coming into relationship with the land by walking doomed to fail because I begin in a place defined by settler epistemology and ontology? Are my attempts at learning nêhiyawêwin extractive? I know I'll never be a fluent speaker of the language, but I hope to glimpse through it a different way of seeing the world. Is that extractive? Robinson might be right: as a settler, I exist in an epistemological and ontological paradigm in which I've learned to relate to the land by taking from it, rather than relating

to it as kin. Perhaps it's not possible to break out of that epistemological and ontological prison. Memmi's suggestion that settlers who want to resist colonization will always find themselves trapped within it might well be correct.

Before I raise questions of how one relates to the land and its agency, a preliminary question might need to be asked: whether settlers can observe the land without turning it into spectacle, without falling into the ways of looking that Mulvey, Bhabha, Garneau, and Robinson critique. Perhaps seeing the land as spectacle, as an object, is part of what enables extractive approaches to it. Is it possible for settlers to become witnesses rather than voyeurs? Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi theatre scholar Jill Carter suggests that witnessing is "an intentionally generous act," and that the witness "embodies communal (hi)story in that her body becomes the vessel on which that history is written, her mind becomes the surface on which its details are imprinted, and her voice becomes the vehicle through which that history is transmitted, passed back to those who may have forgotten and passed forward to those who will have to remember" (2020, 19). To be a witness is to be "locked into a covenant relationship with the witnessed," to acknowledge responsibility (19). "Voyeurism, on the other hand, is an intentionally capricious act: it accepts no responsibility, it requires no somatic engagement, and it is performed without generosity," Carter continues. "The voyeur/spectator stands apart from the story, *consuming only what is pleasing* (in that it titillates, edifies, nourishes, or affirms) and rejecting anything that may unsettle the stomach" (19). Voyeurism is extractive: it "consumes, digests, and expels" (19). Carter is concerned with making settler viewers of Indigenous performance aware of "their own *complicity* within a system of oppression that, by turns, punishes, spectacularizes, and disappears Indigenous bodies," of "their *accountability* to the living Indigenous body," of "their *responsibility* to respond to that body as witness, not consumer" (21). She leaves open the possibility that settler audiences might become witnesses rather than voyeurs, but she makes the difficulty of this shift clear. As a form of embodied territorial acknowledgment, can walking on the land become a form of witnessing for settlers?

A city rabbit in a vacant suburban lot. Regina, Saskatchewan, June 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

As a way of thinking about these questions, I turn to settlers who have written about the land—particularly grassland, the ecology that existed here, where I'm walking, before settlers arrived—in a way that suggests it is a sacred space, not merely a resource. In Trevor Herriot's essay "A Way Home," we see a settler writing about the land and relating to it in what seems to be a nonextractive fashion. In that essay, Herriot, a writer and naturalist based in Regina, suggests that "if enough people would discover all that is good and holy" in grassland songbirds, "we might be able to turn things around"—that is, stop destroying the remaining grassland, where those birds live—"before it's too late" (Herriot 2009, 3). That language—"all that is good and holy in these birds"—speaks to Herriot's sense that this ecosystem, which exists only in fragments where I walk, is sacred. That language is characteristic of Herriot's belief in the importance of the grassland ecosystem. But that sense of the sacred is connected to identity. He invites his readers to visit a patch of wild grass:

> Walk into the middle and lie down. Press your back against the earth and let the exhalations of the soil enter your body breath by breath. With grass blades waving overhead and the sky beyond, the human spirit has half a chance to come to its senses. If there are birds singing in the air, all the better. They will tell you where you are and, if you listen long enough, they may tell you who you are in the bargain. (Herriot 2009, 4)

For Herriot, making an embodied connection to the grassland by lying in a patch of wild grass and observing its birds will both locate us physically and unveil our identity. What makes this statement a surprise is that, although he was born and raised in Saskatchewan, he seems to have found his identity by discovering the "spirit" of the grassland by learning the names of its plants and birds. That learning mattered for him, not as an Adamic form of naming, not as a way of turning those more-than-human beings into possessions, but "in its capacity to call things forth from generality into a particularity that allowed for admiration, familiarity, even wonder" (Herriot, 2009, 11). In particular, knowing the birds locates Herriot in this place. "The influence of beings as unprepossessing and elusive as grassland birds is something like gravity, a weak though persistent mystery that holds us in place," he concludes. "The heart recognizes such a gentle force, knows that in simply becoming aware of its pull we take a small step toward belonging here ourselves" (12). Perhaps it's through developing a sense of this ecosystem as sacred and entering into a dialogic relationship with its creatures by learning about them that Herriot has come to feel that he belongs here. That sense of relationship is no doubt different from the one Simpson and Hogan describe, but it might be something to build on, something that might shift us away from a way of life premised solely on destructive extraction.

Like Herriot, the American writer and insect ecologist Jeffrey A. Lockwood, who teaches at the University of Wyoming, sees the shortgrass prairie of the American high plains as a sacred space that has had a powerful effect on his life. Lockwood is a scientist, and his job is to examine the prairie closely; what he sees when he looks at the grassland plants and animals is "the good labor of living, competing and cooperating, sustaining self, and creating community" (Lockwood 2004, 7). "The grassland is a setting that reflects my life, evoking the depth and wonder of the eternal present," he continues (7). The grassland is "a gateway to the ultimate manifestation of the infinite and the infinitesimal, the universal and the particular. Whatever else God might mean, to merit our reverence God must be transcendent. And to deserve our awareness, God must be immanent" (7). That transcendence and immanence, he writes, is "manifest in the earth beneath my feet" (8). Like Herriot, Lockwood makes direct physical contact with the grassland, but unlike Herriot, who advocates lying down on it, Lockwood takes off his shoes and socks and walks barefoot on the grassland, a brave thing to do given the number of thorny plants and cacti he encounters.

A sense of the land as sacred and having a powerful effect on his life is one thing, but Lockwood also suggests that he converses with the grasshoppers he studies, and with the wider ecosystem of which they are a part. Any ecologist "who wants to relate to a prairie as a living being worthy of deep respect is pushing the limits of modern science," he writes, and he admits that he risks his professional credibility when he claims that he "hears the creatures of the grasslands. Their speaking is neither literal nor metaphorical, but it is true in a way that transcends mere sensation and abstraction, reaching through and beyond the objective facts of ecology" (Lockwood 2004, 34). Lockwood acknowledges that few of us are able to see the land in this way; many if not most of his students cannot imagine that a parcel of land has any value except as real estate, except as an asset with a monetary value (140–41). In that belief, they are far from alone; it is the foundation of our extractive economy.

After the rain. Regina Bypass, south of Regina, Saskatchewan, September 2020. Photo: Ken Wilson.

Dialogue, "deep respect," love, a dissolution "of separateness from the world," and a sense of the sacred—surely Lockwood's connection to the grassland is a kind of relationship. Of course, Lockwood doesn't use the word "kinship" to describe his relationship to the grasshoppers he studies; he suggests that his connection to those creatures is not unlike one of parent to child, a notion that reinscribes a hierarchy of relationship rather than seeing a connection of equals (Lockwood 2004, 43). Nevertheless, might the way Lockwood and Herriot think be as close as settlers can get to seeing and experiencing the land as, literally, a relation? Perhaps—but it's important to distinguish between what they are doing and the cosmological understanding Watts describes, particularly in regard to the hierarchy Lockwood sees in his relationship to the grasshoppers. Could I adopt Herriot's and Lockwood's ways of thinking about the land? I'd like to

think so, although I'm walking in a city and in a countryside dominated by industrialized agriculture, rather than on what's left of the grassland ecosystem, and I find it much harder to see the sacred in such places. Nonetheless, I'm still walking on the land, experiencing the wind, the sun, the birds, and the sheer scale of this place through my senses. That experience might be a way to develop a relationship of kinship with the land.

Is it possible to look closely at things without turning them into objects or wanting to possess them in some way, without voyeurism or fetishism or the narcissistic belief that the land exists to serve our needs? Is it possible to learn about the land, engaging with it in a way that offers witness and extension toward reciprocity? Lockwood's description of scientific research suggests that observation without possession is possible—in fact, he claims that's what he does when he's conducting his fieldwork. Herriot's claim that knowing the names of birds allows for feelings of admiration and wonder also suggests that possession, or even the desire to possess, is not necessarily a part of looking as observation. Lockwood and Herriot may not see the land and its creatures as kin, as relations, and they might see humans as the dominant partner in that relationship. This signifies settler distance from Indigenous paradigms and reflects the differences between the cosmology Watts describes and our own ontological and epistemological frameworks, or the distinctions Tuck and McKenzie see between Indigenous and Western ontologies of land and place.

I hope my way of looking at the land is similar to Herriot's and Lockwood's, if not Simpson's, Hogan's, and Watts's. I could easily be wrong. I'm doing what I can to shift my connection to the land, to appreciate it as kin, to decentre humans from my thinking about it, but my efforts, my walking, might not be enough. Could walking, as a form of embodied territorial acknowledgment, offer an opportunity to begin to enter into a relationship with the land, to shift my sense of being in the world from an anthropocentric paradigm to a land-centred paradigm, to start becoming a witness to the land rather than a voyeur? I'll continue walking, hoping to find out, trusting that this methodology is taking me in the right direction, knowing that I walk carrying both an intention toward the possibility of shifting paradigms and my own distance from such a transformation.

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I'm walking east now, heading for home on the shoulder of busy Highway 1. Two ducks fly out of a slough, and red-winged blackbirds and yellow-headed blackbirds, two different kinds of cahcahkâyowak, chase each other in the reeds.

I stop to take pictures of the interchange where the Regina Bypass meets Highway 1. The wind jostles me; it's hard to keep the horizon straight in the viewfinder. A borrow pit—a hole from which the soil used to build the overpasses that make up this interchange was taken—lies behind a fence, filled with water. A remnant of the old highway still stands between the onramps, looking like a miniature asphalt-covered butte. The multiple overpasses of this interchange seem to last forever. Finally, I am past them, beyond the way they concentrate the wind, the sound of the traffic. The highway, twin ribbons of asphalt and speeding vehicles, stretches east. Dark clouds—waskowan—dominate the horizon, and I wonder if it's starting to rain in the city.

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