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“Balancing the Earth: Native American Philosophies and the Environmental Crisis”

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> “You see,” Josiah had said, with the sound of the water trickling out of the hose into the empty wooden barrel, “there are some things worth more than money.” He pointed his chin at the springs and around at the narrow canyon. “This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going.”
> —Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*
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> We hope that sooner rather than later Western society will realize that Native people are not simply vestiges of the past and sources of interesting and even beautiful ideas, but rather that they are very much alive today, and their economic and political issues must be addressed on their own terms.
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> The modern obsession of being in control and the dream of eliminating uncertainty through control of nature, which is the underlying philosophical premise of Western science must give way to the reality of moving creatively with the flow of events, which is the true reality of the universe. Western science is committed to increasing human mastery over nature, to go on conquering until everything natural is under absolute human control.
> —Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*

The story of the West might be projected as the story of what Wallace Stevens calls a “rage for order” in his poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” (128). It is difficult to know whether to read this phrase as paradox or irony. But in line with my purposes in what follows, I read it ironically, as a kind of fundamental or founding contradiction. This is the irony, then, that drives Western history from 1492 forward—a date, the European invasion of the Americas, that can mark the beginning of the emergence of capitalism as a global system. It is an irony constitutive of the capitalist system, as Max Weber suggested a century ago in his formative essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). As Weber conjectured, capitalism, which projects itself as the rational system par excellence, is driven by a terror of chaos, or in Stevens’s words a “rage for order.”

The source of this terror is located in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination in which God is represented as “a transcendent being remote from any human understanding, a being who had allotted to each individual his destiny according to his entirely unfathomable decrees, and who controlled the tiniest detail of the cosmos. Since his decrees were immutably fixed, those on whom he bestowed his grace could never lose it, just as those to whom he denied it could never attain it" (Weber 73). In the crucial matter of salvation, within this doctrine, human effort is of no account.

The terror in this scenario comes in facing the unbridgeable gap, the abyss, between what God understands as the order of the universe and what humans can never understand, which is, precisely, that order. From the human perspective, then, God's order must be felt as an infinite disorder, in the sense of that which defies rational comprehension. The doctrine of predestination, Weber tells us, "with all the pathos of its inhumanity, had one principal consequence for the mood of a generation which yielded to its magnificent logic: it engendered, *for each individual*, a feeling of tremendous inner *loneliness*" (73). And, concomitantly, we can imagine, a feeling of tremendous anxiety. We can also imagine, perhaps, how this radical separation of person from person produces the kind of "*individualism*" that is useful in creating the kind of competition that drives the capitalist machine (74).

As Weber explains it, the antidote to this terror lay in the attempt to systematize or rationalize, that is, to bring order to one's worldly life because "*tireless labor in a calling* was urged as the best possible means of *attaining* [the] self-assurance [that one was among the elect]. This and this alone would drive away religious doubt and give assurance of one's state of grace" (77–78). That is, while works could not save one, works in the world could serve as "*signs* of election" (79). Weber explains it this way:

> In this sense ["good works"] are occasionally described quite simply as "indispensable for salvation" or linked with the "possessio salutis." This means, however, fundamentally, that God helps those who help themselves, in other words, the Calvinist "creates" his salvation himself . . . more correctly: creates the certainty of salvation. It further means that what he creates cannot consist, as in Catholicism, in a gradual storing up of meritorious individual achievements; instead it consists in a form of systematic self-examination which is constantly faced with the question: elect or reprobate? (79)

This approach may seem to be a way to hedge one's bets in the gamble of grace, to become a somewhat cautious player in the high stakes game of predestination. Indeed, it may seem to threaten to change the rules of that game so that it resembles too closely the Catholic game of salvation by works. But even as Protestantism tries to control the anxiety of pure Calvinism with a system of works, there is a crucial difference between the Protestant relation to works and the Catholicism out of which it emerged in the sixteenth century, a difference residing precisely in the notion of *system*, which Weber makes clear:

> The "good works" [the Catholic] performed over and above ["the traditional duties"] . . . were normally an unsystematic series of *individual* actions that he carried out to make up for particular sins or as advised by the priest, or, toward the end of his life, as a kind of insurance policy. The God of Calvinism, on the

> other hand, demanded of his own, and effected in them, not individual "good works," but "sanctification by works" raised to the level of system. The ethical practice of ordinary people was divested of its random and unsystematic nature and built up into a consistent *method* for the whole conduct of one's life. (80)

The "ascetic" practice of this system produced the worldly saints of Protestantism, as opposed to the ascetic withdrawal of the Catholic saints. More importantly for the present day, even as the sacred structure of the Calvinist system became secularized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (though it had its particular evangelical offshoots as well), it retained its rage for order in a world made just as unbearably anxious by the cataclysmic uncertainties of capitalism, by the irrationality of the rational; its saints those captains of industry, who, like Benjamin Franklin—Weber's exemplar of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism—were able, it seemed by sheer dint of method, to bring systematic order, in the form of profit, out of the chaos of capitalist competition or, more precisely, were able to rationalize the chaos. It is within the force of this irony, then, of an order that is founded on disorder, that capitalism has attained its current productive capacity, both in terms of natural and human ecology: as the globe warms dangerously, eight million people currently die each year from poverty. For most of the world, capitalist production is a form of destruction.

These two forms of human violence are intimately connected through the question of resource distribution. As Weber notes in his essay, "the middle-class businessman" "was given the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of this world's goods was the special work of the providence of God" (119). Weber of course is writing about a particular religious era in Western history; and while today, we might not find many people who would justify the extremes of wealth and poverty within this rubric, nevertheless, it appears, given the relative indifference of the wealthy countries to the state of the poor, that this religious rationalization survives in the form of a secular fatalism linked to a belief in the efficacy of markets to solve global issues of poverty. So at this point in this essay, let me offer what, unfortunately, appears to be a radical idea at the present historical juncture. We are not alive to make a profit, that is, to rationalize the chaos of capitalism, but to sustain a decent life for every person on this planet, which means, of course, sustaining a decent life for the planet itself.

Within a system, sacred or secular, grounded in radical uncertainty, the Protestant ethic produces what the West terms the "individual," that radically alienated person who works obsessively for God or the corporation or the state in order to rationalize this uncertainty. Tocqueville, who coined the term "Individualism" (2:98), saw the individual as a particular product of democracies (and certainly Protestantism was a critical step in the movement toward democratic revolutions in the West). According to Tocqueville, individuals "always consider themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (2:99). Here we understand another figure of the Protestant ethic, rationalizing utter helplessness as radical self help. Nevertheless, as Tocqueville remarks of the individual, democracy "throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his heart" (2:99). Tocqueville, of course, is writing of Western, capitalist democracies.

Intertwined with this alienation from sacred or secular forces that the individual figures as cosmic is an alienation from what the West terms “nature.” In the Western view, individuals may know philosophically that the human is a part of nature; they know that there is no simple inside or outside in this matter, that they are within nature and nature is within them. They say they know this, in any event, but they do not live it—individuals have acted historically, that is, whether within a sacred or a secular tradition, as though nature were outside of the human, an object, to be mastered—and individuals do not live their naturalness because in fact they cannot imagine what it means. They cannot imagine what it means, I want to suggest, because they are trapped in a particular epistemology, a particular way of knowing that is surely killing all of us as a species, both literally and figuratively, materially and spiritually. This epistemology is based in the conceptual model that opposes *nature* and *culture*, a model the West has exported imperially, with increasing force since 1492 but not without concerted resistance from what I want to term Native, indigenous, or kin-based epistemologies.

It should be noted that the nature/culture divide, which has dominated the Western imagination for the last 250 years, is the precipitate of a dialectic (a dialogue of sorts), an ancient habit of thinking in Western civilization going back, formally at least, as far as the Greeks. In Aristotle’s *Politics*, for example, nature authorizes, or rationalizes, the norms of culture. However, beginning at least with the Enlightenment, this dialogue (as partisan as it was) has become a divide, or opposition, which in recent times has been deconstructed repeatedly, reminding us of its dialectical roots. But the divide persists, articulating a hierarchy, with *culture* privileged over *nature*. And like every hierarchy, every philosophical opposition, it assumes the fundamental externality of the terms to each other, even as one deconstructs this externality to demonstrate the dialogic intimacy of opposites, that is, their dialectical relationship. Nature and culture are at once separate and inseparable. Indeed, as Derrida pointed out at the beginning of his project, the deconstruction is dependent to a significant degree on the assumption of the externality. Hence, the irony, or is it the paradox, of deconstruction itself, to which Derrida was very much attuned.

My point here may be obvious. That is, the rhetorical dismantling of a philosophical system does not necessarily bring it to an end; indeed, it may even help to strengthen it because the deconstruction is always dependent on the structure it is deconstructing and in that way repeatedly reconstructs it in the very act of deconstruction. There is, perhaps, a kind of nostalgia involved in this activity (a kind of philosophical patriotism); and nostalgia is always the sign of sublimated violence. So, I am suggesting, there is no point in continuing to deconstruct the nature/culture divide. If we want to bring it to an end, we must find and adapt a philosophical system that does not recognize this divide in the first place, which brings me to what Santa Clara Pueblo scholar Gregory Cajete calls “Native science,” indigenous ways of knowing the world.

Over and against the nature/culture epistemology, which Cajete terms “an essentially dysfunctional cosmology, a cosmology that can no longer sustain us at any level” (53), Cajete articulates a Native cosmology, which he terms “natural democracy”:

> The first Indigenous cosmologies were based on the perception that the spirit of the universe resided in the Earth and things of the Earth, including human beings. Because of this perception, these people remained equally open to all possibilities that might manifest through the natural world. In turn, perceptions of the cycles of nature, behavior of animals, growth of plants, and interdependence of all things in nature determined culture, that is, ethics, morals, religious expression, politics and economics. In short, they came to know and express "natural democracy."
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> In the inclusive view of natural democracy, humans are related and interdependent with plants, animals, stones, water, clouds, and everything else. Thus, it becomes in every sense abnormal to view the world as dead matter, private property, commodities, or commercial resources. The manifestation and roots of the Native sense of democracy run much deeper than the modern American political version of democracy today in that all of nature, not only humans, has rights. This is the essential "cosmological clash" between the foundations of Native culture and those of modern society. (52–53)

Within the context of "natural democracy," then, there is no nature/culture divide because culture is always already within nature and nature within culture (Cajete, writing in English rather than speaking in his native Tewa or another Native language, is constrained to use the language of this divide even as he bends it to try to express a way of thinking beyond the divide). Within the order of "natural democracy" "humans are related [to] and interdependent with plants, animals, stones, water, clouds, and everything else"; that is, "natural democracy" is a kin-based order with kinship extending throughout the universe in a system of inclusive rights. Just as within "natural democracy" there is no distinction between *nature* and *culture*, so there is no essential distinction, for example, between humans and animals: "Most Native languages," Cajete tells us, "do not have a specific word for 'animals.' Rather, when animals are referred to they are called by their specific names. The fact that there are no specific generic words for animals underlines the extent to which animals were considered to interpenetrate with human life. Animals were partners with humans even when humans were abusive" (152).

The most astute scholars of Native studies have always understood the radicalness (radical in the sense of root) of Native "natural democracy." William Bevis expresses it this way:

> Native American Nature is urban. The connotation to us of "urban," suggesting a dense complex of human variety, is closer to Native American "nature" than is our word "natural." The woods, birds, animals, and humans are all "downtown," meaning at the center of action and power, in complex and unpredictable and various relationships. . . . Nature is part of tribe. (601–02)

That is, Native nature *is* culture. To articulate one term is to articulate the other in the same breath.

Commenting on the way the Navajo language reflects the traditional matrifocal and matrilineal locus of Navajo social life, its mothercenteredness— the anthropologist Gary Witherspoon remarks:

> Essential parts, as well as the earth itself are called mother. Agricultural fields are called mother, corn is called mother, and sheep are called mother. These applications of the concept certainly make it clear that motherhood is defined in terms of the source, sustenance, and reproduction of life. (16)

But, it is crucial to emphasize in conjunction with Cajete's conception of "natural democracy," Witherspoon speculates that "mother earth" is not a figure for but the literal ground of the notion of motherhood itself: "Maybe it is the earth who is really mother, and human mothers merely resemble the earth in some ways and are not really mothers" (21)—that is, I take it, not literal mothers, thereby reversing the movement of this metaphor in the West, where the figure of mother earth depends on the earth's perceived resemblance to mammalian, particularly human, mothers. But it may be the power of Native kinship terminologies that they break down the distinction between the literal and the figurative, a distinction so fundamental to Western notions of identity and to the Western notion of literature.

One of the key figures in American Indian oral traditions, what the West has termed "trickster" but which has no generic name or fixed form across Native cultures, combining attributes of what the West would parse as the "human," "animal," and "divine," can be recognized as a social force that defines itself in ways that cannot be categorized in terms of the division between nature and culture, the literal and the figurative, male and female, sacred and secular, hero and villain, or human and animal, precisely because trickster embodies all of these categories (any opposition for that matter) within itself without contradiction. As Arnold Krupat notes, trickster logic blurs the boundaries between identities that the West has come to think of as "oppositional, hierarchical, and exclusionary":

> The logic developed in the West is a consequence of the internalization of the habits of alphabetic literacy. But the traditional philosophy of an oral culture, and particularly . . . the philosophical thought expressed by means of trickster tales, does not construct its posited pairs in oppositional, but, rather, in conjunctural or complementary fashion. This thought is not expressed in abstract, analytical discourse, but, rather, in highly particularized narratives. (n. pag.)

"Natural democracy" suggests such a blurring, even erasure, of the boundaries between the literal and the figurative in its extension of kinship-based rights throughout the universe. For a crucial component in the denial of rights is the placing of whoever or whatever is denied those rights outside the circuit of kinship in one way or another, which is to de-realize, fictionalize, or metaphorize these "others." In his first book *Nature*, published in 1836, Emerson articulates with spectacular acuity this process of de-realizing nature as the "NOT ME" (8). From 1492 forward, indigenous peoples have been well acquainted with these rights-denying processes of othering as they are instituted in the still-utilized Western rhetorics of "savagery" and "primitiveness," thus reducing these peoples to the status of a nature-to-be-dominated.

In its extension of kinship-based rights, "natural democracy" is inherently environmentally conservative for the very dynamic of kinship, based as it is in ideas of reciprocity as balance, sets specific limits to the uses of ecological systems. Native literatures, oral and written, which might usefully be termed trickster literatures, are acutely aware of these limits because, unlike Western literatures, they are not inscribed within the nature/culture opposition. Let us take, for example, the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, perhaps the most widely read and taught Native novel since it was first published in 1977. The scene on which I want to focus is one of deer-hunting, which Silko uses to contrast the traditional Laguna way of hunting deer with the Western way.

Because of the way Silko tells the story, the reader enters this hunting scene *in medias res*, after the kill, and the narrator does not make it clear who has killed the deer, Tayo, the Laguna protagonist of the novel, or his cousin Rocky, although certain details suggest the latter. This ambiguity of agency may at once suggest the lack of emphasis on individual action in a society where kinship emphasizes communal responsibility, but it certainly serves to focus the reader's attention on the relationship of the community to the death rather than on the act of a particular individual. If Rocky has, indeed, killed the deer, he does not claim it as his own; even as he disdains the community's ceremonial relation to the deer, he does not disrupt the ceremony. The reader first encounters Tayo "slowly" approaching the dead deer:

> It had fallen on its right side with its forelegs tucked under its belly; the hind legs were curled under to the left as if it were still sleeping in the grass. The eyes were still liquid and golden brown, staring at dark mountain dirt and dry oak leaves tangled in the grass.
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> When he was a little child he always wanted to pet a deer, and he daydreamed that a deer would let him come close and touch its nose. He knelt and touched the nose; it was softer than pussy willows, and cattails, and still warm as a breath. The bright blood in the nostrils was still wet. He touched the big mule-size ears, and they were still warm. He knew it would not last long; the eyes would begin to cloud and turn glassy green, then gray, sinking back in the skull. The nose would harden, and the ears would get stiff. But for the moment it was so beautiful that he could only stand and feel the presence of the deer; he knew what they said about deer was true. (50)

Tayo's approach to the deer is sensually meditative—one might say that he thinks with his body, or, more precisely, that the Western opposition between mind and body is not operative here—which summons its "presence" and allows Tayo to verify through experience community knowledge: "what they said about deer." At the same time, Tayo's experience is itself mediated by this knowledge. In contrast to Tayo's approach, Rocky's is all business:

> Rocky was honing his knife; he tested the blade on a thread hanging from the sleeve of his jacket. The sun was settling down in the southwest sky above the twin peaks. It would be dark in an hour or so. Rocky rolled the carcass belly up and spread open the hind legs. When Tayo saw he was getting started, he looked at the eyes again; he took off his jacket and covered the deer's head.
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> "Why did you do that?" asked Rocky, motioning at the jacket with the blade of his knife. Long gray hairs were matted into the blood of the blade. Tayo didn't say anything because they both knew why. The people said you should do that before you gutted the deer. Out of respect. But Rocky was funny about those things. He was an A-Student and all-state in football and track. He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So he listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him. They told him, "Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don't let the people at home hold you back." Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world. After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque, Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old Grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition, and he opened his textbooks to show her. (50–51)

As previously noted, Cajete contrasts "natural democracy," the basis of Native science, with a Western "view [of] the world as dead matter, private property, commodities, or commercial resources." This is a view of the world as primarily a source of profit, *the* key sign of winning in the West. This is the fundamental view of the world, the passage from Silko suggests, that Rocky has been taught in the Western boarding school, which compels him to view the Laguna ceremony Tayo has initiated as "superstition." The emphasis Silko has Rocky place on winning, with its implicit idea of a zero-sum game that atomizes the community into a competition between individuals (for profit), would turn the deer into "dead matter, private property, commodities, or commercial resources" rather than a relative that has sacrificed itself so that the community can be fed and clothed.

But in this instance community mores prevail. While Rocky continues to butcher the deer,

> Josiah and Robert [Rocky's and Tayo's uncles] came . . . and unloaded their rifles and leaned them against a scrub oak. They went to the deer and lifted the jacket. They knelt down and took pinches of cornmeal from Josiah's leather pouch. They sprinkled the cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise the deer would be offended, and they would not come to die for them at the following year.
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> Rocky turned away from them and poured water from the canteen over his bloody hands. He was embarrassed at what they did. He knew when they took the deer home, it would be laid out on a Navajo blanket, and Old Grandma would put a string of turquoise around its neck and put silver and turquoise rings around the

> tips of the antlers. Josiah would prepare a little bowl of cornmeal and place it by the deer's head so that anyone who went near could leave some on the nose. Rocky tried to tell them that keeping the carcass on the floor in a warm room was bad for the meat. He wanted to hang the deer in the woodshed where the meat would stay cold and cure properly. But he knew how they were. All the people, even the Catholics who went to mass every Sunday, followed the ritual of the deer. So he didn't say anything about it but he avoided the room where they laid the deer. (51–52)

For Rocky, schooled in the Western value of winning with its emphasis on the individual competing in a zero-sum game, his community is already "they" (in a passage cited earlier, Tayo also refers to the community as "they"; but I would argue that the distance this infers is qualitatively different from that of Rocky's "they"). That is, just as Rocky refuses to acknowledge his kinship with the deer by following its "ritual," so he is in process of denying his kinship with the community. Indeed, the passage suggests that kinship with one is inseparable from kinship with the other because the deer is kin to the community, which is why "even the Catholics who went to mass every Sunday . . . followed the ritual of the deer": "They [the community] said the deer gave itself to them because it loved them, and he [Tayo] could feel the love as the fading heat of the deer's body warmed his hands" (52).

The passage is at pains to contrast Western and Native science and to show how beside the point the former is under the circumstances. No one, for example, needs to be told that meat spoils so that Rocky's textbook knowledge here is both superficial and superfluous. In fact, it would appear that he communicates it not to instruct but to alienate. On his way to a thorough psychic colonization, Rocky views his own community as primitive.[1] If the ceremony of the deer is intended to express the closeness, the interdependence, of the deer and the people, Rocky's immediate desire "to hang the deer in the woodshed, where the meat would stay cold and cure properly" (something we might assume will be done after the ceremony if the meat isn't eaten by the community immediately) seems intent on distancing the deer from the community by reducing it to "dead matter."

What is at stake here are two opposed ways of knowing, what Cajete refers to as "the essential 'cosmological clash' between the foundations of Native Culture and those of modern society," though I would add that Native Culture (or more specifically Native cultures) is itself one of a number of modernities. We might characterize the Native way of knowing as ceremonial, intended to strengthen kinship ties through the maintenance of balance. Cajete notes: "Ceremony is both a context for transferring knowledge and a way to remember the responsibility we have to our relationships with life. Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and restoring balance, renewal, cultivating relationship, and creative participation with nature" (70–71). That is, just as ceremonies function as social action, indigenous ways of knowing, including what the West terms "art" and has increasingly subordinated to what it terms "science," are always socially useful—crucially, in this regard, the subject of ceremonial knowledge is the community not the individual. In fact, there is no "object" of knowledge as such in Native epistemologies, for such an object presupposes an isolated observer, such as the narrator of a scientific article or the alienated “I” of the Western lyric poet, who can, theoretically, stand outside both nature and the community. Cajete expresses this as what may appear paradoxical from a Western perspective: “Native science reflects the understanding that objectivity is founded on subjectivity. There is a stress on direct subjective experience, predicated on a personal and collective closeness to nature, which will lead to an understanding of the subtle qualities of nature” (67–68). Ceremonial knowledge is conservative—“Acting in the world must be sanctioned through ritual and ceremony” (65)—based in enduring narrative traditions, but we must remember that tradition itself is not static. Rather, it is a particular dynamic way of adapting to change that stresses stability in relation to certain values.

Thus, unlike Western modernity, where the development of technology is not determined by tradition, or integrated with it, but is a tradition in and of itself of breaking with or, more precisely perhaps, interdicting tradition, “adoption of technology [in Native science] is conservative and based on intrinsic need, and care is taken to ensure that technologies adopted and applied do not disrupt a particular ecology. Such care is grounded in the belief that it is possible to live well through adhering to a cosmology and philosophy honoring balance, harmony, and ecologically sustainable relationships” (Cajete 69).

In contrast to the ceremonial structure of Native science, which is based in the philosophy of “natural democracy,” Western science is anti- or a-ceremonial, and in that respect anti-democratic as well. In this respect Western science, in contradistinction to Native science, is an esoteric body of knowledge accessible only to those who can gain access to an increasingly class-stratified system of higher education. Within this elite system, the tendency to specialization is disintegrative in relation to the sharing of knowledge across disciplines and its integration with significant social processes having to do with the well-being of the whole community. Further, these processes of exclusivity and compartmentalization tend to occlude *the* key issue of social justice: the radically unequal distribution of wealth, which is historically characteristic of capitalist society, in both its local and global (imperial, colonial, and neo-colonial) manifestations. In his book *Fight Back*, to which I will return, Acoma poet Simon Ortiz makes this point about the difference in the social function between Native and Western ways of knowing, when he turns to the function of knowledge in the fashioning of the atomic bomb:

> Thorough knowledge was what was always required to live by for Indian people; since the Mericano, knowledge has been kept in some hidden place and has been used as controlling power. Although the people had felt the tremor of light, and knew that it was strange, they did not know what it meant. The great majority of U.S. society did not know what it meant because knowledge was kept away from them just as effectively, and in many ways more so. The meaning was known only by a few people in the U.S. government, and to those who were in control of this knowledge, it meant power. They not only had power by controlling knowledge, but they had it by having the power to destroy. (63–64)

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx points to the anti-ceremonial (anti-traditional) character of the capital-wielding class:

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life; and his relations with his kind. (58)

Here in an early stage of his career, Marx is thinking in a wholly Western context so that in the first instance the tradition he has in mind is a Western feudal and aristocratic tradition, the revolutionizing of which by the bourgeoisie is a necessary, even progressive, step on the road to the revolution of the industrialized proletariat, though there is also the thought in this passage that beyond its revolutionizing of aristocratic society capitalism's form is to continually revolutionize itself so that its only value is the new. But in the last stage of his career, Marx turned his thoughts to the revolutionary potential of the traditions of indigenous peoples, as Franklin Rosemont argues in his essay "Karl Marx & the Iroquois." If in the 1840s Marx's "starting-point was the critique of *alienated labor* which 'alienates nature from man . . . man from himself . . . [and man] from the species'—that is, labor dominated by the system of *private property* by *capital*, the '*inhuman power*' that 'rules over everything,' spreading its 'infinite degradation' over the fundamental relation of man to woman and reducing all human beings to commodities" (9–10), by 1880, Rosemont finds in Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, particularly in Marx's reading of the American anthropologist and explicator of the Iroquois Lewis Henry Morgan, "a vivid awareness of the *actuality of indigenous peoples*, and perhaps even a glimpse of the then-undreamed-of possibility that such peoples could make *their own* contribution to the global struggle for human emancipation" (11). That is, Rosemont suggests, at the end of his career, Marx was thinking or pointing us in the direction of thinking that the answer to the alienation of Western humanity from nature could be found, beyond the nature/culture divide, in Native epistemologies. If in the *Manifesto* Marx was thinking of the basis of bourgeois knowledge as the revolutionizing of all ceremony, for capitalism does not stand on ceremony but is constantly on the move, we are invited to think that the Marx of the *Ethnological Notebooks* was thinking of the revolutionary potential of indigenous ceremony.[2]

If Marx was thinking of Indians at the end of his life, certainly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Indians have been thinking critically of Marx, to which the ongoing Mayan resistance in Chiapas, Mexico, begun in 1994 under the name *zapatista*, and the election of Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian, in Bolivia, testify. Both of these indigenous-based movements are linked by the way they synthesize socialist and indigenous philosophies in resisting the neoliberal predations of globalization both theoretically and practically. For far from balancing the earth's intertwined cultural and natural ecological systems, globalization, based as it is in an ethos of maximizing corporate profit through the privatization of resources, seems only to have further unbalanced them, establishing greater discrepancies between rich and poor, while at the same time pushing the planet toward environmental disaster. As the historian Greg Grandin pointed out in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*:

> Before NAFTA, Mexico was self-sufficient in corn and bean production. Today, one out of three Mexican tortillas is made with cheap corn meal from the United States. In 1993, more than 10 million Mexicans made their living off the land. Today, even as Mexico's population has grown, that number has plummeted to about seven million.
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> Mexican farmers simply can't compete with capital-intensive United States agribusiness, which continues to enjoy generous government subsidies. Moreover, Mexican commodity importers receive low-interest loans to buy crops from the United States. Every year, nearly three million tons of harvested Mexican corn is left to rot because it is too expensive to sell. (a13)

This waste of food while people go hungry is bad enough. But for Indians in the Americas corn is not simply a commodity, as Simon Ortiz reminds us:

> When corn, the cultivated seed and plant and food is spoken of, it is given a sacred nature because of the all-important item that it is in the life of the people. It is a food, gift, seed, symbol, and it is the very essence of humankind's tending and nurturing of life, land, and product of physical, mental, and emotional work. Corn cannot be regarded as anything less than a sacred and holy and respected product of the creative forces of life, land, and the people's responsibilities and relationships. (56)

Countering this kind of wasteful structural exploitation (while people go hungry, corn rots), which was in part enabled by President Carlos Salinas's revocation of "agrarian reform in 1992 as part of Mexico's preparations to enter the North American Free Trade Agreement," the Zapatista agenda proposes an economic program of land redistribution grounded in the idea of ending poverty through Mexican self-sufficiency (Rus et. al. 1; Womack 21). Published first in December of 1993, the Zapatista "Revolutionary Agrarian Law," among its other provisions, stipulates:

> Groups benefited by this Agrarian Law must dedicate themselves preferentially to the collective production of foods necessary for the Mexican people: corn, beans, rice, vegetables, and fruit, as well as animal husbandry for cattle, pigs, and horses and bee-keeping, and [to the production] of derivative products (milk, meat, eggs, etc.). . . . The purpose of collective production is to satisfy primarily the needs of the people, to form among the beneficiaries a collective consciousness of work

> and benefits, and to create units of production, defense, and mutual aid in rural Mexico. When in one region some good is not produced, [some other good that is produced there] will be exchanged [in trade for the needed good] with another region where it is produced, [this trade to occur] in conditions of justice and equality. Excess production can be exported to other countries if there is no national demand for the product. (Womack 253–54, brackets original)

This program of collectivization is to be implemented through the "expropriat[ion]" of "big agricultural companies," which would then "pass into the hands of the Mexican people, and be administered collectively by the same [companies'] workers. . . . Individual monopolization of land and means of production will not be permitted" (Womack 254, final brackets original). I emphasize that this model of collectivization is not the Soviet model of the centralized, bureaucratic state farm but a decentralized model much closer to that of traditional kin-based indigenous communities. Among the Zapatista demands formulated for negotiations with the Mexican government beginning in February of 1994, the fourth stipulates: "A new pact among the states of the federal republic that will end centralism and allow regions, indigenous communities, and municipalities to govern themselves with political, economic, and cultural autonomy" (271). Integrated into this program of decentralized economic reform, which presupposes other political formations than the nation-state, are environmental protection laws: "Virgin jungle zones and forests will be preserved, and there will be reforestation campaigns in the principal zones. . . . Headwaters, rivers, lakes, and seas are the collective property of the Mexican people, and will be protected by avoiding pollution and punishing misuse" (254). The notion here is that economic, political, and environmental balance are of a piece, though if this manifesto were to thoroughly achieve what Cajete refers to as "natural democracy," it would need to replace the terms "collective property" with the term "kin."

While the Mexican state apparatus through both physical force and hegemony has been able to contain the Zapatista revolution so far, contemporary, successful indigenous-centered resistance in Bolivia to the privatization of water, natural gas, and oil, which began in 2000 with the "water war" in Cochabamba, erupted into a potentially state-transforming event with the election of Morales in December of 2005. Following the agenda of the popular uprisings—Bolivia identifies itself as 62% indigenous—that led to the ouster of two presidents and his subsequent election, Morales has already indicated that he will move to nationalize hydrocarbon fuels and redistribute land. What forms this agenda will take, or even if it will take in the face of local and global neoliberal resistance, remains to be seen.

But what I want to emphasize at this juncture is the movement toward "natural democracy" that we may be witnessing in the Americas today. At the center of this indigenous democracy is a community relationship to land as kin in contradistinction to its conceptualization as *property*. While the institution of property treats land as alienable, a commodity and hence fungible, the kinship relation to land understands it as absolutely inalienable, as literal family, as part of an ongoing and inviolable ceremonial relationship that we have read in the Laguna community's relationship with the deer. This relationship is expressed precisely by another

Pueblo writer, Simon Ortiz from Acoma, Laguna's sister Pueblo, in his poem "We Have Been Told Many Things but We Know This to Be True," which I reproduce in its entirety:

> The land. The people.
> They are in relation to each other.
> We are in a family with each other.
> The land has worked with us.
> And the people have worked with it.
> This is true:
> Working for the land
> and the people—it means life
> and its continuity.
> Working not just for the people,
> but for the land too.
> We are not alone in our life;
> we cannot expect to be.
> The land has given us our life,
> and we must give life back to it.
>
> The land has worked for us
> to give us life—
> breathe and drink and eat from it
> gratefully—
> and we must work for it
> to give it life.
> Within this relation of family,
> it is possible to generate life.
> This is the work involved.
> Work is creative then.
> It is what makes for reliance,
> relying upon the relation of land and people.
> The people and the land are reliant
> upon each other.
> This is the kind of self-reliance
> that has been—
> before the liars, thieves, and killers—
> and this is what we must continue
> to work for.
> By working in this manner,
> for the sake of the land and people
> to be in vital relation
> with each other,
> we will have life,
> and it will continue.

> We have been told many things,
> but we know this to be true:
> the land and the people. (35–36)

This is a poem that is both about balance, the balance created by the land and the people working with each other in kinship, and that is formally balanced, each line working in reciprocity with the next, back and forth cyclically, the last line taking us back to the first line, so that the poem performs formally the balance of land and people it invokes. The poem is a chant, a ceremony in miniature; it is meant to be spoken and in that it is a figure for, indeed a part of, ongoing Native oral cultures. The poem is also a balance, a fulcrum, appearing, as it does, in the middle of Ortiz's book *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People For the Sake of the Land*, a cycle of poetry and prose, published in 1980, as it says on the reverse of the title page, "In Commemoration of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and our warrior Grandmothers and Grandfathers." Ortiz describes the Revolt, which drove the Spanish down to El Paso for twelve years, as an indigenous-centered insurrection of the poor:

> In August of 1680 when the Pueblo people rose against the ruling Spanish oppressor, they were joined in the revolt by the mestizo and genizaro ancestors of the Chicano people, and the Athapascan-speaking peoples whose descendants are the peoples of the Navajo and Apache nations, and descendants of Africans who had been brought to the New World as slaves. They were all commonly impoverished. (57)

As the preface by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz notes, the book "is a tribute to the struggles of Indian people, Indian workers, and to the Revolt. The book was written for the Tricentennial celebration of the 1680 revolt, and reminds us that the Revolt left a legacy of resistance. Resistance continues in the mines, in the fields, in the factories" of the Americas (n. pag.), as exemplified in the insurrections in Mexico and Bolivia to which I have alluded: resistance to exploited Indian and non-Indian labor alike on stolen Indian land. The immediate exploitation on which *Fight Back* focuses in 1980 is the corporate uranium mining in New Mexico with its devastating results in terms of poisoning the land and the people, a devastation that continues in the present moment along with continuing indigenous resistance to the devastation.

As *Fight Back* and its central poem make clear, exploitation of land and labor are inseparable because "The land. The people. / They are in relation to each other. / We are in a family with each other." Immediately, the "they" becomes "we," what is out there is in here, but in contrast to the Western lyric the "we" is never subordinated to "I," a subject position that is absent in this central poem. The subject of the ceremony, of the Native lyric, is collective. This makes the reference to "self-reliance" in a U.S. context particularly ironic. For the self being referenced here is not the hyper-individuated, boot-strapping self of Franklin and Emerson (a self by the way that comes from chauvinistic, reductive readings of these two figures; readings that miss the ironies in both figures). Rather the self of the poem is precisely the opposite, a collective self constituted in the reciprocal dependencies of kinship. Whereas the self-reliance of U.S. ideology presupposes the nature/culture divide in projecting an individual alienated from nature, standing over and against and bent on dominating it, the self-reliance referenced in the Ortiz poem is constituted by an entirely opposite epistemology, one in which *nature* and *culture*, if we are constrained to use these two terms, are always synonymous. The poem works to express this equivalence in its balance.

Within the context of *Fight Back*, "We Have Been Told Many Things but We Know This to Be True," as ceremonial moment, is a critique of Western imperialism and as such an act of resistance to it, specifically U.S. imperialism. Such critique and resistance is characteristic of Native American literatures, oral and written. As the context makes clear, the reference to "liars, thieves, killers" is a reference to the genocidal policies of Indian removal set in motion by the U.S. government in the 1820s and 1830s and continuing today in congressional acts and court rulings, a genocide accompanied by what we might term, a slaughter of nature. What Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s about U.S. Indian policy holds in the present moment: "It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity," not only "men" we might add but the physical world as well (1:355). Ortiz's work is one chronicle among many Native histories that recount this U.S. war against the land and the people, against, that is, what Cajete terms "natural democracy." As a critique and chronicle of that war, this work is a remembrance of that time "before the liars, thieves, and killers" upset the balance of land and people:

> The people had developed a system of knowledge which made it possible for them to work at solutions. And they had the capabilities of developing further knowledge to deal with new realities. There was probably not anything that they could not deal properly and adequately with until the Mericano came. (Ortiz 59)

And as a remembrance, *Fight Back* is also a projection of a time when the "creative" "work" of balancing the earth will return:

> By working in this manner,
> for the sake of the land and the people
> to be in vital relation
> with each other,
> we will have life,
> and it will continue.

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Notes

1. U.S. American Indians are legally colonized under federal Indian law, which places all federally recognized tribes in the lower 48 states under a “trust” relationship, in which Congress retains “plenary power” in tribal affairs. Within this trust relationship, the federal government holds title to all lands in “Indian country” (a legal term defined in section 1151 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code), thus effectively placing the tribes in the positions of minors before the law.

2. I want to thank Marcus Rediker for alerting me to the Rosemont essay.

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