It had been several years since he had heard the wild turkeys flying up to roost along the creek, and he could scarcely remember what the howl of a wolf was like. The crows going to roost did not fly raucously over his father's house any more, but sometimes, if he happened to be awake, he could hear in the ringing silence of the morning before dawn the long, quavering chant of death from the hills across the valley... Away from the activity of Progress which had become so important, he felt a pleasure which seemed to be absent when he was in town. On the few occasions when the pounding hoofs of his pony flushed a small flock of prairie chickens, he would come to the realization that he didn't see them in large flocks any more; that it had been years since he had heard the familiar booming carried across the April prairie. When he came to little black-jack-covered ravines that reached out like feathered fingers into the prairie, he didn't seem to miss the band of deer bounding away; their white tails bobbing and seeming to float away among the black boles of the trees. Had he seen one lone frightened buck, he might have missed the band, but there were no more deer, and he was not acutely conscious of their absence.

—John Joseph Mathews (Osage) (1895-1978)

When I was growing up in Oklahoma, not that far from where Chal Windzer, John Joseph Mathews's fictional alter ego, experienced this personal silent spring, wolves were only a memory, but one could still find wild turkeys in the woods and fields. I remember cold, foggy mornings when I would go hunting for the wily birds with Bill Kenney, wearing a big, brown/drab hunting coat that had belonged to my grandfather. Today turkeys are less commonly spotted, not due to hunting but because of urbanization and the "activity of Progress" about which Mathews wrote. In a small museum in Cheyenne, Oklahoma, I remember seeing the last cougar spotted in the area, stuffed and mounted. As a child, I once saw the skeleton of Chief Black Kettle in a glass case.
At that same museum. It had recently been transferred there from the window of the local newspaper office.

In “The Man Made of Words,” his meditation on tradition, reality, and imagination, author and poet N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee) advises,

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth... He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of moon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

There are many places in my landscape of memory, but when I cast my mind back it inevitably runs to western Oklahoma, where I was born.

There is a bald knob there on the Oklahoma prairie. In the glare of a hot summer sun, horned toads and boomers scuttled across its surface of soil, gypsum, and patchy grass. On clear nights coyotes stood on its lowrise promontory and talked to the moon. Sitting on it, you could watch Oklahoma thunderstorms coming from a long way off, rolling across the open ground like the dust clouds of the thirties. I sat on that hill one spring night during such a storm. Thunder rumbled in tympanic drumrolls, punctuated by sharp crescendos. Flashes of lightening made the red dirt glow and lit up the night like bright midday. The wind whipped around my body, beating me from eight different directions. Ozorne-rich air smelled like rain.

That hill is nothing special. It is like hundreds of others throughout the state. A few hundred yards from this particular one, wavelets of Foss Reservoir lapped at its shore. Foss was created by construction of the planet grew in the 1960s, as the Army Corps of Engineers.

As awareness of the dimensions of the environmental crisis facing the planet grew in the 1970s, Indians were convenient symbols of ecological harmony. In his new edition of *God Is Red*, Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) describes the period, “Finally the ecologists arrived with predictions so chilling as to frighten the strongest heart. At the present rate of deterioration, they told us mankind could expect only a generation before the species would finally be extinguished. How had this situation come about? Some ecologists tell us that it was the old Christian idea of nature: the rejection of creation as a living ecosystem and the concept of nature as depleased, an object of exploitation and nothing more.” He states,

The collapse of the Civil Rights movement, the concern with Vietnam and the war, the escape to drugs, the rise of power movements, and the return to Mother Earth can all be understood as desperate efforts of groups of people to flee abstract articulations...
of belief and superficial values and find authenticity wherever it could be found. It was at this point that Indians became popular and the widespread and intense interest in Indians, as seen in the fantasy literature and anthologies, seemed to indicate that Americans wanted more from Indians than they did from other minority groups. For many people the stoic, heroic, and noble Indian who had lived an idyllic existence prior to contact with whites seemed to hold the key to survival and promised to provide new meaning for American life.1

The image of Indian actor Iron Eyes Cody (Cherokee) shedding a single tear for the polluted earth became emblematic. A fraudulent version preserving the land intact and holding it in escrow from the foundations to the exploitation of Natives and their land. It denies Indian This seemingly affirmative, if highly romantic, vision in reality con-
tion of the world for the colonizers who would come

Euro-Americans have always looked at Indians in some distorted funhouse mirror, gazing upon them and seeing whatever they most desire. For many worshipful Whites, Indians were the first environmentalists. For Jay McDaniel, a professor of religion at Hendrix College, they were the first American “bioregionalists.” Though counseling hearing Native objections to appropriation of their religious traditions, he nonetheless offers selected “spiritual lessons” from Native America, drawing, from among other sources, on the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog and John Fire Lame Deer. Similarly, theologian Geoffrey Lilburne notes the “arrogance and romanticism” that have colored relations between Europeans and Natives in North America, drawing, from among other sources, on the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog and John Fire Lame Deer. Similarly, theologian Geoffrey Lilburne notes the “arrogance and romanticism” that have colored relations between Europeans and Natives in North America, drawing, from among other sources, on the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog and John Fire Lame Deer. Similarly, theologian Geoffrey Lilburne notes the “arrogance and romanticism” that have colored relations between Europeans and Natives in North America, drawing, from among other sources, on the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog and John Fire Lame Deer. Similarly, theologian Geoffrey Lilburne notes the “arrogance and romanticism” that have colored relations between Europeans and Natives in North America, drawing, from among other sources, on the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog and John Fire Lame Deer.

One strain of this stereotype of Natives as “environmental perfectionists” holds that they did not use the land, existing on it as in some ecological status box and leaving no tracks or traces of their presence. This seemingly affirmative, if highly romantic, vision in reality con-tributes to the exploitation of Natives and their land. It denies Indian personhood and erases Natives from the landscape where they lived for countless generations before the advent of European invaders. Having thus “ethnically cleansed” the continent, the conquest can then be justified. Natives become nothing more than stewards of the land, preserving the land intact and holding it in escrow from the foundation of the world for the colonizers who would come later.

Not all environmentalists, however, pretend to hold American Natives in such high regard.

“Radical ecologist” George Weurthner of the environmental organization Earth First! argues that “far from having achieved spiritual traditions predicated on an understanding of natural harmony and balance, ancient American Indians were really the “first environmental pillagers.” This flat reversal of even the most elementary meanings of native tradition is then “explained” as Weurthner wanders through a self-contradictory and wildly convoluted monologue in which he saddles North American indigenous societies with everything from the extinction of the woolly mammoth to desertification of the Sonora. That he deviates from logic, known fact, and even plain common sense while making his “case” does nothing to deter his stream of bald assertions.

Similarly, Dave Foreman, the Earth First! political leader, has pronounced Native peoples “a threat to the habitat” and told ecologists and New Age adherents actively to resist their ecological motives. On a more scholarly level, William Starna terms the belief that early Natives possessed an environmental ethos “pan-Indian mythology.”

Historian Calvin Martin seems to adopt the image of the Indian as ecoterrorist, maintaining that Natives had an “underlying spiritual motive” for attempting to exterminate animals in service of the fur trade. He contends that at the time of European contact, the Cree, for example, were in a state of war with beavers and bears and that the indigenous peoples were operating under a divine injunction to kill them. He bases this thesis on the testimony of two White fur traders, David Thompson and Alexander Henry, the latter of whom was an “adopted Ojibwa.” In this primordial warfare, access to European technology tipped the balance of power in favor of the Native, and “nature, which had once rejected his supplications and frightened him, now lay prostrate at his feet.” Martin contends that millions of dead beavers give silent testimony against “any argument that native peoples generally held nature to be sacred and that most native peoples took from nature only what they needed.”

As a historian, Martin has argued that modern non-Natives must not assume that the worldview of Natives was the same as that produced by the Western Enlightenment or that Natives operated from the same motivations as their Western counterparts. Here, however, he employs that difference in frames of reference as a club with which to bludgeon the indigenous peoples. He depicts Indians as scared of the very environment in which they lived, reflecting more the Euro-american alienation from nature than Native thoughtworlds. Despite his own evidence to the contrary, he virtually ignores the dislocations caused in Native society by invasion and the fur trade before large...
scale killings of fur-bearing animals occurred. Inadvertently or by design, he absolves non-Natives of culpability in these dislocations when he points at the pre-existing spiritual warfare between humans and animals. In fact, many tribal traditions preserve stories of such antipathy. The Cherokee, for instance, tell of a council of animals in which animals, fearing overpopulation by humans, invent disease; plants, however, overhearing the animal plot, devise medicines to counteract the various contagions. Martin’s own data illustrate the fact that, beyond economic dislocations creating incentives to participate in the trade, Native destruction of animal populations was a means for them to come to terms with epizootics and their potential impact upon humans. Martin points to the romanticized stereotype of eco-harmonic Lakes Natives. Discussing the gift, he points at the pre-existing spiritual warfare between humans and animals. In fact, many tribal traditions preserve stories of such antipathy. The Cherokee, for instance, tell of a council of animals in which animals, fearing overpopulation by humans, invent disease; plants, however, overhearing the animal plot, devise medicines to counteract the various contagions. Martin’s own data illustrate the fact that, beyond economic dislocations creating incentives to participate in the trade, Native destruction of animal populations was a means for them to come to terms with epizootics and their potential impact upon humans.

Martin points to the romanticized stereotype of eco-harmonic Natives manufactured by the environmental movement and concludes that modern society has little, if anything, to learn from indigenous cultures. He writes,

Even if we absolve him of his ambiguous culpability in certain episodes of despoliation, invoking instead his pristine sentiments toward Nature, the Indian still remains a misfit guru. Even if he were capable of leading us, we could never follow him. The Indian’s was a profoundly different cosmic vision when it came to interpreting Nature—a vision Western man could never adjust to. There can therefore be no salvation in the Indian’s traditional conception of Nature for the troubled environmentalist. Someday, perhaps, he will realize that he must look to someone other than the American Indian for realistic spiritual inspiration.

In contrast to Martin, Dennis McPherson (Anishinaabe) and J. Douglas Rabb point to just such an environmental ethic among the Great Lakes Natives. Discussing McPherson’s own Ojibway people, they note that hunters offer gifts to the creatures they hunt in a complex and reciprocal system of barter in which the animal (considered an “other-than-human person”) gives its life to sustain humans in exchange for the gift. Not to offer gifts in exchange would be to bring shame on the hunter. They write,

It is not only the case that members of the [tribe] would bring shame upon themselves if they stood by and did nothing while the habitat of those other-than-human persons with whom they exchange gifts is threatened or destroyed! After all, it is through the exchange of gifts that one maintains one’s membership in Ojibway society. Are not these other-than-human persons with whom they exchange gifts members of that society and entitled to the same respect and help accorded to any other member of the community? There is, we suggest, a moral obligation to pro-

spect the habitat of the moose, the beaver, the muskrat, and the lynx; the habitat of geese, ducks, grouse and hare, not just because members of the [tribe] wish to continue hunting and trapping, but because these other-than-human persons are also members of Ojibway society.

They note that similar attitudes are found in most Native cultures, and I believe the studies in this volume bear them out.

In reality, modern Natives and their ancestors are neither saints nor sinners in environmental matters. They are human beings. The Americans were no Edenic paradise. “People sometimes went hungry . . . ; wars were fought, and people died in them. Occasionally, a native civilization overcrowded its environment and collapsed.” Grinde and Johansen state, “Occasionally, in pre-Columbian times, native urban areas taxed the local environment (e.g., by overgrazing and raising the forests). Like all societies, those in pre-Columbian America faced the question of how to utilize land for purposes of survival. Indians manipulated the environment to improve their material lives.”

The general consensus today, however, is that, given pre-contact population numbers, Native peoples could have wrought much more environmental damage than was the case. Again according to Grinde and Johansen, “While mistakes were made, the fact that Europeans found the Western Hemisphere to be a natural treasure house indicates that misuse of the environment was not frequent or sustained over long periods of time.” Likewise, some contemporary Indians have demonstrated themselves capable of making devastating choices for the environment. Others try to live a life that is in harmony and balance with the natural order. Their task is complicated, however, by powerful systemic forces arrayed against such ethical choices.

For Natives, living within the bounds dictated by creation and the environment was not a product of some abstract ecological ideal. Rather, it was necessitated by the need to understand and adapt to the diverse environments in which they found themselves in order to survive. As Marcos Terena (Terena) puts it, “Indigenous man has been able to decipher the greatness of nature and set down a code of life ‘civilized’ man could never understand, whether in its materialistic or spiritual aspects.” In traditional Native education, the environment was the textbook and animals the teachers. The seasons became the calendar. The people’s needs were the clock they worked by, and their senses and imaginations were their tools of survival. Natives therefore learned to practice reciprocity and nature of gifts that one maintains one’s membership in order to ensure ample resources for themselves and their progeny. They learned to distribute their populations over areas of sizes and types to sustain them. They learned not to ask for or take more than could be used, else misfortune occur. Among the Natassinan Inna, for example,
traditional religion is based on a belief in animal masters. When they
hunt, the Natassauan must show respect for these masters. They place
the bones of caribou, bear, marten, mink, and other creatures on tree
platforms so dogs cannot get them. They do not overhunt or overtrap
areas where animals are scarce. If they do not show respect in this way,
young and old and practicing and non-practicing within the community
must show respect. For them, the master of a given animal is the
master of that animal for all of its life, even if, in modern contexts, it
is too often sentimentalized and
versimplified.41

As Rollins alludes, this way of life led to an understanding of nature
as an organic entity. The environment in which traditional Natives live
is impassive and dispassionate, but it is also alive and nurturing. Many
times, in widely diverse parts of the Americas, this personified world
was envisioned as female. A pre-Columbian Mixtec codex from cen-
tral Mexico, for example, shows humanity emerging from the earth
depicted as a womb.42 Isidore Kochon, a Dene from Western Canada,
states, “The land fed us all even before the white people ever came to
the North. To us she is just like a mother that brought up her chil-
dren.”43 Among the Quechua of Peru, the world is revered as Pacha
Mama, Mother Earth.44 Such examples could be reproduced from nu-
erous tribes in various periods of history.

Recently some scholars have disputed the antiquity and authenticity
of this concept, central to many Indian peoples and to this volume, of
Mother Earth. Sam Gill, in Mother Earth: An American Story, argues that
the concept is largely invented, the product of scholars and other ob-servers and of Native interaction with Europeans. He writes, “While I
have been able to find a number of tribal traditions that make references
to the earth in personal and kinship terms, there is an absence in the vast
literature on North American tribes of any identification of the earth or
the spiritual personification of the earth as a major goddess. Not until the
twentieth century and then for the most part not until mid-century is
there any extent of clear reference to Mother Earth made by native
people.45 He goes on to state, “It seems that Mother Earth as a major
goddess of the Indians of North America is a reality, but that she has
become so only during the twentieth century.”46 For Gill, “Mother Earth
is a central figure in that long saga in which Americans of European
ancestry have attempted to define and create themselves as Americans.”
She is also mother to Indians, but “she has become so only recently and
then not without influence from Americans, with their thirst for land
and their need to define themselves in terms of likeness and contrast
with those they imagined to be the ‘Indians.’”47

In contemporary Indian thought, especially in North America,
some voices are skeptical of this mute, passive earth mother, cre-
avative in only the physical sense. At the same time there persists
an age-old awareness of the idea’s political—and moral—value in
the continuing struggle for ownership of the American land. In
other words, the image of mother earth is useful and deep-seated,
even if, in modern contexts, it is too often sentimentalized and
oversimplified.48

For Bierhorst, then, Mother Earth is little more than a political expedi-
ency.

We are a people who live in community closely to one another.
Our way of life centers around a brotherhood that is permanent—
deeply observed and deeply offended. . . The Indian way is to
live with nature, not against it. It is important to maintain a com-
patible and working relationship with all living things. Whatever
one holds sacred is to be respected. . . A sense of group respon-
sibility is evident especially in our upbringing and discipline. For
instance, a household without a father image is given one by an-
other member of the community who may or may not be related.
As the fruits of the womb are shared within the community so
are the fruits of our Mother, the Earth. Each and all must be
cared for. In the past we were taught our responsibility for this,
and today we must continue on if we are to survive and be liber-
ated as a people . . . It is our responsibility to provide for the
good for all the community and to have respect and reverence for
all of creation.49

For Bierhorst, the world is not a place of separation but a
place of connection.49
To be sure, not every Native culture in the tremendous diversity of the Americas conceives, or conceived, of the earth in feminine terms, as Bierhorst demonstrates. Likewise, it is undoubtedly correct that the ideas of Mother Earth has been interpreted and reinterpreted so that it is difficult, in many cases, to retrieve its original indigenous significance. Increasing pan-Indian discourse has both spread the concept and broadened its meaning. Scholars such as Gill and Bierhorst, however, diminish its importance for Indian peoples when they ignore evidence that the fundamental notion is both ancient and widespread. Deloria has traced references as far back as 1776, when Cornstalk (Shawnee) attempted to persuade the Iroquois to ally with the colonists during the Revolutionary War by arguing, “For this Big [Turtle] Island being our common Mother, we and they are like one Flesh and Blood.” And Grinde and Johansen discuss a seventeenth century reference attributed to Massasoit, the Wampanoag chief who befriended the Pilgrims: “What is this you call property? It cannot be the earth. For the land is our mother, nourishing all her children, beasts, birds, fish, and all men. The woods, the streams, everything on it belongs to everybody and is for the use of all. How can one man say it belongs only to him?” Both references are well before the 1805 statement of Tekembi (“The earth is my mother—and on her bosom I will repose”)—the earliest statement cited by Gill and one of the first generally pointed to in discussions of the concept of Mother Earth—and probably too early to have been corrupted in the manner Gill delineates.

The Americas’ indigenous nations are possessed of an incredibly rich diversity of histories, spiritual traditions, and cosmologies. Despite a view in the dominant culture that tends to homogenize all Natives, there is no such thing as a monolithic Native American experience. At the time of contact, there were probably around two thousand different tribes inhabiting the North American continent. Today there are approximately six hundred. No single ethnicity can encompass the four hundred different ethnicities, eight major language groups, and three distinct racial strains usually lumped together under the collective label “Native American” or “American Indian.” This multiplicity of peoples developed distinctly different understandings of the Creator, the creation of the world, and its destiny.

The Cherokee revere a supreme being and creator called Yowa, a deity whose name was so sacred that originally it could be spoken aloud only by certain priests. Yowa is a unity of the cho ta ash nt le eh, the three Elder Fires Above, but these, in turn, are always and forever synonymous in thought and action. They are merely aspects of a single mind, manifesting itself in multiple forms. Through the fires, Yowa undergirds and permeates all creation with his will, love, and intelligence. The process is not static but dynamic. Creation is viewed as ongoing throughout all life.

Navajo artist Carl Gorman describes his people’s view of ultimate deity:

It has been said by some researchers into Navajo religion, that we have no Supreme God, because He is not named. That is not so. The Supreme Being is not named because he is unknowable. He is simply the Unknown Power. We worship him through His Creation. We feel too insignificant to approach directly in prayer that Great Power that is incomprehensible to man. Nature feeds our soul’s inspiration and so we approach Him through that part of Him which is close to us and within the reach of human understanding. We believe that this great unknown power is everywhere in His creation. The various forms of creation have some of this spirit within them. . . . As every form has some of the intelligent spirit of the Creator, we cannot but reverence all parts of the creation.

The Maya understand that time and space are primogenital gods. Nature is the superior force from which emanates that power that gives direction to life and all beings. All nature is animate and alive, and earth and water are superior to all other elements of nature because they are the origins of life. Every animal, river, and stone has its own natural or “divine personification.”

Among the Siouxs, Wakan-Tanka is both supreme being and the totality of forces in creation. It is everything and yet above everything. It has the power to create and the power to destroy. It is this that makes it great and sacred. Wakan-Tanka is often translated into English as Great Mystery, but is better, though still inadequately, rendered Great Mysterious. Norma Kassi, of the Gwich’in people of the Dene Nation, discusses the Great Energy in similar terms:

We have a powerful sense of interrelatedness from the Creator that we always pray to. We pray to Mother Earth, we pray to the mountains. We pray to the Moon as our Grandmother, and to the Sun as our Grandfather. We pray to all the waters that feed us and nourish us all the time. That’s what we pray for. Those are the greatest creators. The energy they all give off makes up the ultimate Great Energy. There is no man attached to it, nor is there a woman—though perhaps it is more closely a woman. Those are the energies that we give to each other, that we pray to, that we give thanks to. Energy directed to each other has the power to make things happen. While there are commonalities among these descriptions of ultimate reality, traditional Native religions and their accompanying worldviews
are actually quite varied. Religious of different tribal groups are often as different from one another as Christianity is from Buddhism. These differing understandings of the Creator inevitably reflect themselves in differing accounts of creation itself. Such understandings are also very different from the Jewish and Christian accounts contained in the Bible.

In the Cherokee creation myth, for instance, there is no concept of a creation ex nihilo. There is no interest shown in the creation of the cosmos. The materials of creation are already present.6 Similarly, in the story of Corn Mother, the most important Cherokee aetiological myth, corn springs from the fecundity of her own body.6 The world and “all living things” are both preexistent. In the earth origin story, even the mud with which Water Bug creates the land mass is already present, under the water, waiting only to be brought to the surface. Rather than a grand tale of cosmic creation, as in Genesis, it is a story of the fashioning of the land. As for Augustine, there is no questioning what existed before creation, and there is no asking what the Creator was doing before creating occurred. In one account of the myth, the storyteller professes ignorance as to who made the first animals and plants, though they are certainly under the care of Yowa. Further, although ostensibly an account of the making of all the earth’s lands, it is in actuality a story of the making of Old Cherokee Country in what is now the American Southeast. After the land is created, the animals above in Gakus-lati are anxious to get down to earth and send Buzzard to survey it. Though he flies over all the earth, the story focuses on his weariness when he reaches the future home of the Cherokee. As he tires and flies closer to the earth, his wingbeats carve out the Smoky Mountains.65

The Cherokee, like other Native peoples, are spatially rather than temporally oriented. Their culture, spirituality, and identity are connected to the land—and not just land in a general sense but their land. The act of creation is not so much what happened then as it is what happened here.6 Thus, when Indian tribes were forcibly removed from their homes, they were robbed of more than land. Taken from them was a numinous landscape where every mountain and lake held meaning. For example, the Cherokee word eli, sometimes translated “religion,” also means, at exactly the same time, history, culture, law— and land.65 Because of these intimate interrelationships, relocation was an assault upon Native culture, identity, and personhood. Ray Somfere (Dene) summarized these connections when he said, “I need and love the land I was born and raised on. Many people find meaning in different things in life. Native people find meaning in the land and they need it and they love it.”66 Salvador Palomino (Quechua) puts it somewhat differently: “The Earth, our Mother Earth, has always been part of our collective. We belong to her, she does not belong to us. Land and community are the souls of our peoples.”67

This spatial aspect of Native worldviews must not be underestimated. Mircea Eliade points out that what he calls “primitive man” sees himself as related to the cosmos and to the land, whereas “modern,” Western humanity sees itself connected only to history.68 This difference is closely related to “fall/redemption” theology. Both American Joseph Epes Brown and Brazilian Leonardo Boff observe that Western and Christian attitudes towards creation, a failure of human vocation that has affected all human beings and their cosmic environment.69 Vine Deloria also notes the role of “the Christian idea of a complete alienation of nature and the world from human beings as a result of Adam’s immediate postcreation act in determining the Western and Christian attitude toward nature.”70 In contrast to the view of dominant streams in Jewish and Christian thought, for Natives, creation never “fell” and so is in no need of redemption. Given the grimness bred by Western thinking against both humans and the environment, it may be that the true nature of the fall of humanity is to be condemned to live only in history. Deloria highlights this dichotomy between Native religions and Christianity in their views on creation, stating,

Both religions can be said to agree on the role and activity of a creator. Outside of that specific thing, there would appear to be little that the two views share. Tribal religions appear to be there—after confronted with the question of the interrelationship of all things. Christians see creation as the beginning event of a linear time sequence in which the divine plan is worked out, the conclusion of the sequence being an act of destruction bringing the world to an end.71

This is not to imply that there is no temporal element in Native cultures and spirituality. All tribes preserve stories of their histories. Many tribes maintain elaborate “winter counts,” recording and naming the years after the most significant events occurring in them. It is merely to say, as George Tinker (Osage/Cherokee) points out, that the temporal is subordinate to the spatial. Further, time is most often not linear but cyclical, mirroring the rhythm of the seasons and reinforcing “one’s individual and collective connectedness to the immediate environment.”72
Many tribal traditions possess a strain of eschatology in the form of end-time myths and prophecies. In keeping with the cyclical nature of time, however, in such myths and predictions, eschaton is usually not an ἀποκάλυψις, a cataclysmic end to creation. Rather, it is most often, though again not universally, an event leading to metamorphosis, the periodic renewal of the world. Eschaton is therefore the mirror image of creation. Beginning and end are homologues with “eschatology, at least in certain aspects, becoming one with cosmogony.” Cosmology triumphs over chronology.

Since contact, many of these myths have become, to use William McLoughlin’s term, “fractured,” reflecting contact with Christianity and the pressures exerted upon Native communities by invasion and colonization. Prophecies of impending disaster have taken on more urgency and, as the ecological crisis has intensified, often have a distinctly environmental element. Aka Primeaux, Sr. (Yankton Sioux), a traditional pipecarrier and a peyote singer, points to the continued use of the earth in a non-sacred way and says, “Getting everything out of the earth, the gas and the oil, is making the world hollow, off-balance. One of these days the gases will be ignited and they will blow up the world.”

Besides the Lakota/Dakota, tribes as diverse as the Dene, Winu, Chiricahua Apache, Hopi, and Zuñi have prophecies of catastrophic collapse linked to environmental devastation. The Nisqually Sound link destruction to overpopulation, followed by consumption of all fish and game and resulting in cannibalism. As Grinde and Johannsen write, “The environment is a mirror that reflects cultural values.” Many Natives concerned, as Deloria points out, with the interrelatedness of all things view the created order and see in the fact that humanity is last in the economy of creation that humans are the youngest. The earth and all the rest of creation are thus elders who care for humanity, from whom it can learn, and whom it must respect. In linear, temporally oriented Christianity, humanity’s place in the creative chain is considered proof that humans are called to dominate and subdue all that came before them. The biblical injunction of Genesis 1:28 is for human beings to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

This dominion theology has been at work in the Americas from the onset of colonization. In 1782 French settler J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in his highly influential Letters from an American Farmer, though he lamented the depredation and disappearance of Indians, nonetheless spoke of the “improvements” and “superior genius” of the Europeans and the “new man” being born as colonists tilled the rich soil of North America. In like fashion, in 1797 settler Eliphalet Stark wrote to a relative, “The Yankees have taken care of the wolves, bears and Indians ... and we’ll build the Lord’s temple yet, build it out of these great trees.” According to Grinde and Johannsen, “By the late twentieth century humankind had fulfilled the injunction of the first chapter of Genesis so effectively that it was beginning to drown in its own effluvia.” This ideology of dominion has been particularly troubling to Natives. Jackie Warledo (Seminole) states, “We have to deal with the notion that people have dominion over life and creation. This dominion mentality is what many people believe gives them the right to look at the environment as inferior.” Salvador Palomino also decries dominion theology, writing, “For us, it seems unthinkable that man—who as the ‘beloved offspring,’ the ‘son of God,’ is also divine—should be superior to other living beings and do as he pleases with the Earth, regarding Mother Nature as an object of consumption, to be conquered, appropriated, pointed to the point of destruction just to satisfy whims and not needs.” He states that this violation of the “mutual relationship” between humanity and the cosmos is what makes the environmental crisis “a social and historical crisis” for Native peoples. It becomes an issue of environmental justice because, “any violation of [creation’s] laws and physical integrity is also an act of violence against our societies and our people themselves.”

In seeking a new, non-hierarchical paradigm for Christianity, Boff writes, “Above all, we should seek another title for the joy of God’s love, as the dance of God’s love, as the mirror of both God and all created things. In this sense every creature is a messenger of God, and God’s representative as well as sacrament. Everyone is worthy to be accepted and listened to as such. He goes on to state that in this vision “the human being is not to be found at the top but behind and at the end of creation. The human being is the last to appear and is found behind, as it were, the front lines. The world is not a product of human desire or human creativity. Humanity did not see the beginning. Being antecedent to humankind, the world does not belong to humanity. It belongs to God, its creator.” Although there is much in such a description that Native peoples could affirm, it nevertheless falls short. It reserves for humanity a “special place.” The world is, according to Boff, “assigned to humanity to till and to keep.” While it seeks to create for humankind an ethical responsibility, it nonetheless contains seeds of the very dominion thinking it seeks to overthrow.

At first glance, the title of this volume, Defending Mother Earth, would seem to be so much eco-babble or envirotibberish. Who are humans to think that they can overthrow the Earth, regarding Mother Nature as an object of consumption, to be conquered, suppressed, transformed, violated, poisoned to death. Grinde and Johannsen write, “By the late twentieth century, humankind had fulfilled the injunction of the first chapter of Genesis so effectively that it was beginning to drown in its own effluvia.” This ideology of dominion has been particularly troubling to Natives. Jackie Warledo (Seminole) states, “We have to deal with the notion that people have dominion over life and creation. This dominion mentality is what many people believe gives them the right to look at the environment as inferior.” Salvador Palomino also decries dominion theology, writing, “For us, it seems unthinkable that man—who as the ‘beloved offspring,’ the ‘son of God,’ is also divine—should be superior to other living beings and do as he pleases with the Earth, regarding Mother Nature as an object of consumption, to be conquered, suppressed, transformed, pointed to the point of destruction just to satisfy whims and not needs.” He states that this violation of the “mutual relationship” between humanity and the cosmos is what makes the environmental crisis “a social and historical crisis” for Native peoples. It becomes an issue of environmental justice because, “any violation of [creation’s] laws and physical integrity is also an act of violence against our societies and our people themselves.” In seeking a new, non-hierarchical paradigm for Christianity, Boff writes, “Above all, we should seek another title for the joy of God’s love, as the dance of God’s love, as the mirror of both God and all created things. In this sense every creature is a messenger of God, and God’s representative as well as sacrament. Everyone is worthy to be accepted and listened to as such.” He goes on to state that in this vision “the human being is not to be found at the top but behind and at the end of creation. The human being is the last to appear and is found behind, as it were, the front lines. The world is not a product of human desire or human creativity. Humanity did not see the beginning. Being antecedent to humankind, the world does not belong to humanity. It belongs to God, its creator.” Although there is much in such a description that Native peoples could affirm, it nevertheless falls short. It reserves for humanity a “special place.” The world is, according to Boff, “assigned to humanity to till and to keep.” While it seeks to create for humankind an ethical responsibility, it nonetheless contains seeds of the very dominion thinking it seeks to overthrow.
Numerous Native leaders and activists, including Oren Lyons (Onondaga), Roland Crowe of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, and Marcos Terena of Brazil, as well as official tribal statements have used the language of “guardian” for the relationship to Mother Earth. In an article in Native Journal, a Native newspaper published in Alberta, Robert Gibson writes, “Guardians are required to help nature overcome the interferences and influences brought about by the industrial age and technological changes. Caretakers of the wilds must help people and nature learn to co-exist. Native peoples must be very careful in the use of guardianship language, smacking as it does of the guardian/ward relationship that has for so long oppressed Native peoples. Does Mother Earth really need a guardian? Does not that once again put humanity in the same superior position as Christian dominion theology? The terminology of defense and protection is perhaps more apt. Roland Crowe has used such language also. Similarly, Marcos Terena writes, “We don’t want the march of progress and ambition to inflict further wounds. On the contrary, we want to find new allies, allies for the survival of our planet.”

Indians long to defend Mother Earth, not because they are superior to her, but because it is the human species of which they are a part that is threatening her. Such a struggle has both practical and spiritual dimensions. Denise and John Carmody note, “To ‘care’ for the land has at least two connotations. A traditional Native American provides for the land, tries to ensure its prosperity, avoids what we might call ‘unecological’ activities that seem to hurt nature. But he or she also has a tender regard for the land. The land lies on the people’s heart, is a constant concern, like a much-loved child or parent, even like a lover, distant yet near, a source of joy and also a source of worry.”

As Dale Ann Frye Sherman (Yurok/Karok/Tolowa/Hupa) says, “We are of this continent. We were not created elsewhere. We were created here. Our memories are here, and the blood of our ancestors is here. We are made of this continent.”

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In seeking to liberate the land, Natives seek not to liberate a place to build their homes but to liberate their homelands.

No one can doubt any longer that the environment of the planet is indeed imperiled. The world has already lost 20 percent of its rainforests, 20 percent of its topsoil from croplands, and tens of thousands of plant and animal species through extinction. The earth has a remarkable capacity to heal itself of the damage and diseases humanity visits upon it. Yet by its constant barrage, humanity is turning Mother Earth into the ecological equivalent of an AIDS victim—a crude and offensive image for what is a crude and offensive problem. Leonardo Boff states, “Humankind does not have absolute power over God’s work to the point of doing it absolute and essential harm, but it can injure it seriously.”

This, however, is a serious misreading of the Noachic covenant, contained in Genesis 9:8–17, pursuant to which Yahweh promised never again to destroy the world by flood. Human beings may not have ultimate power to destroy the terrestrial ball of the earth itself, but they can clearly destroy themselves, take uncounted species with them, and render much of the planet lifeless in the process.

The ecologists cited by Vine Deloria in God Is Red may have been alarmist and ultimately wrong in their dire predictions, but evidence demonstrates that the assault on Native lands and their environment is at a crucial point. The year 2030 has been cited as a pivotal turnaround year. Grinde and Johansen have warned that the current generation may be the last “to see tribal peoples living as they choose in a natural habitat.”

Already the “last enclaves of ecologically independent Native America, notably in the Arctic... and the Amazon” are being threatened. Felix Cohen said that Indians were the miner’s canaries of American society; the multiple ills that are visited upon them are only a prelude and a harbinger of what is to be expected for society as a whole.

At the North American Native Workshop on Environmental Justice, Duane Good Striker (Blood) shared a story passed on to him by his uncle, Rufus Good Striker, about their family. His uncle told him that someday he would use the story, and that he would know when he was meant to do so. This was the time. He said:

Right at the time of Contact, there was a relative in our family named Sees-From-Afar. He and his uncle were out on a warparty against a neighboring tribe. They attacked the enemy camp, and, as the uncle attacked one of the warriors, the warrior dropped his weapon. The nephew grabbed the weapon and claimed it. The uncle protested and grabbed the club from him, but the others in the party said that Sees-From-Afar had taken the weapon off the ground and therefore it was his. It was true, they said, that the uncle had knocked the warrior down, but nevertheless the weapon belonged to the nephew.

The uncle was very angry about losing his trophy and put a curse on Sees-From-Afar that never again would he get another war trophy as good. When they returned to their home, the uncle and nephew went their separate ways and were no longer close. Sees-From-Afar went down to the Yellowstone Country in Wyoming.

On his travels, he learned from the animal spirit helpers. He learned their medicine. Finally, he talked to the sandpiper, a small bird with a long beak. He learned their medicine. Then he set out for home.

About this same time, his uncle went on another warparty and got shot. He made it back to camp but was mortally wounded.
His situation was getting worse, and the medicine people couldn't get the bullet out. Just then, Sees-From-Afar returned home. His uncle knew that he possessed strong medicine and told the young man's grandmother to get him.

The old woman pleaded for him to come doctor his uncle, but Sees-From-Afar was still mad and refused to go. She went back and gave the news. The uncle then knew that he was going to die. So he started calling to him across the camp so that the whole camp could hear him. If he had to use his dying breath, at least his nephew would hear him, too.

Finally, Sees-From-Afar heard him, and his heart softened. He went over to his uncle's lodge. He told him, "I'm going to help you but only to show the people that forgiveness and compassion are stronger than all the hate I feel toward you." So he told the old woman that the sparrowhawk flags all the way around so that the people could see.

He pulled out the medicine bag that he had acquired in the Yellowstone. In it were the dried skins of two sandpipers. He pulled the uncle into a sitting position and put the two sandpipers beside him. Then he began to sing. The sandpipers' heads came up, and they began to dance.

Sees-From-Afar kept singing, and the birds got up and flew. They flew around the teepee four times. Then they landed on the uncle. Going to the beat of the song, they used their long beaks and took out the bullet. They flew around four more times and then lay back down. The nephew sang the song once more to thank the sandpipers for helping his uncle. The uncle lived, and nephew and uncle forgave each other.

Good Striker suggests that the moral of the story is that perhaps Natives do not have to hear technological society crying and Native land rights. In any effort to defend Indian lands, according to David Grant, director of the Pacific Institute of Native American Programs, "We have already learned that waiting for someone else to take positive action...is a lesson in frustration. If things are to change in line with our expectations, then the answers must ultimately come from ourselves." In Maine, the impulse to prevent the destruction of an ancient forest was heard for the first time by a Mayan who couldn't wait for the government to take action.

In place of these schemes of common use, Europeans sought to impose upon the earth their own concepts of ownership. In the United States and Canada this has generally meant British notions. Europeans reasoned that because Native tribes did not, for the most part, practice private property they therefore had no concept of ownership. Legal fictions were created which held that Natives had no title to the land but only a right to use it. Their claims to specific territory were thus inferior and subject to those of the colonizers. These conceptions were written into laws, codified by Chancellor James Kent in his highly influential Commentaries on American Law, and recognized by courts.

Ideas like communal use, gathering, and hunting were replaced by foreign words like "buy," "sell," "cede," and "poach." When Natives did not understand or recognize these new beliefs and still sought to enter and use their traditional lands, they were punished and yet another term, "Indian giver," was born. What was once Mother Earth was now mere property.
Perez Olindo, a senior conservationist in Kenya, has noted that a word largely absent in the colonial lexicon in dealing with indigenous peoples around the globe has been "tenure."11 Tenure is the right to hold, occupy, and use a specific thing or piece of land.12 It "is a complicated and variable concept, implying arrangements more subtle than mere ownership. Tenure doesn't define relationships between people and resources so much as it defines relationships between people and other people. It specifies who may use, who may inhabit, who may harvest, who may inherit, who may collect, who may hunt, under what circumstances and to what extent; it also specifies, implicitly, who may not."13 It is different from the concept of usufruct and the mere "right of occupancy" recognized for Natives by Western legal systems.14 It is often contrary to normal Western conceptions of ownership.15 It is the accepted "understanding of user-rights, interests and limits."

All Native cultures have systems of tenure, "derived from direct experience at using, maintaining and apportioning particular resources."16 Such systems are intimately connected to a complex web of culture and spiritual practices, "and like any aspect of culture, they're constantly evolving."17 The concept of tenure could be a powerful tool in Native claims for sovereignty and environmental justice, being, as it is, "central to the issue of who can and should conserve what resources for whom."18 It is also an essential ingredient of those claims. As has been noted, "Without secure tenure . . . communities have no standing in the decision-making process that determines use or protection . . . Without secure tenure . . . communities can only afford to consider their own short-term interests. They are compelled to exploit resources for maximum immediate gain, regardless of future consequences for themselves, or for the resource base or for biological diversity."19 For example, Cindy Kenny-Gilday (Dene), an advisor to the government of the Northwest Territories and a founder of Indigenous Survival International, asks why her own people should "maintain their own traditional strictures on salmon-harvesting along the Mackenzie River, conserving that resource for their posterity, if a new pulp mill has already begun poisoning the waters upstream?"20

Though land is the central focus of sovereignty and tenure, they also encompass fish, water, air, minerals, timber, game, plant life, and other resources.21 Who, for example, has the right to use "intellectual property" derived from the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples?22 Who holds the user-rights over the wet breath of the Amazon forest, exhaling oxygen and moisture back into the sky above central Brazil?23 As has been noted, such questions are intricately consequential. Perez Olindo states, "Use is a necessary ingredient to the protection of biodiversity. If you outlaw use, it will be a recipe for the most rapid depletion, degradation, extinction. And the systematic understanding that legitimizes and limits use is what's called tenure."24 According to Winona LaDuke (Anishinabe),

What does this mean? Well, it starts with advocating that Indians regain jurisdiction over what the treaties define as being their land. . . . This, in turn, means that those Indian governments which would traditionally hold regulatory and enforcement power within these territories should have the right to do so right now. It means that land which is currently taxed, regulated, strip-mined, militarized, drowned by hydroelectric generation over over-irrigation, and nuked by (or with the blessing of) the U.S. and Canadian governments would not be under their control or jurisdiction any more.25

With secure tenure, and the sovereignty it implies, people will be able to take a longer-term view toward the environment. We will be able to see sustainable development as more than sustainable exploitation, the destruction of Native homes as more than mere profits, land as more than simple property.26

Carole and Jon Belhumeur (Métis) write, "Our human connection to our Mother Earth is plain to see. Her sea water is much like our own blood. Her energy meridians are like those in our own bodies. Her soil, our flesh; her stone, our bones. Hydrogen, sodium, oxygen, magnesium, carbon, and so on, all in Mother Earth, all in us. . . . Are we killing the Earth, are we not committing global suicide as well?"27 In connecting the demand for environmental justice with traditional knowledge, tenure, and sovereignty, Natives are not looking backward to some supposed pre-Columbian idyll. They do not want to remain static. They do not want to stop the clock of time.28

There is a story that recently has been making the rounds in Indian Country, undergoing local variations as it goes. It involves the trickster figure of the particular people telling it. Though it is of modern origin, it has similarities to much older stories told in various cultures about Trickster. A version, involving Tseg'gin', one of the Cherokee tricksters, goes simply, "Tseg'gin' tried to make love to Death. And he died. That's all."29 In the embrace of Western thought, of Western technologically society, of so much that has brought us to where we are, are we not perhaps locked in an embrace with Death as well? As Georges Erazmus, a president of the Dene Nation, says, "Our old people, when they talk about how the [traditional] ways should be kept by young people, they are not looking back, they are looking forward. They are looking as far ahead into the future as they possibly can."30

Allen Badger (Cree) writes:
The focus... is justice. The word itself makes us think of the judicial system, prisons, and police officers. It is much more. Being fair and just must be all-encompassing. Mother Earth must be treated fairly and with respect, just as we expect to be treated. She unbiassedly provides for and loves all her children, even those that abuse her. Many of her children poison her, strip her barren and act like it is they that give her life. Many are the atrocities heaped upon our mother with just as many excuses for doing so. She continues to be patient. She still provides shelter without renting. She provides our clothes and food. When you are bored and see no meaning to life, she whispers, “Come and sit on my lap and I will show you some of the most breathtaking wonders and mysteries ever created by our Father from the most minuscule to the majestic.”

What does justice mean when we abuse not only one another but Mother Earth as well? That is the question of environmental justice. The case studies that follow pose that question in ways that cannot be ignored.

**Notes**


2. Famous Cheyenne peace chief killed by George Custer and his 7th Cavalry at the Washita Massacre in 1868.


5. Donald A. Grinde, Jr., and Bruce E. Johansen, Essentie of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1995), p. 3.


26. Martin, Keepers, pp. 131-141.
27. Ibid., pp. 185-188.
30. Grinde and Johansen, p. 11.
32. Grinde and Johansen, pp. 11-12.
37. Dene Nation, p. 93.
42. Dene Nation, p. 4.
44. Sam D. Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 120. Emphasis mine. Even among many of the Native nations that refer to and revere Mother Earth, there is no indication that she is a "goddess."
45. Ibid., p. 130.
46. Ibid., pp. 155-157.
48. Ibid., pp. 200.

52. Gill, p. 8; see also, Bill Gilbert, *God Gave Us This Country: Tekamthi and the First American Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 237. Gilbert gives a complete account of the life of Tekamthi (also known as Tecumseh). Cf., Grinde and Johansen, p. 31, for another version of a quotation by Tekamthi concerning Mother Earth.
53. Gill attributes much of the corruption to the twentieth century to the effects of scholars and American Indian activists.
56. Ibid. The names of the three fires are U-ha-be-ta-qua, A-ta-no-ti, and In-un-ne-ha-la.
58. Chay, p. 20. In citing this example, I do not mean to deny or detract from other Native cultures that consider nature animate.
61. Mooney, pp. 239-240. Once again, it needs to be pointed out that this is not universally true among Native traditions. The Cherokee are of the Iroquian language group. Their creation account is similar to that of the Iroquois. For an account of the genesis of the universe from the Mbya of Paraguay, see, Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1993), p. 204.
63. Mooney, p. 239. Cf., Dene Nation, p. 10. In the Dene creation myth, the servants of the Creator shape the earth's surface by spreading "something resembling the hide of a large moose" over the earth and lifting it. They repeated the process six times.
64. Deloria, *God Is Red*, p. 78. With regard to this Native connection to the land, Tandy Wilbur, Sr. (Winominish) notes that even urban Indians, separated from their tribes, sometimes say of traditional homelands, "This is the place where my ancestors communed with the spiritual world. I have a relationship to it even though I DO NOT LIVE THERE." (Rollins, p. 204, caps. original).
66. Dene Nation, p. 121.
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