

Whose North America is it? “Nobody owns it. It owns itself.”¹

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***Abstract:** Responding to the question, “Whose North America is it?,” this essay argues North America does not belong to anyone. As a Sonoran Desert Tohono O’odham said of the mountain: “Nobody owns it. It owns itself.” Contrasting Native American and Euro-American views of the natural world, the essay maintains that European immigrants introduced the startling concept of Cartesian duality. Accepting a division between spiritual and material, they viewed the natural world as physical matter, devoid of spirituality. North America’s First People saw it differently: they perceived the Earth/Universe as a spiritual community of reciprocal relationships bound by intricate ties of kinship and respect. This clash has shaped American history. From the sixteenth century forward, many European immigrants envisioned land ownership as a dream. Creators of the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution thrust “happiness”/“property” into the nation’s mythology. Southern Euro-Americans claimed “ownership” of African Americans, defining them as “property”; Native Americans resisted Euro-Americans’ enforcement of land ownership ideology; by the late 1800s, Euro-Americans’ view of the natural world as physical matter spurred massive extraction of natural resources. The Cartesian duality persisted, but, given its dubious legacy, Native Americans question the wisdom of this interpretation of the natural world.*

***Keywords:** property, Cartesian duality, natural world, Native Americans, spirituality*

A Mandan Hidatsa was telling a story about his People. “In the late nineteenth century, the government wanted my People to move to Indian Territory. Some of the Elders decided to go down there and take a look. They came back and what they said was: ‘We saw the rivers and none of their

1 Camillus Lopez, “Tohono O’odham Culture. Embracing Traditional Wisdom,” in *Thinking Like a Watershed*, eds., Jack Loeffler and Celestia Loeffler (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 138.

names had any meaning for us. We didn't know any of the birds; they weren't our birds. To us it was a foreign country.' The Elders told the government they couldn't live there in that foreign land. And they never moved."²

Like many Indigenous peoples, the Mandan and Hidatsa could not conceive of living in a place they did not know, a land that did not hold the stories of their People and the natural world, where every location nurtured a memory.³ Like other global First Peoples, these renowned farmers of the upper Missouri River have always been connected to their homeland, and it anchors their world view.

Yet the bond that links Native People and the natural world surrounding them seldom receives acknowledgement in the Western (or European) perception of this consequential relationship. In this essay I will consider the issue of ownership by suggesting that North America does not belong to any people or entity. The continent cannot be owned by any other being because North America belongs to itself. Despite the many real estate contracts that have been signed, the numerous titles to land that have been verified, and the bank accounts that have been sucked dry for purchases of ocean front, lake views or mountain splendor, North America remains an independent being, sovereign unto itself.

This line of reasoning would likely lead to some astonishment among figures such as attorneys, title companies, purveyors of commerce and all those engaged in the pragmatic world of capitalism that permeates the global economy in the early twenty-first century. In the realm of commerce, participants would probably reject out of hand the hypothesis propounded here, just as early European immigrants to North America closed their minds to the cultural perspectives of the Native peoples they met upon arrival. Vine Deloria, Jr., a Lakota intellectual, has depicted the early Spaniards: "The first group thought they were sailing off the edge of the world (...) Their successors spent years traveling all over the continent in search of the Fountain of Youth and the Seven Cities of Gold. They didn't even know how to plant an ear of corn when they arrived. So, the non-Indian is pretty set in his ideas and hard to change."⁴

2 Mandan Hidatsa man, 8 March 2016.

3 For further clarification of this theme see Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

4 Vine Deloria, Jr., *We Talk, You Listen* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1970), 12.

The legacy of the Spaniards has persisted. Even today, contemporary Americans remain largely uninformed about Native Americans' understanding of the land. The struggle over the Dakota Access Pipeline (2016-2017), just north of Standing Rock Sioux lands, offers a classic example of the wide gap that separates the views of Native peoples on this continent from corporate America. Energy Transfer Partners, the Texas Company building the pipeline, "said it was operating entirely within the law and its agreement with the landowners." The Sioux expressed their concern "about the future of land and water they held sacred."⁵ When dozens of tribes came to North Dakota to offer peaceful support for the Sioux, they caught the attention of news media, which highlighted historical environmental issues symbolized by the event. In this regard the position held by American Indians remains crucial. If the global community had chosen to listen to Indigenous perspectives on the natural world, the health of the Earth might be in balance. Understandings of the land remain at the core of a sustainable planet.

In order to explore the contentious issue of land ownership, we begin with some definitions. "Ownership," the first pertinent term, has been defined as "the state or fact of being an owner," "legal right of possession," and "proprietaryship." The second term, "possess," merits this description: "to have as belonging to one," "have as property," and "own." The final term, "property," is defined as "that which a person owns," "a piece of land or real estate," and "right of possession (...) esp. of something tangible [to have property in land]."⁶

When we place these terms—ownership, possess, and property—in the context of the late-eighteenth century north Atlantic world, they take on an added resonance. Drawing on the writings of English philosopher John Locke, Thomas Jefferson penned the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Precisely why Mr. Jefferson chose the phrase "pursuit of happiness" remains unclear. Perhaps he was acknowledging Locke's distinction between "natural rights," a state of freedom preceding the establishment of government. Locke argued that men agreed to put themselves under government in order

5 "I Want to Win Someday': Tribes make Stand Against Pipeline," *The New York Times*, 9 September 2016, A1, A18.

6 *The Random House Dictionary for the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1967).

to preserve their “property.”⁷ Jefferson might have selected “happiness” as an “unalienable right”—or a right available in the “state of nature”—because the right of “property” was the most important responsibility of government.⁸ Hence, “property” was not an “unalienable” or “natural right.”

Regardless of Jefferson’s rationale, the term quickly lost its luster, and by the time the United States had ratified the Bill of Rights (December 1791), the Fifth Amendment had discarded “happiness” and replaced it with “No person shall (...) be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.”⁹

In the context of the Young Republic and antebellum America, the term “property” gained notoriety as a dominant theme of chattel slavery. From the 1790s forward, southern whites argued that enslaved African Americans were property. During the Civil War the Union turned the tables on the Confederate position, declaring that slaves who fled toward freedom were deemed military contraband because of their status as property. When slaves crossing behind Union lines declared, “I’se property,” they were well aware of the legal distinction that legitimized their flight to freedom.

After the Civil War, a largely Protestant group of easterners who seized on the goal of federal Indian policy reform, shifted the focus of the term “property” once again, applying it to their call for “civilization” of American Indians. Their eagerness to divide the remaining Indian lands into family allotments relied on the rationale that allotment of Indian land would pull Native Americans into the orbit of the Euro-American world by transforming them into owners of land or “property.”

The belabored reasoning of these righteous easterners, as well as their acquisitive speculator counterparts in the American West, is well known in the annals of Native American history. Promoting the assimilation of Native peoples, eastern reformers led a campaign for federal Indian boarding schools, Christian conversion, and the destruction of tribalism through individual land ownership.¹⁰ Senator Henry Dawes (Democrat, Massachusetts),

7 Edward Dumbauld, *The Declaration of Independence and What It Means Today* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 60.

8 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

9 Use of the term “property” appears again in Amendment 14, which grants citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.” This amendment overturns the infamous Supreme Court ruling, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* of 1857.

10 See Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father*, vol. II (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 659-686; Valerie Sherer Mathes, *Helen Hunt Jackson and her Legacy of Reform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 1-37; Robert E. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 166-175; Robert

sponsor of the Allotment Act (1887), struck the tone of the reformers in his criticism of the Cherokee:

They have got as far as they can go, because they own their land in common (...) and under that there is no enterprise to make your home any better than that of your neighbours. There is no selfishness, which is the bottom of civilization. Till this people will consent to give up their lands, and divide them among their citizens so that each can own the land he cultivates, they will not make much progress.¹¹

The eastern reformers were deeply immersed in the nineteenth century belief in the concept of “progress,” an idea that emerged from the Second Great Awakening religious revival movement that promoted the dramatically popular concept of “Free Will.” Reformers insisted that land allotment would enable Indians to join the ranks of Christian Americans who saw the nation marching toward Progress. Lamenting “the Want of Property Rights among Indians,” one Presbyterian missionary claimed that the Indian custom of “common land ownership was ‘a barrier to progress, to thrift, and to independence among the civilized.’”¹²

In 1883 Senator Dawes and other reformers began meeting at a resort hotel located by Lake Mohonk in the Adirondack Mountains and owned by Albert K. and Alfred Smiley, two Quaker brother who were involved with Indian affairs. Albert Smiley, a member of the Board of Indian Commissioners (BIC), a watchdog group of citizens who kept an eye on the Office of Indian Affairs, offered the hotel as a retreat venue for members of the board, suggesting they gather there each fall. By the late 1880s, the Lake Mohonk gatherings were attracting more than 150 individuals, whose cumulative pressure led to the passage of the Dawes Act. As a lobbying group, they set a high standard for success. Historian Francis Paul Prucha concluded that their views on Indian assimilation “enjoyed a near unanimity.”¹³

H. Keller, Jr., *American Protestantism and United States Indian Policy, 1869-72* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Frederick Hoxie, *A Final Promise* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 41-81.

11 Board of Indian Commissioners, *Annual report*, 1885, 90-91. Quoted in Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 21-22. Thanks to Markku Henriksson for alerting me to this quote.

12 Michael C. Coleman, *Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes toward American Indians, 1837-1893* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 102. On mixed attitudes toward “Progress” in nineteenth century America, see Lee Clarke Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4-10.

13 Prucha, *The Great Father*, vol. II, 617-626, quote on 628.

The rhetoric of these reformers encapsulated Americans' deeply rooted attachment to the transforming power of individual land ownership. Economist Leonard Carlson has described this attachment as a "prevailing faith in private property."¹⁴ Adding a wry note, D'arcy McNickle, Métis/Salish-Kootenai scholar, novelist, and co-founder of the National Congress of American Indians, observes: "Europe and the white man's civilization had grown to greatness on a system of private property in land, and it must therefore be a proper system for any people."¹⁵ Vine Deloria, Jr. notes, "The first go-round of real inquiry into the nature of tribal societies assumed that all human societies had developed a sense of property."¹⁶ Finnish scholar Markku Henriksson describes "land ownership" as a "symbol of difference between Euro-American and Native American "cultural heritage." He adds, "for the white, private land ownership was the basis for civilization, but to most Indians it was a foreign concept."¹⁷

All of this commentary brings us back to the influences of Locke's ideas during the late-eighteenth century. Locke eased the way for Jefferson and the founders of the Young Republic to remind English readers of how dearly the newly minted colonials-cum-Americans cherished their notions of "happiness" or "property." But the Americans' understandings of property had gelled long before the 1770s. By the era of the revolution, potential land ownership had shaped the dreams of more than six generations of European immigrants crossing the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ownership of land emerged as perhaps the most compelling motivation of immigrants who came to North America during this era. Although US history textbooks have woven the search for religious freedom into the mystique of the US origin story, and it cannot be discounted for Puritans, Quakers, and many others, the most persuasive magnet drawing these transplanted peoples lay in the promise of "free" or virtually free land. In seventeenth-century Europe ownership of land was confined to the elite, the aristocracy, the church, and the growing merchant class. It lay well beyond the reach of ordinary people, whether they farmed, tended livestock in rural regions or had fled to rapidly growing cities.

14 Leonard Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and the Land* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1981), 8.

15 D'Arcy McNickle, *Native American Tribalism* (New York: Oxford, 1973), 79. Métis by blood, McNickle was an enrolled Flathead (Salish-Kootenai).

16 Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 64.

17 Markku Henriksson, *The Indian on Capitol Hill* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1988), 166.

For the Scottish settlers of Northern Ireland, who are known to Americans as Scots Irish, pressures of poverty, rigid English trade regulations, and an eagerness for land pushed thousands of them across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century. When they stumbled ashore in ports like Philadelphia, they discovered that German speaking immigrants had already settled in the region and were thriving on the rich soil of their orderly farms. Facing a dilemma, the new arrivals turned south. Following ancient Iroquois and Cherokee trails down the Shenandoah Valley, the Scots Irish, who had precious few coins jingling in their pockets, quickly learned that land prices went down and down as they plodded through the back country of Virginia and on toward the Carolinas. All the while, they focused on one goal: acquisition of cheap, perhaps even free, land, where they could put up a cabin, plant some maize and flax, raise a few sheep, rear their children, distill a little whisky, and attend their Presbyterian churches. By the revolution's opening salvos at Lexington and Concord, over a quarter of a million Scots Irish, and continental Europeans had settled in the back country that stretched between Maryland and Georgia.¹⁸

Even before the fighting erupted outside Boston, the descendants of these immigrants had crossed the Southern Appalachians through well-known passage ways like the Cumberland Gap, making their way into the Trans-Appalachian West and encroaching upon the homelands and hunting grounds of the Shawnee and other Native peoples. After the Peace of Paris was signed in 1783, the early movement would swell into a virtual flood; and by the 1830s and 1840s, Scots Irish and other migrants of European, and African, ancestry had persisted in their restless trek, crossing the Ohio River and the Mississippi, making their way to Missouri (where Daniel Boone made his final stop), then over the Great Plains and on to destinations in Utah or Oregon Country; others had taken up lands in Texas. Profit and potential wealth beckoned, but ownership of land remained the number one drawing card.

The trek of these land seekers reinforced, in a dramatic fashion, the nation's core belief in private land ownership. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French observer whose comments on early nineteenth century America have earned high praise, assessed American's obsession with private property: "In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert

18 James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch Irish, A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 200-223.

than in the United States, and nowhere else does the majority display less inclination toward doctrines which in any way threaten the way property is owned.”¹⁹

The cultural divide between Euro-American and Native American has reached its apex in their widely divergent understandings of the natural world. In the late 1800s, most Euro-Americans interpreted land ownership through a materialistic lens. This view was rooted in Cartesian dualism, dividing the material and the spiritual, a concept once described by Vine Deloria, Jr. as the “bifurcation of nature” that had led “generations of scientists to treat an obviously living universe as if it were an inert object.”²⁰ Yet materialism was also shaped, at least partially, by the late-nineteenth century expansion of capitalism and industry, and the growing influence of science. Cumulatively, these shifting perspectives enabled Euro-Americans to slide easily into the belief that they could commodify every aspect of the natural world. Indeed, it appeared as if the natural world existed to serve people, a notion that persuaded Euro-Americans to confirm the concept that humans could own almost anything, including lakes, rivers, mountains, and virtually all features of a commodified landscape.²¹

By contrast, most Native Americans knew that an overarching bond of kinship connected them with the land and the natural world. Native people understood that this kinship network linked all beings, and that its overarching presence ensured a relationship of mutual respect and sharing of gifts. Yet Potawatomie botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has argued that the Euro-American perspective should not be underestimated. Reflecting on its potential to destroy the reciprocal relationship between the earth and those who share her bounty, Kimmerer observes, “I fear that a world made of gifts cannot coexist with a world made of commodities.”²²

Had nineteenth century American industrial leaders not viewed the natural world through the lens of materialism, they could not have led the nation toward phenomenal economic growth. Often dubbed the Robber Barons, these leaders supplied the name that historians rely on for this era—the

19 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper and Row Perennial Library, 1988), 638-639.

20 Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies*, 18.

21 Exceptions to this stereotype of Euro-American attitudes include the famous painter, George Catlin. See Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95-109.

22 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 374.

Gilded Age. The wealth they accrued during the Gilded Age relied heavily on massive extraction of the natural resources that spanned the continent. Yet the rationale for the entire extraction process remained contingent on the identification of gold and silver, coal and oil, timber, and other resources exclusively as commodities. In short, resources were things.

Since most Americans accepted this principle, they celebrated the presence of these abundant commodities and the jobs and expansion they bequeathed. In the late-nineteenth century, US industrial expansion, from the laying of railroad tracks to the building of Pennsylvania steel mills by Andrew Carnegie to the amassing of the Standard Oil trust engineered by John D. Rockefeller—all depended on the continent's resources and the labor of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. By the turn of the twentieth century the commodification and extraction of natural resources, plus the labor of thousands of workers, had thrust the US into a position of industrial power unequalled across the planet. From a Native perspective, however, the status of the land reflected the legacy of the Euro-American stance on "a world made of commodities."

Yet there were critics, and their voices continue to be raised. Shifting the paradigm to further Native American perspectives on these events, we turn to Laguna storyteller Leslie Marmon Silko for a graphic critique of Euro-American perceptions of the natural world. In her novel *Ceremony*, set during World War II, Silko provides a dark impression of the world view of "white skin people." She writes: "The world is a dead thing for them/The trees and rivers are not alive/the mountains and rivers are not alive/the mountains and stones are not alive/The deer and bear are objects/They see no life."²³

Approaching the controversy from a historical perspective, Vine Deloria, Jr. offers a critique of white materialism that does not spare the susceptibility of those Indians who thrived on trade with early Europeans engaged in commerce: "When Europeans arrived on these shores they brought with them a power of technology (...) Whites had already traded spiritual insight for material comfort, and once trade of material things characterized the Indian relationship with whites, Indians would soon lose much of their spiritual heritage also."

Deloria's quarrel with the heritage of Western civilization's Cartesian duality targets the split between the sacred and the secular. He argues that

23 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Signet, 1978), 142.

they became independent bodies of knowledge, and “once reason became independent, its only reference point was the human mind.” In this context he concludes: “As Western civilization grew and took dominance over the world (...) A view of the natural world as primarily physical matter took hold and became the practical metaphysics for human affairs.”²⁴

Kimmerer, the Potawatomie botanist, assesses this dichotomy by relying on her dual background as both a Native person and an individual trained in the sciences. Kimmerer writes: “Scientists use the intellect and the senses, usually enhanced by technology (...) But Indigenous knowledge, too, is based on observation, on experiment. The difference is that it includes spiritual relationships and spiritual explanations. Traditional knowledge brings together the seen and the unseen, whereas western science says if we can’t measure something, it doesn’t exist.”²⁵

Kimmerer’s observation marks a growing awareness of the value of traditional knowledge, but, like Deloria, she also acknowledges the historical decline of spirituality among Indians that accompanied the onslaught of Western duality and its alleged division between the sacred and the secular. Yet even in the early twenty-first century, some twenty generations after the voyage of Columbus, a journey that prompted the loss of perhaps ninety percent of the Americas’ Indigenous population, some Native Americans/ First Nations/Inuit and Métis still retain the older understandings of the spirituality of the Native world that Kimmerer attests to. In the concluding section of this essay we will explore a selection of those Native voices.

Robin Kimmerer believes that the entire natural world is connected through kinship. This concept, she observes, “has to do with the realization that we are all beings on the same earth (...) [yet] kinship also comes from our reciprocal relationship with other species.” In this context, she writes, “Species are not just materials or resources, they’re nations or collections of individuals. I say I live in Maple Nation. Someone else might live in Oak Nation. It’s important to recognize that there are these other nations of beings within the United States.”²⁶

Writing from the perspective of another global first people, the Maori, Fiona Cram explains their view of the sacredness of the natural world: “Ev-

24 Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies*, 16-17.

25 Leath Tonino, “Robin Wall Kimmerer on Scientific and Native American Views of the Natural Environment,” *The Sun*, Issue 284 (April 2016): 6.

26 *Ibid.*, 9, 11. Kimmerer lives in upstate New York, near the historic homeland of the Potawatomie People.

everything possesses a *mauri* (life force), including animals, fish, birds, land, forests, rivers, and seas. *Mauri* is the source of links between things.”²⁷ These Maori words bear a similarity to the words of a Sonoran Desert people, the Tohono O’odham; the similarities are uncanny. Tohono O’odham Camillus Lopez describes the desert natural world as community: “Community is everything. It’s the stars. It’s the ground way under. It’s the little ant that comes across. It’s the coyote. It’s the buzzard (...) if you can see yourself in it, then you’re there. But if you can’t look at Nature and see yourself in it, then you’re too far away.”²⁸

Rio Grande Pueblo peoples of New Mexico share further insights into this Southwest Borderlands natural world, revealing the crucial interrelationship shared by clouds, mountains, water, and humans, all of which form the lynchpin of community. An Oke Owinge (San Juan Pueblo) woman observes, “The *Okhuwa* or cloud people arise from the mountains and move through the adjoining hills and valleys. That movement is the breath of the universe (...) water is like the breathing cycle.”²⁹ A Jemez Pueblo woman continues in the same vein: “We humans are like clouds. Our bodies are 99 percent water.” And a San Felipe Pueblo woman adds: “our human songs, dances, and thoughts can communicate with the clouds (...) Water can talk with water.”³⁰ In the Pueblo world humans become the intermediaries: “song brings the dance, which is the touching of the earth with the feet and the reaching of the head into the sky realm with the mountain and cloud *tablitas*. The human, in the dance place, is the connector of Earth and sky.”³¹

Borderlands Native peoples also emphasize the need for respect for the land. “What you do to the land you do to yourself, and eventually it’ll catch back to you (...) you have to learn to respect things.”³² A woman from Taos Pueblo reiterated the concept of respect, observing, “We all remember we are here because we have to take care of such places. To bring the rain, to

27 Fiona Cram, “Backgrounding Maori Views on Genetic Engineering,” in *Sovereignty Matters*, ed., Joanne Barker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 54.

28 Lopez, “Tohono O’odham Culture,” 139.

29 Rina Swentzell, “Pueblo Watershed, Places, Cycles, and Life,” in *Thinking Like a Watershed*, eds., Jack Loeffler and Celestia Loeffler (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 29-30. “A watershed,” Swentzell explains, “is an interwoven web of life energies from clouds to rivers to streams, springs—and tears.” (Quote on 29.)

30 Ibid., 29.

31 Ibid., 32. During ceremonies Pueblo women dance with bare feet on the earth and *tablitas*, worn on the head and reaching toward the sky.

32 Lopez, “Tohono O’odham Culture,” 138-139.

sing the songs. (...) We realize that from the beginning of time, that's where the ceremonies came from."³³ A Navajo illustrates this concept in his explanation of the relationship between the San Juan River and the People (Dine, the Navajo name for themselves, translates as The People). Describing the river as "a sacred being that has a life," he says, "when they dammed it and imprisoned the water's natural ability to be free and to flow free (...) we've captured it without its permission." He concludes: "Anything in Nature, you capture it and you evolve it, you give it a different identity, you disharmonize that process."³⁴

The Salish and Sahaptin people of the Northwest Coast and Columbia River Plateau, have always accepted rivers as sacred beings; and the salmon beings who are native to these rivers have remained central to the lives of these people for thousands of years. Billy Frank, Jr. was the renowned Nisqually fisherman who galvanized the fishing wars, the fight led by Indians whose lands lay in Washington State. During the 1960s and 1970s, they fought, and won, the extended battle to save their treaty fishing rights, a bitter war that was resolved by a ruling handed down by the US Supreme Court in favor of the Indians—*US v. Washington* (1979). On one occasion Billy Frank reiterated the respect he and his people offer to the salmon: "I always tell my kids, 'If a salmon gets away from you, don't cuss. Don't say anything. That salmon, he's going up the river. He's producing more salmon for you and all of us. The salmon, he's coming home. And we've got to take care of his home. He journeys out of here for six, seven years clear to the Arctic Ocean and then he comes back to the Nisqually River.'"³⁵

Desert peoples offer the words for this essay that circle back to the essay's title and the disputed concept of ownership in the natural world. Tohono O'odham Camillus Lopez observes, "Every place has a place in the natural order (...) The mountain holds a special place in history or time (...) There's a reason its put there. Nobody owns it. It owns itself."³⁶ A Santa Clara Pueblo woman concurs, asking, "How could any person own any part of the Earth, the mother who gave birth to the people?"³⁷

33 Swentzell, "Pueblo Watershed," 43.

34 Roy Kady, "Applying Traditions to the Modern World," in *Thinking Like a Watershed*, 108-09, 124.

35 Trava Hefferman, *Where the Salmon Run, The Life and legends of Billy Frank, Jr.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 34.

36 Lopez, "Tohono O'odham Culture," 138.

37 Swentzell, "Pueblo Watershed," 35.

In this essay I have suggested that North America does not belong to any people or entity. Further, I have argued that the continent cannot be owned by any other being because North America belongs to itself. I have traced the importance of land ownership to Europeans who crossed the Atlantic and the persistence of that attitude among their descendants. I have also explored the history of the concept of property, noting its importance to the nation's founders; I have also included the white southerners, whose demand that slaves be viewed as property implied a sub-human category for these human beings; I assessed the reformers, who almost destroyed the Indian land base in their eagerness to transform Native views of land in accord with their own perceptions; and I looked at the Gilded Age industrial leaders, who had no regrets about extracting the natural resource "commodities" that brought great wealth and power to some Americans. Further, I have offered a brief introduction to the concept of dualism, which assumes a division of the material and the spiritual, enabling its followers to accept the commodification of the natural world. Finally, I have drawn on Native voices that support the sense of kinship and responsibility, and of gift giving that is shared by all who dwell on the planet. This view springs from the belief that "everything possesses a life force," and that all of the natural world—rivers, clouds, mountains—are sacred.

In conclusion, I suggest that any American's position on land ownership will depend on whether that individual views the natural world as physical matter or as sacred beings that, like humans, possess a life force and share with us responsibility for the community and the wellbeing of the Earth.

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