Notes of a Non-Native Son: Narrative, Ecology, and Ethics in the Arizona Desert

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Notes of a Non-Native Son:
Narrative, Ecology, and Ethics in the Arizona Desert

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Messiah College, Spring 2017
Author’s Note

This project is not strictly ecological research, personal essay, or literary non-fiction. It is not a bildungsroman, ethnography, or an interview collection. It is not any of these in their fullness, because it is all of them. It seems fitting that a collection dedicated to the health of interconnectedness would require a cross-pollination of genres, voices, and styles.

As much as this project has been an act of writing, even more so, it has been an act of deep listening. Many of the words included here are not my own. I have been guided and challenged by those who came before me, from the prehistoric mysteries of the Hohokam, to the ecological research of Robin Wall Kimmerer, the stories of Elmer Yazzie, the words of Wendell Berry, and the wisdom of the Tohono O’odham people. And yet, as I have listened and responded, these voices have become a part of me.

The following essays do not represent an arrival. They are rather, expressions of the journey—my deep desire to know and belong to my home in Tucson, Arizona. Of course, with all journeys, the most important step is the next, and my next steps will once again draw me away from the desert I love. Yet, I will take with me these voices and lessons. When I arrive in Tacoma, Washington in the fall, I will hear the voice of Elmer Yazzie’s grandmother, instructing me to act thoughtfully, and Frances Manuel encouraging me to go for a run.

I will take these voices with me, as I develop my own. And I will know that regardless of where my feet may travel, my education in the practices of nativity is far from over.
Huhugam

I was always sad when Elmer Yazzie cut his hair. On a private-school staff of mostly middle-aged white women, Yazzie's broad shoulders and rough hands stood out as much as his Navajo surname and low, measured voice. But nothing identified him so well as the sleek, black ponytail that graced the back of his blue painting smock.

Yazzie seemed to inhabit a different world than the rest of us, and it was a world I badly wanted to enter. Though I had no skill with a paintbrush, I looked forward to spending time in his classroom. The white floor was dusty with clay from pottery classes. The ceiling tiles were alive with paintings. In the center of the easels and supply shelves that crowded the room, his desk was framed by a set of old couches draped with Navajo blankets. The smells of clay and acrylic mixed with that of burning incense.

A door at the back of the room opened to the mountains. The school property directly bordered state wilderness land, and some afternoons Yazzie would take us out that door and tell us to spread throughout the brush. The colors and smells of this vibrant desert classroom made the building we left behind pale in comparison. Unlike the intangible stress of academia, the rugged earth produced a peace I could hear, feel, and bask in. Sitting in the warm, gritty sand, I feebly sketched the rounded bulges of the granite peak that towered before me.

The Sonoran Desert is alive in a way that’s difficult to understand until you experience it. The only descriptions that make sense to me are sonic; it hums,
vibrates, pulses. When heat moves through this desert you feel its broad waves buzzing through your bones.

Unlike the barren dunes of the Sahara, the Sonoran boasts more plant and animal diversity than any desert in the world. Yazzie often instructed us to simply sit and observe this beauty, to drink in the desert like rain. In the shade of a palo verde, we would listen to the gentle cooing of mourning doves perched high in a saguaro, or the rustle of a jackrabbit as it scared up a covey of quail chicks from behind a creosote bush.

Eventually, he would call us back together to reveal one of the desert’s secrets. Knowing that paintbrushes lay hidden in the tough, pale-green stems of the yucca plant, he would cut a slender leaf and teach us to fray the fibrous edges with our molars. Once the stiff filaments were exposed, we rhythmically stripped them clean with our front teeth. The brush was small and simple, but itself a work of art.

Yazzie seemed completely at ease in the desert. When the lease on his rental house expired, he spent the last several months of the school year camping in the local state park. He had no qualms about spending his nights on a blanket spread over the warm sand of the riverbeds, or shaving in the rearview mirror of his truck before heading to work each day.

I associated this casual sense of desert belonging with Yazzie’s Navajo heritage. I envied it, and perhaps that’s why I was saddened when he cut his hair. He had access to a history and a culture that was out of my reach, and each time I saw his hair, I was reminded of that. If I grew out my own locks, it would represent only
a passing trend, but for him a simple ponytail embodied the richness of Diné tradition, and it was that tradition, I assumed, that rooted him in this land.

It was a reductionistic and tokenizing assumption, I know that now. Sherman Alexi wrote a poem titled “Good Hair,"

Hey, Indian boy, why (why!) did you slice off your braids?
Do you grieve their loss? Have you thought twice about your braids?

With that long, black hair, you looked overtly Indian.

... Were the scissors impulsive or inevitable?!

I hear my unspoken voice in the inquisition. Hungry for a history and culture to ground me in my home, and unsure of how to find that myself, I felt an odd mourning at a perceived loss of what I could never experience.

In sixth grade, my class took a field trip to Montezuma Castle, a 900-year-old cliff dwelling of the Sinagua people. Along the Mogollon Rim of Northern Arizona, the ruins of twenty rooms and compartments meld seamlessly into the limestone cliffs. The structure is made of dirt and rock, but it is no less ornate than the great architecture of Rome or Greece. It has a distinctly desert beauty, a fittingness that makes you certain any modern improvement would be a tasteless addition.

After the park ranger finished giving our class his talk, he told us we would go up into the ruins as long as every member of our class was willing. My heart soared until I heard Jennifer Estrada’s voice saying she was too scared. She can stay here, I screamed in my head, we’ll wave from the windows! I found out later the jury had been rigged. Access to the ruins had been cut off in the 1950’s, so the ranger bribed Jennifer to break our hearts.

But what good is a castle in a cliff if you take away the ladders, I thought. Our
five-dollar tickets allowed us to visit for an afternoon, but every paved sidewalk ended at a metal fence. This national monument was nothing more than a museum. I could observe all I wanted, but physical contact was strictly prohibited.

It seemed that at every turn, well-intentioned restrictions were pitting me against the natural world I yearned to explore and experience. I could hike, but, I was told, if I respected the mountain and wanted to preserve it, I would stay only on the trails. I could buy books about edible plants, but other hikers deserved to see them too, so I should not harvest or taste them myself. I could take pictures of the castle, but climbing its walls would selfishly hasten its decay. In order to preserve the things I loved, I learned I must protect them from myself.

At times I felt this tension in Yazzie's lessons as well. He showed my classmates and I how to chew yucca into paintbrushes. He explained the intricate meanings of Navajo symbols he used in his art. He took our cross-country team camping on Pusch Peak. But the experiences, rich as they were, were experiences. These were not lessons to teach me a way of life; they were exhibits. Like the castle, I was encouraged to observe and learn what I could, so long as I understood I would not be climbing any ladders.

It wasn't that Yazzie ever communicated this, but in my heart, I sensed that that in order for Navajo heritage to survive, it must continue without me. My inclusion would necessarily corrupt it. Reluctantly, I struggled to accept this, feeling that to distance myself from native culture was to simultaneously hold at bay a meaningful relationship with my homeland. Though my spirit was still stirred by mountain runs and yucca brushes, I knew that sooner or later, someone would
explain that the park ranger was only joking. The bell would ring, we would brush the dirt from our shorts and return to our real classrooms, beneath the white fluorescent lights.

This may have been easier for me to swallow if I had grown up in a subdivision with manicured lawns and the latest video games. But thankfully, as a child, I was given opportunities to wrestle with the “wild.” My three sisters and I were homeschooled through elementary school, and during this time my two eldest sisters took riding lessons at a nearby stable called Oasis.

What Oasis lacked in palm trees and crystal springs, it made up for with dusty corrals and affordable stables. While Kendra and Alyssa took turns lunging our scrawny Arabian, Jenna and I would build forts in the massive piles of horse dung left to dry behind the barn. We would run across its ramparts and burrow into its backside. It may not have been pristine wilderness, but at least no one chastised our activity there as destructive.

The desert was our playground. The summer I turned seven we moved from the “suburbs” near Oasis to “horse property” near the mountains. It was barely an acre of dirt and cacti, but at the time, one was as good as a hundred. When Mom tutored students in the afternoons, and Kendra and Alyssa went to a nearby high school for math class, Jenna and I would play one-on-one capture-the-flag for hours. We made maps of the property and hid them under loose bricks in the front yard. We cut paths through the prickly pears in the “back 40” and named our secret passageways with fragmentary Spanish we learned from nearby street names.
When we tired of cornering each other at the ever-changing "base" tree, I enlisted Jenna's help in building the ultimate hideout—the pit. It started out as an attempt to dig up an old tree stump, but two years later, the stump was gone and the pit remained. About eight feet long and two feet deep, it must have looked suspiciously like a grave to our neighbors. For Jenna and I, it was Montezuma Castle, the center of our kingdom. It may not have been dimensionally impressive, but we were fourth-graders with hand shovels and this was rock-hard caliche. Two feet was pretty good.

We chiseled our way around rocks and tree roots, and filled the bottom of our earthen throne with crumpled paper towels wrapped in duct tape—the only ammunition we were allowed to ward off invaders. After hours of digging and centimeters of progress, we would run inside to grab books, then plop down in the fresh, cool dirt to read.

Of my relatives that easily spring to mind, about 80 percent are teachers, so I guess its not surprising that my siblings and I all turned out to be bookworms. We were always reading. My favorite was *My Side of the Mountain*. Sam Gribbley runs away from his home in New York City and with nothing more than a stack of books and a helpful research librarian, he learns how to survive in the forests of the Catskills. He burns a home out of a hollow tree, makes buckskin pants, and trains a falcon to hunt for him. My dreams sprang to life on paper.

The dream of reading myself into the landscape never faded, but as I progressed through school, I learned how to frame it with language more acceptable in the academic community. It wasn’t that I wanted to go to college to climb
mountains and rocks; I was interested in Adventure Education programs, or perhaps Outdoor Leadership. Of course I wouldn’t waste tuition money learning to identify edible plants or build squirrel traps; I was considering the respectable fields of Plant Science and Wildlife Biology. When asked, I told interested teachers and parents that I would like to work for the Forest Service or National Parks system. This was partially true, but really I just wanted to be Sam Gribley.

I substituted Sam’s New York public library with a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, but my goal was the same. Majoring in Sustainable Agriculture and English allowed me to explore how Milton’s understanding of Britain’s ecology colored his writing of Paradise Lost, and contrast the land ethics of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson with those of the Kiowa and Ojibwe. Under the guise of Environmental Ethics and Postcolonial Literature, I devoured the writings of native authors, Winona LaDuke and N. Scott Momaday, and Antiguan-American Jamaica Kincaid.

Like Sam, I found teachers in unexpected places. Authors, professors, and friends taught me, not just what I wanted to know, but also a litany of lessons I had no idea I needed to know. I spent every Tuesday afternoon of my first semester learning to pilot a canoe through the twists and turns of the Yellow Breeches creek. The following year, biology labs led me into the Eastern woodlands, where I learned to identify Oaks and Maples by their bark and leaves. I realized with each paddle stroke and bark sample, that in addition to literature and lectures, I could read the landscape itself. To echo Robin Wall Kimmerer, “In the absence of cultural elders, I had plant elders instead.” I began to recognize and revere these plants as the
teachers they are.

In the spring of my junior year, I was given a choice in my Plant Ecology course. Perform a research project in the familiar woods of campus, or attempt to squeeze the necessary data collection into a spring break trip home. After three years of instruction, I knew the names and traits of far more members of the eastern woodlands than of my desert home. I was happy to know them, but I was also eager to once again wander among cacti and creosote, which I now saw with new eyes. I gathered every book about Arizona plants and ecosystems I could get my hands on and checked out equipment from the lab. After packing more tape measures and spotting scopes than clothes, I boarded a plane for Tucson.

At this same time, I was entering the approval process for a two-semester senior thesis. Newly captivated by the history and study of desert plants, I proposed a similar exploration for my project. The title changed daily, but the essential question was: what does it mean to be native to Arizona? As I pondered that question, I was flooded by memories of those desert lessons with Yazzie, and unsure of when I might be in Arizona next, I sent him a last-minute e-mail, explaining my future project and asking for his guidance.

“Good afternoon Joel,” he wrote back. “Thank you for inquiring. That makes me full of joy. I am happy you seek to understand culture, ancestry, land and their significance. Yes, my heart is open to share with you what you seek.”

I was thrilled. During that week, I spent the mornings and evenings savoring much needed time with my parents, and while they were at work, I traipsed around the Santa Catalina Mountains attempting to identify and measure tree growth. But in
the afternoon, I made my way off the mountain and back to those old couches in Yazzie’s classroom. I didn’t know what I was looking for enough to form meaningful inquiries, so I just listened as Yazzie sat on the couch across from me. His stories answered the questions I didn’t know how to ask.

He told me that when he first came to Tucson, he couldn’t teach, or even paint, landscapes. “I couldn’t paint the desert because I didn’t love it,” he said. It took me a few minutes to process the reality of these words. Yazzie wasn’t even from the cactus-covered foothills of Arizona. His first home was the scrubby chaparral of New Mexico. I knew this—he had told stories of growing up on the reservation there before—but the thought of him being an immigrant to the desert he seemed to know so intimately had never crossed my mind.

He went on to explain that in those early days, when he finished teaching, he would walk out into the dry riverbeds and just sit. He would spend hours watching and listening to the pulse of life in the Sonoran—the movement of the winds and the calls of the birds, the way the light and plants met, how the water shaped the soil and how the soil hungered for water. He knew he had to learn the land before he could love it, and it was a process that could not be rushed.

I wondered how he knew to do this, but before I could ask, his stories explained. As a child on the reservation, he and his sister would often take his grandmother’s sheep to be watered. At five or six-years-old, they would leave in the afternoon and spend the night near the watering hole. Carrying only some bread and a blanket, they would find a small crease in the hillside, spread the blanket over
each other, and pass the night, pressed up against the earth for shelter. In the morning, they would walk the sheep home.

Moments like these birthed an intimate relationship with the land that cradled them, a relationship that never faded. Just recently, Yazzie continued, he returned to the reservation to visit his mother. While he was home, she needed him to dig a new outhouse hole. A simple, but glorious task, I thought, my mind flashing back to Jenna and I covered in dust. But before he began to dig, he said, he walked the area, thinking and praying about where the pit should be. When the site was chosen and the shaft was dug, he edged the floor with a dowel rod to make sure the lines were straight and clean. Then he just sat in the hole, breathing in the clean smell of soil, offering prayers of thanksgiving for that earth and the purpose it would serve.

If ever there was a place outside of the sacred, surely it must be the outhouse shaft. But, Yazzie told me, these decisions, these places, mattered. A phrase his grandmother taught him guided his thinking and digging. “Be careful how you move that stone—it may have something to do with that star.”

I walked from Yazzie’s classroom to my car. The sun was setting over Sombrero Peak on the far side of the valley and Pusch Ridge blushed in response, while Yazzie’s words ran through my head. Yazzie’s stories were rooted in a cultural history and understanding so rich and ancient, they seemed beyond my reach. But I was unwilling to accept that such a meaningful relationship to this land was unattainable to me, simply because of the family and culture into which I was born.
Though Yazzie’s bloodline was indigenous, his stories told me he was not
born native. He was raised native. It was the lessons and practices he was taught by
his family, his community, and his land, that fostered this belonging. The proof was
in his ability to reenact those practices in a new place. It took time and effort, but his
desert nativity was learned, not inherited.

When I returned to Pennsylvania, I began to trace Arizona history as far back
as I could manage. Before the Europeans there were the Spaniards, and before the
Spaniards, the Tohono O’odham, Apache and Yoeme. As I researched, I realized that
there was always a “before”—a time when even the most ancient inhabitants of the
desert were newcomers. Even the prehistoric Hohokam had to, at one point, learn
the lessons of the desert for the first time. Perhaps, I thought, it was a learning
process I could repeat, not from scratch, but as Isaac Newton once said, “by standing
on the shoulders of giants,” learning from my predecessors of place.

I had always heard that Hohokam means the “Vanished Ones,” an adaptation
of the more modern O’odham word “Huhugam,” meaning “gone.” But, I learned, the
name is actually a misnomer. Hohokam is not a cultural name; it’s an archeological
moniker that describes the people who inhabited south-central Arizona from AD
200-1400. In contrast, Huhugam is actually a much broader term the O’odham use
to refer to their communal ancestors.

O’odham elder Barnaby Lewis explains that “O’odham oral traditions identify
Huhugam as the ancestral relatives of the present day O’odham, and that knowledge
is essentially the core of O’odham cultural identity.” The mysterious mid-century
disappearance of the Hohokam makes it impossible to know for certain if present
day O’odham are genealogical descendants, but regardless, the O’odham recognize
the Hohokam as Huhugam, ancestors of place, if not blood. The biology is uncertain,
but common knowledge of a shared homeland ties these people together.

Though I am sure I don’t yet understand this word in its fullness, I am
encouraged by it. If the O’odham can claim the Hohokam as geographical elders,
learning from and building upon their culture and history, perhaps it’s not wrong for
me to do the same. I don’t mean cultural appropriation. I won’t be tattooing the man
in the maze on my chest, or growing out my hair. I mean reverently seeking out the
stories of those who have preceded me in this desert, opening my eyes, ears, and
spirit to what they have to teach.

As I approached the stories of the Hohokam in this way, I realized the lessons
hidden in their history are frighteningly relevant for a young American. Though
1500 years have passed, the basic desires of human society are the same. The
Hohokam desired the food security of reliable agriculture, the stability of a constant
home, and the ability to shape the natural world in the pursuit of progress and
convenience. Apparently the American dream is much older than the American
Experiment.

Rivers played a major role in every aspect of this pursuit. Hohokam life was
built around water. The Salt and the Gila had plenty to supply, but development, as
we humans tend to understand it, demands control of resources as well as access.
Unable to harness the clouds, the Hohokam cut the earth. The irrigation canals they
dug were unrivaled in the North American continent, allowing them to deliver water
to ever-expanding fields and agave terraces.
The Hohokam became rulers of water. With their canals, they captured life and directed it as they willed—one of the few cultural practices that shows no sign of extinction today. The convenience of this technology allowed them to spend less time scouring the wilderness for food and more time creating what we Westerners call “civilization.” In addition to canals and terraces, ball pits and ceremonial platform mounds distinguish Hohokam ruins, not unlike the football stadiums and oil pipelines that might characterize our own.

For over a millennium, the Hohokam built their empire in the desert. But by the time the Spanish arrived in the 1500’s, it was gone. They were a people whispered about. For many years, archeologists and historians assumed some traumatic event or disease was to blame for the demise of the Hohokam, but more recently, a new explanation has gained traction. The “coalescent communities model” suggests that the disappearance of the Hohokam was the result of a slow, centuries-long decline.4

Though irrigation provided the tangible security of abundant harvests, it created less visible vulnerabilities. Monoculture production of corn and cotton replaced a more diverse selection of wild plants. This was, of course, the goal, but as the Hohokam became less mobile and their diet grew more predictable, their health, and the health of the desert ecosystem, suffered.

Modern Arizonans may not boast Hohokam blood, but we proudly pay homage to this heritage of monoculture. Using stable isotope analysis of human hair, Todd Dawson, professor of integrative biology at UC-Berkley, discovered that “corn has increased by some 10,000% in modern North American diets in just 50 years.”5
He ran this test on CNN’s chief medical correspondent, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, and found that 69% of the carbon in his hair could be traced to the hallowed grain, a fraction typical for Americans.6 “We are corn walking,” Dawson says.

At the same time that the Hohokam diet was simplifying and health was waning, immigrants were pressing the fringes of Hohokam territory. Local communities responded by pulling back, condensing more people into fewer settlements. Ball courts were abandoned in favor of walled defensive compounds,7 and waste disposal became challenging. Standing water and increasing density made crowded communities vulnerable to disease.

The culmination of these issues led to a population drop. It may have been imperceptible at the time, only a percent or two each year, but the subtle decline remained constant for nearly 150 years. By the mid 1450’s, the Hohokam had lost 75 percent of their population.8 Strained to the breaking point, it is assumed that surrounding people groups swallowed up the waning Hohokam culture.

The truly shocking part of the Hohokam story is not that they collapsed, but that nearly every aspect of their decline ties back to the supposed masterpiece of their civilization—their canal systems. These focal points of innovative design interrupted complex relationships between water, soil, and people, relationships the Hohokam had not fully understood. Wendell Berry points out that this is a truth ecologists have been documenting for some time: “you can’t do one thing”—which means that in a natural system whatever affects one thing ultimately affects everything.”9
Canals are reminders that no matter how ingenious the method of our technological control, the rhythms of nature, reciprocal cycles of health, cannot be escaped or transcended. In fighting to ignore or surpass them, we are fighting against ourselves.

Like all rivers, the Gila and Salt would flood from time to time. The rising waters were not natural disasters; they deposited silt and sediments on the riverbanks—rich deposits of nutrients in an environment where soil formation is almost nonexistent. The floods also prevented salt from building up in nearby fields. But as Hohokam canals spread the river thin, floods became less common, and when they did arrive, they were destructively powerful. “Be careful how you move that rock,” Yazzie’s grandmother would have warned.

We still acknowledge the truth of this adage, though we rarely practice it. The “precautionary principle” framed in the Rio Declaration of the 1992 Earth Summit and later defined in the Wingspread Statement, urges, “When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.” Put simply, we shouldn’t harm what we don’t understand.

But unlike the precautionary principle, Yazzie’s grandmother understood that this thinking must guide our actions as well as our reactions. Certainly the Hohokam must have recognized and attempted to redress these issues. But healing on an ecological scale happens in geological time. The Hohokam were not around to fix the brokenness they initiated. The same may be true for my generation, which is why we must act with more than caution.
I am sobered by the story of the Hohokam because I see their undoing all around me. If they strained the rivers, my generation has all but killed them. In my lifetime, I have never seen water in the Santa Cruz or Rillito Rivers outside of flood season. Yet, looking at our lawns and swimming pools, you would think we have an inexhaustible supply. In order to fuel our extravagance, we extended our canals beyond state lines, surpassing the limits of the desert in ways even the Hohokam could not have imagined.

We ran our own streams dry, and now our dams, irrigation, and ever-increasing user base are taxing the Colorado River to the breaking point as well. Over 75 percent of the Colorado’s water is removed for agricultural and domestic use, a figure so high that 2014 marked the first time the river had reached the ocean in sixteen years. A dry riverbed may be an aberration, but in the brief memory of human culture, unhealthy anomalies can too easily become accepted norms.

When I took fifth-grade Arizona history, every schoolchild in the state was taught to recite the five C’s of Arizona: climate, copper, cotton, citrus, and cattle. Only now do I realize that industrialized monoculture makes up 60 percent of the economic heritage I was taught to celebrate as a child. Though I memorized the powerful industries of agriculture, mining, and tourism, I was never taught to question why these activities had become central to Arizonan commerce. Or, the far more scandalous question, should such practices exist in the desert at all?

We did not learn to ask those questions. Perhaps, because answering them would require us to stop thinking about what our state could bring to the table of national economics, and begin thinking about what the limits of our home require of
us. We would have realized, and been forced to reckon with the fact that when the Spanish introduced horses and cattle to Sonoran Desert, the O’odham rejected the animals. Though steer and steed are engrained in our American image of the Wild West, an image we celebrate and consecrate with yearly rodeos, the Desert People knew these thirsty animals couldn’t adapt to this environment without radically altering it.

This information fills the walls of our state museums, but not the hearts and minds of our citizens. Our beautifully irrigated cotton fields and water-demanding cattle ranches make Hohokam monocultures look like organic family farms in comparison, and though the cracks of Hohokam collapse are showing everywhere, we call them signs of success. Growth seems to be our only barometer of health, and regardless of whether it should, the population of the Tucson basin continues to rise, dwarfing the peak numbers of the Hohokam. All must be well.

The way we ignore the stories and lessons of the Hohokam causes me to see the past with eyes of mourning. But I would rather mourn what’s broken in my past, than ignore it. Especially since my generation seems hell-bent on reenacting this narrative.

As O’odham poet Nathan Allen wrote,

today the songs and legends of the Old Ones
can no longer be heard
the waters of the akimel no longer flow
but they linger in our eyes
and in our hands
and land

Huhugam guides this practice of reflection, even for myself. Though I am not O’odham, it is very possible that the O’odham are not Hohokam. Ethnicity is not
what binds these people. Huhugam celebrates a relationship of place and understanding that transcends simple genealogy. These men and women may not be my relatives, but that does not mean they can’t teach me how to live well here. That does not mean they lack authority or knowledge, that they do not deserve my respect and attention. Huhugam reminds me of a brief Lakota prayer I was taught to say before entering a sweat lodge. *Mitaykuye Oyasin.* “We are all related.”

In my search to understand desert life, I have struggled to find the balance of learning from these cultures without appropriating them for my gain. There is truth in the lesson I was taught as a child—sometimes you do have to protect what you love from your own destructive nature. But in this journey, I have also learned that there is a healthier approach than the sterile distance of the museum exhibit. It involves forming a new mind, a nature guided by a geographical consciousness.

Conservationist Aldo Leopold once wrote, “nothing so important as an ethic is ever written . . . it evolves in the minds of a thinking community.” Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday describes this as a “moral comprehension of earth and air,” and Potawatomi ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer affirms the indefinable nature of such a mindset when she writes, “The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest are not written down, or even consistently spoken of as a whole—they are reinforced in small acts of daily life.”

Kimmerer and one of her students spent several years studying the biological effects of such an approach to the natural world. Their study focused on sweetgrass, a plant often used for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. They found that the grass flourished best in areas where it was harvested by native elders, who gathered in
line with the principles of the honorable harvest: “don’t take the first or the last, take less than half, ask permission...” Taking everything would destroy the plant, and taking nothing would not facilitate its healthy growth. But a humble harvest, one prompted by need and guided by gratitude, allowed the grass to thrive.

These seem to me, appropriate guidelines for my own search to understand the desert and my place within it. I am not Hohokam or O’odham, yet I find myself here, needing to know this land. In seeking out the stories and lessons of Huhugam, I do not wish to take that which is not mine. I want to learn the lessons of those who came before me, that I might live well and rightly, one day passing these teachings on to those who come after me. The honorable harvest does not prohibit me from having or filling such a need, but it requires I approach with respect and reverence, asking permission and showing gratitude.

For much of my life, I have struggled with the idea that I don’t belong where I am. That no matter how long I live in the desert, I will always be an immigrant in this place. I now know that’s not just a fear. It’s a reality. But it is not a reality to be feared. We are all immigrants. In nearly every creation story, there is an exodus. Adam and Eve must leave the garden. Skywoman falls to the earth. It’s what happens next that defines the human story. How will the immigrants belong to their new home?

Examining this process in the natural world, Frederic Clements, the “father of plant ecology,” spent much of his career arguing for the existence of a “climax community.” Essentially, he claimed that once evolution had run its full course in a place, a prescribed set of species would be found there. While there is some basic
truth to this idea, it is dramatically incomplete. It assumes that the composition of
the natural world is fixed. To prove him wrong, Clements’ successors turned to the
Santa Catalina Mountains of the Sonoran Desert.

The complexity of this place is revealed in constant gradients rather than
disconnected communities. Mesquite trees fade into junipers at five thousand feet,
and evergreens a few thousand after that. Plants blend in and out of crags and
canyons, influencing and interacting with each other as the landscape breathes and
shifts. These communities form a living mosaic, roughly consistent, but always
changing. Perhaps this is why Mary Austin called this desert “the country of lost
borders.”

Clement’s theory assumes a predetermined constancy that isn’t found in the
natural world. It assumes that nativity is a birthright rather than a way of life. But
the reality is, plant communities, like human communities, are formed and
sustained by complex and dynamic relationships. They shape their environment
even as it shapes them. Their response to the land around them, and how it in turn
responds to them, it what makes this place what it is.

The Sonoran Desert is a land of unexpected associations and adaptations. Mesquite saplings serve as nurse trees for young saguaro buds, protecting them
from the brutal sun in their infancy. The condensing breath of pack rat families
provides the moisture saplings need to survive drought. Bacterial rhizome on these
tree roots fix nitrogen from the atmosphere to increase the soil’s fertility. The fruit
of these trees, the leguminous mesquite beans, may be a coyote’s only food through
the winter and the coyotes will spread and fertilize the hopeful seeds with their
waste, allowing the process to start again. Every member of this community is locked in an intricate dance. It’s easy to miss this from behind the whitewashed walls of a classroom, but impossible not to perceive when you walk these ridges and listen to these riverbeds.

Belonging in this place is not a simple matter of physical features, instinctual prowess, or familial superiority—it requires sensitivity to the shifting atmosphere, and receptivity to the gifts of strangers. Alone, none of these individuals can survive such a steep learning curve. But within a healthy community, they are taught and sheltered by the ones who come before them, a gift they pass on when they take their place in the communal order.

As they daily live out the process of immigration, the varied mosaic of desert inhabitants recognize the meaning and importance of Huhugam. They learn from their ancestors and care for their descendants, regardless of what seed or species they might be. They are linked, not by blood or birthright, but by a complex web of relationships formed by place and necessity. For this reason, there is no such thing as a meaningless interaction with a desert dweller. Each life is sacred. Each story is a part of your own. So move, but move carefully, each rock you jostle might just rift the stars.
The familiar formations of Monument Valley peeked out from the wall of posters advertising campus events in the atrium of my freshman dorm. After several months of school in Pennsylvania, I was missing the Southwest, and though my home in Tucson was much further south than the iconic landscape of the Navajo Nation, the red rocks were still warmly familiar. The sign advertised Mark Charles, a Navajo man, would be speaking at the missions-oriented chapel service held each Thursday. A few days later, I arrived early to the chapel, grateful for even a small connection to home.

After announcements and worship, Mark stood and introduced himself in the Navajo tongue. Since none of us spoke Diné Bizaad, he explained in English that Diné culture is matrilineal, and introducing himself required the naming of his four clans, beginning with the clans of his grandmothers and then his grandfathers. Only after explaining his family roots in his native language would he continue with his message.

I didn't think much of this the first time I heard it, but Mark returned twice more over my four years at Messiah College and I listened to him speak nearly a dozen times. Each time the introduction was the same. Of the hundreds of lecturers and chapel speakers who frequented campus, Mark was the only one who began his talks in this way. Other speakers had longer introductions, but the words were always focused on what they had done—because they were chair of this board, author of this book, or professor at this university, they were worthy of our
attention. Mark didn’t bother defending his authority. He simply told us who he was by explaining the people and places that defined him.

Over the years I began to appreciate how beautiful and rare this is. As I thought about my own family, I also realized how difficult it was to craft such an introduction. My mother’s mother was from Texas, but also New Mexico and Arizona. She and her husband are divorced, and I don’t see my grandfather often enough to tell you what kind of car he drives, much less what place and people he comes from. My father’s mother grew up in the Midwest. Her family lived in a mansion in Oklahoma City before her older brothers mismanaged the oil money and lost the family fortune. She met my grandfather in Colorado where they made their home. Naming my place and people is no simple matter.

I could dissect the genealogy more, but it leads me to places I’ve never been. England and Ireland hold my ancestral roots, but I am so removed from those places referencing them doesn’t make much more sense of me. Originating from a myriad of places and backgrounds, one attribute ties together the varied histories of my family. It’s the same attribute the government uses to keep track of me on standardized tests. My clan, I have been told all my life, is white.

At times I have been saddened by the blandness of this moniker, but before I read Ta Nehisi Coates, I never thought to question the identity itself. Coates does. I was only seven pages into his book Between the World and Me when he laid bare the dangers of this identity:

... race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society
and that they signify deeper attributes which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.¹⁶

As a white man, those words were, and still are, difficult to read. Hopeless, tragic, and deceitful are not words you want to see as precursors to your name, and white is, without question, one of my names. For the majority of my life, my culture and context have taught me that the color of my skin is the most simplified characteristic of my identity. I am not Native American, African, Latino, or Hawaiian. I am white.

Growing up, no one ever told me that whiteness was a problem. I was taught not to discriminate. I was taught to abhor injustice and racism, but I was never taught not to be white. Ta Nehisi instructed me in this, unapologetically:

\[
\text{\ldots it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation in the belief of being white, was not achieved through wine-tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children.}^{¹⁷}
\]

It sounds absurd to say after that list, but growing up, I honestly assumed that whiteness emerged accidentally. That as immigrants poured across the Atlantic and their children married their neighbors’ children, it became harder to keep track of genealogical roots, but still easy to identify the color of skin. Of course I knew about the history of racism and injustice Coates catalogs, but I understood it as a moral failure of a historical time period in which white people happened to hold the reins of social, economic, and legal power. Ta Nehisi makes it clear that whiteness was no coincidence; it was a masterful and purposeful feat of exclusionary dominance.

The concept of Whiteness, both as an ethnic construct and the basis of a social hierarchy, was formed to distinguish those in power—those with land, and
property, and unquestioned human rights—from those without. Though certain privileges were directly tied to this name, the name was not meant to carry meaning in and of itself. To be white, was to not be Black, to not be Native, to not be Latino. The weight and usefulness of the name was, and continues to be, in its ability to draw a line of separation, clearly distinguishing power from property, white from “other.”

Mark Charles was not the first person to break through this wall of whiteness and challenge my thinking, but his voice has been one of the most consistent and memorable. He condemned Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery, ideologies that allowed explorers, pilgrims, and homesteaders to believe their colonization of native lands was divinely orchestrated. He showed me that the Declaration of Independence, a document I had been taught to revere as a global symbol of democratic equality, referenced Native Americans as “Merciless Indian Savages.”

In decades of studying and celebrating American history, I was never taught that. I’m sure I had read those words before, but reading them on an antique document in a predominately white school, I apparently had the freedom, or more accurately, the white privilege, to gloss over them. When a Native American man I admired spoke those same words from the chapel stage, I could not ignore them.

Moments like these, and voices like Mark’s, prepared me to read Ta Nehisi Coates. Mark refused to let me off the hook for the realities of my country’s past and the way that past shaped my present. Appealing to the moral ideals I had been
taught to cherish as cornerstones of the American Revolution, he caused me to question the entire narrative of American exceptionalism.

I had been wrestling with this idea for several years when I first encountered *Between the World and Me*. So when Coates wrote,

> These new people are, like us, a modern invention. But unlike us, their name [WHITE] has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power*

I was at least ready to listen. But I found that I wasn’t ready to listen for long. I agreed with Coates. It wasn’t that I wanted to deny or dismiss his claims, but the truth he presented was so uncomfortable, I struggled to simply dwell in it.

In the very next paragraph Coates writes,

> The new people were something else before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish—and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to become something else again.19

I immediately circled this passage and scribbled in the margins, “PLACE.” I thought I had found my ticket out. As I write this now, I imagine Coates shaking his head, unsurprised at my inability to sit still and lament the painful reality of my country’s history. Even as I read his words and affirmed them, I was scrambling for a “fix” that would cause them not to apply to me.

Coates mentioned that white people were something else before we were white and I grabbed at this idea like a life preserver. Before the identity of white people was reliant on a contrasting subaltern, we were people from places. The land, communities, and cultures of Corsica and Wales grounded the identities of the Corsicans and Welsh. If whiteness was a mythological construct defined by separation, then perhaps, I thought, recovering a meaningful relationship to place
was the way forward. This identity would be defined by a concrete relationship rather than a dehumanizing comparison.

In order to test this possibility, I had to answer a seemingly simple question: what is my place? What identifier can I reclaim that will detach me from the legacy of taking and the mythology of whiteness? My immediate answer was Arizona. The southwestern state is my home, and anyone who knows me knows how important this place is to my identity. So I wondered, rather than being white, can I be Arizonan?

I spent the better part of a year trying to figure out what it would look like to live out of this new identity. I read books on Arizona history, plant life, and people groups. I visited museums, conducted interviews, and stood in front of thousand year-old petroglyphs. I examined the complex etymology of Arizona’s name and cut my knees identifying plants in the Santa Catalina Mountains. But the more I read and experienced, the less comfortable I became with the idea of claiming this place as my own.

In unexpected places, I found authors putting words to some of the questions and thoughts I was struggling to articulate. One text was a recently published collection of essays by Karen Babine, an English professor from Concordia University. In a review of her book, *Water and What We Know*, Renee D’Aoust asked, “What does it mean to know a place? To be from somewhere, and formed by a particular terrain?” Please, tell me, I thought. Though these authors were from distinctly different places, they were both wrestling with the question that had been
guiding me. What does it mean for me, a white American, to be from and formed by a place?

As I read and reread these words, I realized that D’Aoust was asking two questions, not one. Being from somewhere and being formed by a particular terrain do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, at least not in our modern, hyper-mobile society. Being “from” a place is lifeless and factual, a simple matter of birthright. I am from Tucson, but so are millions of people who look, act, and think completely different from me. Have any of us been “formed” by this place?

I believe we recognize this distinction, if only subconsciously. My Dad was born in Santa Fe, but I don’t think of him as New Mexican, and I would never say that he’s “from” New Mexico. His family moved to Colorado shortly after he was born, and he grew up there. When he graduated high school he headed north to Spokane, Washington for college and now he’s lived in Arizona for over thirty years. Still, anyone in my family would say that my father is from Colorado.

Why is that? D’Aoust seemed to have an answer. “Though Babine . . . lived for a time in Spokane,” she wrote, “her geographical roots are in the northern Midwest, and it is this area of lakes and land that truly forms her consciousness.”21 I love that sentence. D’Aoust suggests a mystical, almost geological process of formation that demands far more investment than simply being “from” somewhere. This formation goes with you because it helped create you. Though you may be physically absent from a place, it will always be present in the framework of your consciousness.

I found this to be true of the Tohono O’odham people, native inhabitants of the Sonoran Desert. For centuries the O’odham have embraced the limits of their
land. They have experienced the harsh realities of desert life firsthand: long
droughts, rare and intermittent rainfall that can cause torrential flooding, and
blazing summer temperatures. But they have understood these realities, not as
problems to be solved or surpassed, but as guides to shape the structure of their
culture and thinking. They know that the limits of their environment are instructive
and healthy.

When ethnographer Ruth Underhill visited the O’odham in the 1930’s, she
wrote, “Poor as the Papago country was, its economics were those of abundance.
Papagos did not hoard property; . . . they were constantly giving, as though from an
inexhaustible supply. The answer is that the supply, meager though it was from the
modern point of view, was sufficient, for their simple needs and more.”

Underhill explained that in the hot desert, the O’odham didn’t try to save food
they knew would spoil in the sun or be eaten by packrats in storehouses. Instead
they viewed any food beyond starvation rations as a gift, and as such donated it to
neighbors “with a lavish hand.” They knew that it was “Better to dispose of any
surplus while it was available and palatable and thus invest in goodwill!”

The harshness of the Sonoran Desert can be unforgiving. And in this setting,
our spirit of industry and progress encourages us to develop technologically
enhanced preservation methods and improved stationary defense. But rather than
building fences and vaults, or adopting laws to stand one’s ground or defends one’s
rights against a neighbor, the O’odham understood that real security is not found in
private storehouses. Security is found in relationship and reciprocity.
This is the type of geographical consciousness D’Aoust references. O’odham thinking and practice was dictated by the particularities of their homeland. What if we still thought like this? What if when we asked each other, “where are you from?” what we really meant was “what place formed you? What terrain crafted your character and consciousness?” Many of us would struggle to understand this question, much less answer it, but I think that’s what Mark was communicating each time he stepped onto that chapel stage and introduced himself. These are the people and places that have shaped my being and thinking. They make me who I am.

Intrigued, I tracked down Babine’s book and found her trying to understand and unpack this process much like myself. Of her own home, the home she left and then returned to, she wrote,

This place, whether it was my place or is my place, makes me want to invent a verb tense that incorporates both, the active quality of standing somewhere yet being emotionally elsewhere. I am connected to a place— it's just not this place. I breathe easier when I am in the tall Norway pines of north-central Minnesota . . . And I wonder if there are places on the planet where we connect more strongly to our surroundings, like pulse points. 24

These words were soothing to me as I read them 2,000 miles from the land I call my home. This place-ness she describes is intricate and complex. Past and present, emotion and physicality, deep spiritual connection—all of these are wrapped up in her words, and the process of place formation.

At first, I thought of Babine’s words quite superficially. In coming to Pennsylvania, I experienced a strong emotional attachment to my distant home. My removal from the Sonoran Desert made me keenly aware of the emotional exhale that takes place when I step off the plane from Philadelphia into the Phoenix
sunshine, not unlike walking in my front door to the comforting smell of chocolate chip cookies and piñon incense. In a sense, these feelings give me a sense of connectedness here—a sense that the desert, this land of mesquite trees and saguaro cacti, is my place.

Unfortunately for my idealistic mind, Babine recognizes that this sense of emotional connection is also something of a sham. Even as she celebrates it, she points out that there are dangerous complexities to this “story we have created for ourselves.”

“It is a mythology,” Babine claims, “this Heartland, one that ignores the realities of how such a land was cleared of its inhabitants and its ecosystems, but it is a mythology that persists.”

When I read this, Ta Nehisi’s word was pounding in my head like a hammer. Mythology. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid. The identity I hoped would remove me from the myth of whiteness was actually the same mythology under a different name. Land does not exist apart from the particular realities of human history. How could it? All the atrocities Coates references were enacted in a place—this place, this American earth. Our home places bear the scars of our atrocities, and as such, the story of our land is necessarily tied to the story of our sins. To disconnect these is nothing less than a lie.

This is where place-based thinking becomes problematic for myself and my white brothers and sisters. My home in Arizona is mine by right of governmental ownership, but not in terms of genealogy, history, or spirit. Babine says it this way: “This land is both mine and not mine, ambiguous landowning and land-belonging common to every other member of settler cultures in this country.”

As a white
man I am still the child of a settler, and that brings me right back to Ta Nehisi: “the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land.” He reminds me that no matter what it may say on a birth certificate or deed, I do not own this land.

But Babine also brings a new word into this conversation: land-belonging. It’s a tricky term, because in one sense you can have belongings—goods, effects, and property. This is the inanimate language of domination already tied up in land ownership, and it’s a definition white men like myself inherently understand. But actual belonging is something quite different. Membership and acceptance are tied up in belonging. Belonging is relational and emotional, and I believe it is this process Babine references—a surrendering of oneself to the land, submission in search of acceptance.

When I think of belonging in this way, I can’t help but recognize that we settlers have been operating on the wrong paradigm all along. In our scramble to create and defend authority over our places, we have missed out on chances to submit ourselves to them. Hell-bent on progress, we have not stopped to listen to the people, plants, and animals who inhabited these lands long before us. We have not moved slowly. We have not moved thoughtfully. We have not been teachable. Babine’s words stir a deep longing in my heart, a hunger to belong to my place, rather than forcing a place to belong to me

I knew others had thought this before me, and in my search I turned to some familiar names—“pioneers” of the American conservation movement and discipline of land ethics. I read and reread Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Aldo Leopold as they pondered about the particularities of a place-based approach to land, and
thought about land-belonging. Jackson borrowed from Alexander Pope, and wrote about *Consulting the Genius of the Place*. Berry mourned the American culture of exploitation and urged for *The Unsettling of America*. Leopold’s land ethic charged humans to shift from “conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it.”

Yet while I ran my highlighter dry on their pages, it was clear that these men, white, middle-class men like myself, were not making new discoveries. Their words spoke of returning to and reclaiming a right relationship with the natural world—one that had long been understood, and our people had simply ignored. Though the environmental community lauded these men as prophets, I was reminded that the biblical prophets rarely spoke groundbreaking messages. Their call was typically one of remembrance and repentance.

So while I cherished their good words, I also pushed past the popular voices of white men who thought and spoke like me. I began to pour over the writings of Native authors Winona LaDuke, Ohiyesa, and N. Scott Momaday. Like Mark Charles, the cultural histories that guided these authors challenged fundamental aspects of American society, in particular, the very idea of land ownership. LaDuke wrote that the Ojibwe did not even have a word for such a notion. How can you own a member of the community, she asked. The same way you can own a man or woman, I thought, Coates’s words heavy on my heart. Make that land, and those who inhabit it “other.” Commodify them with your language, law, and actions. And if for some reason you cannot rename these others, rename yourself so that your ownership and exploitation will be “indelible.”
As these voices converged across space, history, and culture, I began to understand why even as I feel those pulse points of connection with my homeland, I also wrestle with feelings of great alienation. The relationship between my people and the land they have inhabited for hundreds of years is deeply wounded. We exchanged land-belonging for land-owning, and the conflict in my heart and mind reminds me daily that regardless of our power and privilege, my people and I still live as outsiders in this land.

Wendell Berry described this phenomenon when he wrote, “The first and greatest American revolution, which has never been superseded, was the coming of people who did not look upon the land as their homeland.” Of the very same white people Karen Babine wrote, they “came to this place looking for home.” I’ve come to understand that Berry and Babine are both right. My ancestors crossed the Atlantic looking to create and possess a home, but never considering submitting themselves to the formative power of a new homeland. It was a one-sided relationship focused on the accumulation of belongings rather than the fostering of belonging.

Describing the ethics of my people in this way sounds harsh, but I believe these words are true. At the same time, I also don’t want to be unfair to my ancestors by condemning the complexity of their history to a single story. We are all products of our environment, and the thinking of the white “race” was shaped by their communal history as well. A scholar by the name of Eugene Hargrove traces Anglo land ethics all the way back to the Saxon Freemen. His essay, “Anglo-American
Land Use Attitudes,”

After Rome fell, Hargrove explains, European land was up for grabs. With a newfound lack of political boundaries, the Freemen occupied as much territory as their livestock needed and they had slaves to support. When they had exhausted the productivity of a particular area, they simply moved to the borderlands and if need be, joined together to conquer or displace outsiders and extend their territory. In this context, providing for the future of your family was as much about expanding your borders as it was about managing your homestead. Home was not a physical location so much as a state of security. If you had food on the table, grain in the barn, slaves to stoke the fire, and pasture for the sheep, your family was safe. You were home.

Obviously this was unsustainable. Soon there were no more lands to conquer, and no more people to displace. As the Freemen reached the physical limits of their place, families had to start dividing the land they already possessed among their children. Vast estates became insignificant parcels. Inequality increased, and over the course of centuries, the famously independent Freemen became feudal serfs.

When the first white man stepped onto the Atlantic shore, I imagine him experiencing some powerful sense of genealogical déjà vu. A whole continent lay open at his feet. He had chafed under the physical and ecological limits of Europe, and rather than adjusting to these limits, he had fought to transcend them. Following the example of his father’s fathers, he had braved winds and waves to
secure a new canvas on which to paint his children’s future. What Ta Nehisi rightly called the machinery of criminal power, my white forefathers called homesteading.

These mythologies, of whiteness, place, and home, allowed my ancestors to pillage the American continent while still maintaining some (albeit illegitimate) sense of moral integrity. They weren’t enslaveing their brothers; black bodies were property. They weren’t stealing sacred lands; they were earning an inheritance for their children with the sweat of their backs.

It is the power of these narratives that makes the study of place absolutely necessary for me, yet also inherently dangerous. I cannot pretend that Arizona belongs to me. Rejecting the mythology of whiteness, only to assume a mythology of place or home is moving sideways, not forwards. Pennsylvania and Arizona have been homes to me, but they do not, and never will belong to me.

At the same time, I, and white people like me, cannot afford not to belong here any longer. Legacies of colonialism and taking, of viewing this land and those who inhabited it as a blank canvas for progress, are connected to nearly all of the deepest wounds in the history of this place. And writing that sentence does not change the fact that I perpetuate this myth every day, simply by living within it. For over half a millennium, the legacy of my people in this place is a constant and exhausting struggle to defend our borders and assert our rights and authority.

I’m tired of this. I want to belong here.

Throughout my search, I have been reminded that attempting to throw off all mythologies is an impossible task. Humans are meaning-making machines, and the narratives we subscribe to shape us. The stories and practices of Native people
guided their actions and thinking in the same way that the stories and practices of my people have shaped me. Capitalism, socialism, environmentalism, they are all byproducts of a certain narrative understanding of the world, and the narratives are inescapable. But we must evaluate the stories that define us. Do they lead to belonging, or alienation? Do they teach us to embrace the limits of our humanity, or stubbornly refuse to acknowledge them? Do they inspire communal flourishing?

Of the relationship between the white man and the earth on which he stands, the answer has to be a resounding no. Wendell Berry lamented, “One of the peculiarities of the white race’s presence in America has been how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be.”

To live in spite of a place is not to live at all. It is a fantasy. Reality is bounded by natural limits and the further we distance and cushion ourselves from those limits the further we remove ourselves from our own humanity. Recovery will be found in embracing these boundaries and letting them shape us, rather than the other way around.

The truth is, my people are not from this place and we never will be. But my hope and prayer is that it is not too late for us to be formed by our new homeland. That it is not too late to submit myself to the hills of Pennsylvania and the canyons of Arizona, allowing their lessons to shape me, just as winds and waters have shaped them.

It may seem like an ethereal goal, but my solace lies in the knowledge that even the iconic cacti that define the Sonoran Desert were once native to a different region. Like my own people, they arrived in the Arizona desert and began to make a
home for themselves. But unlike my people, they integrated themselves so fully that they became indispensible to the community surrounding them.

For thousands of years, the Hohokam and the javelina, the O’odham and the owl, have relied on cacti for food, fiber, and medicine. In return they harvested those plants in a manner that allowed them to flourish, helping to create the desert I have come to love.

Inhabiting the very same ecosystem, my people have created extravagant buffers to shield and surpass the healthy limitations of the desert. When summer temperatures surge into the triple digits, we control our thermostats with the touch of a button and fill artificial pools with water from distant streams. When there is no rain, we don’t stop our lives, gather our neighbors and hold a multi-day nawait ceremony to pray down the clouds. We have the Colorado River at our fingertips, so we simply turn on the tap.

We are a people powerful enough to enjoy nearly constant comfort. Yet as I think we can see from our political discord, our obsession with entertainment, and our lifestyles of excessive consumption, we are also a people hungry for belonging and identity.

When I visited the San Xavier reservation, I got to speak with an O’odham man about my father’s age. He told me of a time when he was playing high school football and he got athlete’s foot. His grandmother, an elder who knew the medicinal uses of many desert plants, told him to go cut a piece of saguaro and rub the juices on the fungus. But, she told him, before he cut the saguaro’s flesh, he must ask permission. He told me he felt like a fool, standing before that saguaro, fumbling his
words as he asked it to grant him a piece of itself for his healing. But he did it anyway. And then, most importantly, he paused and waited, looking for a sign or signal that might tell him, “no.”

It is in this moment of seemingly foolish humility, that we wait honestly, vulnerably, for healing. A phrase I repeatedly heard in my time on the San Xavier reservation was “our people are sick.” And they’re right. The O’odham people have the highest rate of Adult Onset Diabetes in the world—a result of a colonizing power that replaced their diet of cactus fruit and mesquite beans with Army rations of flour and lard. And yet, as I have studied Sustainability, it has become abundantly clear to me that my people are sick as well. In medical terms we know excess growth as cancer, yet in economics, we call it progress. My people too are sick, sick in spirit, and soul, as is the land that ties us all together.

If we understand place as another qualifying adjective of our identity, we will simply gain a new tool with which to draw lines of difference and distinction. We’ll use new language to continue the age-old, self-destructive process of “othering” and exclusion.

But the search for belonging in a place is not about proving or qualifying one’s identity. In fact, I have come to understand it is a profound rejection of this process. There is no place that I can claim as my own. And I will not belong in a place until I put myself in a position to belong to that place. This is a position of humility and submission—one that requires I submit my gifts, my role, and my very self to the continued flourishing of all members of my ecological community.
Renowned author and speaker, Vandana Shiva, reminded me when I heard her speak at Westchester University, that survival of the fittest does not mean survival of the most dominant or powerful. It does not mean survival of the social elite, the colonial power, or the intellectually superior. It means those that flourish in a place will be those who fit, who ingratiate themselves into the system and community in which they find themselves.

When we internalize this truth, we begin to understand that those hierarchies Ta Nehisi mentioned, are indeed mythologies. We begin to understand that difference means health, because belonging is not a state, but a process of reciprocity, a sacrificial cycle that leads to communal wholeness. If we seek to find a place at the expense of our neighbor, be he man, plant, or animal, we will find our storerooms full to overflowing, and our spirits still hungry for belonging.

Life is dynamic. We children of the settlers are here, and anymore we have no other homeland to return to. By necessity we will remain, continuing to take from this land, just as native peoples, plants, and animals have for millennia. But as we take, we must make sure that we are equally ready to sacrifice and submit ourselves. We must be guided by gratitude not greed.

So what is my place? In one sense, the answer to that question is, it does not exist. Regardless of the depth of my spiritual connection or the airtight legality of my claim to ownership, no physical place will ever belong to me. Ignoring that reality has brought moral, mental, and physical sickness to my people, and by extension, to this entire land. But in another way of thinking, my place, my position, is quite simple. It is a place of humility.
“Huntin’, fishin’, and lovin’ every day...” The lyrics of a Luke Bryan song broke the early morning stillness of the Rocky Mountains, Kyle’s alarm. Depending on the morning, one of us would wake while the other rolled over. Regardless of the order of operations, five minutes later we were both tightening the laces of our running shoes and padding down the stairs of our cabin loft.

Sometimes we knew where we were headed—a fast, five-mile grind to the mailboxes and back for mental toughness, or a specific hunting stand where Kyle expected to see elk. Other times, we just ran. We’d take a trail to Barry’s Cabin or the Bone Yard, and then cut hard into the woods. The obstacles of the forest formed our playground. We spun around pines, rolled under low branches, and leaped across sudden drops.

On trails we would settle into a steady pace, but in the woods we moved as fast as our bodies allowed, reveling in the sheer joy of motion. Then, in the middle of a sprint, Kyle would hear a rustle, and his body would freeze. I mirrored a second behind. His eyes and ears, trained from years of guiding elk hunts, always picked out movement quicker than mine. A herd of bachelor elk, a moose mama and her calf, a black bear.

Kyle and I were guiding for an outfitting service in Taylor Park, Colorado. The basecamp, a collection of pine-milled cabins at the foot of the Continental Divide, included hundreds of acres of wilderness that brushed up against Forest Service land in most directions. For us, that simply meant our feet could take us anywhere we wanted to go.
It was my second season at the camp, and Kyle’s third or fourth year of guiding through the summers and into hunting season in the fall. The workday started with breakfast at eight and ended with dinner at six. In the fringe hours, we ran.

Several friends from college and I were training for our first ultra-marathon in October, so I came into the summer with a rigorous training schedule outlined. Kyle frequently jumped in, but his runs were dictated more by his desire to keep tabs on the movements of local elk herds than meeting training requirements. I logged my miles in the morning and evening, soaking up the sounds, sights, and smells of the Rockies—letting the steep mountain slopes shape my body with each stride.

I was looking forward to the race in the fall, but that wasn’t what motivated me to leave my cabin each morning. Running these mountains had become a liturgy the previous summer, a ritual of physical prayer I was eager to reinstate. The sacrifice of sweat and spent muscles prepared my spirit to encounter the surrounding peaks and rivers in a way that even a backpacking trip did not.

My pounding pulse was the currency in which the mountains and I dealt. Each morning, I offered this small payment in exchange for access to sacred spaces. Like leaving a tobacco leaf in exchange for a medicinal plant, the mountains didn’t need my silent suffering, but the gifts I received here, peace and beauty, challenge and humility, seemed to require an offering in exchange.

Weekday runs ranged from thirty to ninety minutes, enough, over the course of two summers, to thoroughly explore my surroundings. With each mile, I came to
know the groves of trees, muddy trails, and breathtaking views, not as objects, but as friends. I knew where the strawberries would come in thick in August because I had wandered among them in May. I discovered where I could hear the wind rustle through Aspen leaves as well as pine needles, and was saddened when these giants fell in a July thunderstorm. I learned where Illinois Creek eddied, creating a pool to soak my tired muscles, and traced hidden game trails through the woods. And I learned that all of these were alive.

In a group, Kyle tends to keep his thoughts to himself, but from time to time on our runs, he would tell me how a certain ray of sunlight striking a leaf the day before had spoken to him. When we drove into Gunnison for supplies he saw a family of foxes and wondered aloud as we fell asleep that night, what might they have been trying to communicate? For Kyle, a run or a hunt, was more than an activity. It was a conversation.

Longer weekend runs drew me even further into the wilderness, and as my body adjusted to the altitude and exertion, the familiar rhythm of my steps became background noise. My ears were opening to this conversation. For three or four hours at a time, I eagerly searched the banks of Texas Creek for those articulate glints of water. I finished each run, exhausted, but invigorated. Next week I would return and press two miles further. What might I hear, see, experience then?

Unlike the ATVs and dirt bikes that sometimes passed me on these trails, I felt I was not seeking nature; I was taking part in it. The cost of my movement was not externalized. I knew it and earned it with each step. Like the elk and pika that called these hills home, I was not a visitor. The rhythm of my daily life, a spiritual
and physical need that found fulfillment in this liturgy of flesh and bone, situated me here, and whatever was happening, unfolding in this space, involved me.

Each run drew new voices into the conversation. Soon, I was not repeating Texas Creek alone, another guide, Ben, was sketching a route that would trade the one hour drive to Crested Butte for an ascent of Mount Jenkins followed by a 16-mile run into town along Cement Creek. An hour before we left, our friend Grace borrowed a mountain bike, threw it in the truck bed and joined us for the journey. By the time we arrived in town, the sun had long since set, and every storefront was closed. We bummed a ride back to camp without disappointment. We hadn't come for food or entertainment. We came for the conversation—the dialogue of open eyes and exhalation.

Two weeks later, Kyle, Ben, and I set our sights on Buena Vista. We exchanged the familiar roads of Cottonwood Pass for a trek up and over Mount Ann. Over the course of the summer, we had run Ann three or four times, and a friendly competition ensued to see who could cover the thirteen-mile trip fastest after dinner. This time we ran together, pausing once we crossed the summit to walk the banks of Lake Ann, a hidden pool surrounded by wildflowers. We had glimpsed it from the peak before, but now we experienced it, tired and satisfied pilgrims.

Wendell Berry writes, “Our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, on which they depend in a complexity of ways from biological to spiritual.” We felt this, as we prodded one another through the mountains, energy transferring between each other without words. “They are not distinct from the bodies of plants and animals,” he continues, “with which we are involved in the cycles of feeding and
in the intricate companionships of ecological systems of the spirit." We knew this was true when a low-flying hawk gave new life to our legs, or our bodies craved the energy of the dried mango we passed between us. “They are not distinct from the earth, the sun and the moon, and the heavenly bodies." We celebrated this with every footfall, the wind accepting the sweat from our limbs, and our skin soaking up the moisture of the cold waters we submerged in. We did not simply run through wild places, we participated in them, with them, body and soul.

In all our runs, we never made it up Mount Ann without stopping. Every time, her strength bested ours, and we were glad for it. Her immensity and fortitude is part of what drew us to her, and with every drop of sweat, we celebrated the humility of “accurate insight.”

The runs drew us to beautiful places, but it was the sacrifice of the journey that allowed us to truly experience them. Berry explains “with the rise of industry, we began to romanticize the wilderness . . . to institutionalize it within the concept of the ‘scenic.’” Wild places no longer filled our nostrils, lungs, and sweat glands, only our camera lenses. We became “viewers of ‘views’” and in so doing, forgot that we daily depend on “natural forces . . . that have never in any meaningful sense been controlled and conquered.” Racing up the side of these mountains was not about competition; it was a rite—a rebirth.

“Until modern times,” Berry recalls, “we focused a great deal of the best of our thought upon such rituals of return to the human condition.” Now, it seems our rituals strive to protect us from such acts of humility. We control the angle of
our beds, the speed of our cars, the amount and color of light we allow in our homes. Everything is customizable. Everything is controllable. Not here.

On these mountain runs, we reclaimed the other half of our relationship to the world around us. We were not only consumers; we were also members, participants and co-creators in the natural beauty of life and movement.

This may seem like high-minded language for a simple act of transportation. But I have learned that to run in this manner is anything but. It requires I submit my body to the unmanageable demands of the world around. Every breath becomes hungry. I feel muscles I cannot name and do not understand yearning for life, and in that moment, I know air is a gift. Every step has a cost, and that conscious act of devotion is driven, not by necessity, but by the knowledge that my movement might allow me to experience something sacred. That it is that thing. Covered in sweat and snot, I am not humiliated. I am reminded of what it means to be free.

The Tohono O'odham call these rites, *Himdag*, the way of life of the Desert People. *Himdag* encapsulates what it means to be O'odham. As one elder woman said, “All of these things . . . they are all a part of who we are. Our language is us, our ceremonies is us, our values is us.”

Former director of Tucson’s Native Seed:SEARCH, Angelo Joaquin Jr., described *Himdag* as “the crucial balance between the mental, physical, and spiritual health of an individual.” Like Berry’s writing, *Himdag* acknowledges that that mind body and spirit are inseparable. To be fully human, means pursuing health in each of these ways.
For the O’odham, running is part of what maintains this balance. Long before thirsty Spanish horses wandered into the Sonoran, or dusty Jeeps pumped out exhaust, the Desert People knew their land with their feet. Joaquin says, “there are still traditional people who get up to run and greet the sun every morning.” If you ask, “they’ll say that what they’re doing is part of fulfilling their spiritual needs.”

In Himdag, “there is no distinction between humans and animals and plants,” Joaquin explains, they are connected by a relationship “that was present since the world was created.” The act of running blends these relationships together. It is physical and spiritual—a silent conversation.

In January, I visited the San Xavier reservation because, though I didn’t yet know the word, I badly wanted to learn about Himdag. I wanted to know what practices and lessons might teach me to converse with my desert homeland as the Desert People learned before me. While there, I spoke with an O’odham man from the cultural center who explained to me, that the O’odham relationship to running was not a casual affair. Many of the O’odham ceremonial games involved races longer than marathons.

“There’s a game called songiwul,” he said, “and it’s kind of a three man relay race . . . kind of a kickball race. The participants, the men, will throw or toss a ball, either made out of hardwood, like ironwood or mesquite or carved out of pumus rock, the volcanic rock that’s kind of light. And they’ll pick it up with their toes and toss it and then the other guy will come and he’ll pick it and toss it and then the other guy will come and so they relay and they get so good at it that they’ll be running in full stride and just tossing the ball and the other guy will come and toss it
and they’ll race like that. And they’ll start at one point and go a 26-mile lap and come back and end at the same point.”

The game was a matter of communal pride and strength, and massive wagers would be placed on the outcome. Games like these also ensured that O’odham runners would have the stamina needed for practical aspects of desert life, such as scouting for water and enemies.

The best runners, the O’odham man told me, might serve as the *kahio* for a village leader or chief. This word, “*kahio,*” he explained, “is our term for leg, and so whenever ... one of their scouts saw their enemy, the Apache, coming onto our lands, they would send their *kahio,* their leg, to the nearest village to warn them, to let them know they’ve spotted an Apache, or a group or a band or whatever. And so, then, the people would send out through the runners, the runners would be the ones that would send that information out to let people know what was going on.”

But as the O’odham ran the desert for ceremonies, games, or errands, something else was happening. They were learning it. When I asked the man about the importance of running in this way, he replied, “it’s just knowing your home. I mean it’s like you have a home, you have a lot, you have a yard ... you know what’s there, right. You know where water puddles after a rainstorm, so you know your land. So this is our land, so we know those things that are here.”

A late O’odham elder, Frances Manuel remembers her grandfather constantly exhorting her to run in this way. “He’d say, ‘Get up and run, so someday, if you need to go fast, it would save your life.’ But, he would also add, “Go and run, maybe some
bird, or powerful thing will give you power. [Mat ‘ab ha’icu om-ma: g’e-gewkdag].”
That’s what he used to say.”

Frances’ grandfather understood that within O’odham Himdag, running had a
dual nature. Running ability was practical—searching for food or the fleeing from
fear, speed and endurance could mean the difference between life and death—but it
also contained a spiritual element. Maybe, while you run, you will encounter, and be
blessed by, a life different than your own. This act of running might imbue life as
well as preserve it.

Running acts as a link between spirit, man, and creation. It’s an
understanding, the man told me, that can be traced back to the O’odham’s most
ancient stories. “In many of our creation stories,” he said, “when those first O’odham
found themselves in situations that they didn’t know how to deal with, that was new
to them, they were dumbfounded on what to do . . . they would send a runner to this
mountain to the east of us, Baboquivari, and they would summon their Creator.”

Up on Baboquivari Mountain, he said, “there’s a special place up there we call
the Home of the Creator. And they would go there and they would summon the
creator to come and he would come and he would help the people deal with
whatever needed to be dealt with.”

This crossover between the physical and spiritual can be seen throughout
O’odham Himdag. In late June, the O’odham gather the fruit of the saguaro cactus.
With long poles of saguaro ribs, they knock down the bahidaj and collect it from the
ground. This harvest, ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan warns, is not the picturesque
process touted on magazine covers and art galleries. It is hot, sweaty, and uncomfortably physical.

“The persistent perspiring and panting in the midst of the saguaro forests—they are the raw intimacy the Papago maintain with their desert,” Nabhan writes. “Somewhat ugly to the outside eye, this routine is an honest indicator of the strong bonds between the Desert People and their surroundings. Instead of running away from the desert during its driest, hottest time some still run to the heart of it.”39

The Papago, or O’odham, have a special relationship with the saguaro cactus. They understand saguaros, not as “something of an ‘other,’ outside world,” but “as part of humankind.” Nabhan claims this is not because of the upright stature of the saguaro, or the familiar form of arms and body, but because, like humans, “no matter how much [the saguaros] tend to dominate a landscape, they are still vulnerable.”40

O’odham legend describes the first saguaro as an infant, abandoned by a neglectful mother. The child attempted to follow his mother, but exhausted, collapsed into the earth and rose up a saguaro cactus. This child-like vulnerability is on display in the early life stages of the plant. Though they are the iconic image of the Southwest, saguaros struggle to propagate in the harsh temperatures and low-moisture of their desert environment. They survive almost exclusively beneath the protection of a nurse tree, a palo verde or ironwood whose presence provides a more temperate environment for the establishing infant.

After the O’odham collect fruit from the mature saguaros, they boil it down to *si:tol* syrup. The syrup is an important source of calories and revenue, but during
this season it serves a more important purpose. It is the key ingredient for nawait, cactus wine. It brings down the clouds.

The nawait ceremony is an O’odham gathering known by the furious pace of its wine drinking. But, elders remind, it is “not simply for getting drunk . . . but for bringing the rains so that the plants can grow again.” The drinking, and the ensuing vulnerability it causes, facilitates the prayed-for precipitation. Because the wine is fermented for such a short period of time, Ruth Underhill’s ethnography notes that the drink has a low alcohol content. “So much of it must be drunk before there is any intoxication,” she wrote, “that its most usual effect is to make the drinker vomit.”

This physical purging is part of the ceremony’s importance. Underhill recorded that upon seeing a neighbor regurgitate the wine, “people say with pleasure . . . ’Look, he is throwing up the clouds.’” When Nabhan attended the event several decades later, he observed “elders and some of the middle-aged Papago” still “do this off and on between their bouts of drinking.” In the context of the ceremony, vomit is not suppressed. “The liquid appeared to come up as easily as it went down,” Nabhan wrote, and as such, it was not a private act. “They vomited in the open, without any hesitancy, and were taken back into the embrace of the other singers just as openly.”

There is no shame in this exchange. It is not hidden or apologized for. Nor is there any attempt to hold in the stomach that which should not remain. The nawait ceremony presses the natural rhythms of giving and receiving together. Nabhan remarks, “This purging and subsequent physical relief tie in so well with the
ceremonial start of the Papago’s annual cycle. As they are being cleansed, they are bringing in the rains to renew the land and to break the heat.” The process celebrates the limitations of the human body while also recognizing that humans participate, spiritually and physically, in bringing down the clouds.

Though I have never been to a navait ceremony, running through the desert introduced me to a similar comingling of spirit and body. At my first cross-country practice, the summer after eighth-grade, I repainted the base of a picnic table with the lemon yogurt I had choked down on my drive. It was my first realization that running was more than a sport. In this intimate act of surrender, I would be confronted by my own natural limits, and this practice would require a visceral giving of myself.

Years later, tennis and basketball have faded from daily acts to occasional hobbies. Yet I am running more than ever. I find myself tightening my laces, not because running is a skill of mine, but because it is a ritual. It is the form through which I make my acquaintance with the world around me.

I run when I spend my summers in the vast wilderness of Colorado, but also when at school in small-town Pennsylvania, or home in Tucson on break. Recently I visited Tennessee for a conference, and in the short time we had between returning from the university and leaving for dinner, I changed out of my shirt and tie and slid on my shorts and shoes. For an hour, I introduced myself to Memphis while I ran its streets.

Compared to the speed of planes and cars, the slow physicality of running requires the repetition of transition. In “An Entrance to the Woods,” Berry writes,
“When the Indians and the first white hunters entered this country they were altogether here as soon as they arrived, for they had seen and experienced fully everything between here and their starting place, and so the transition was gradual and articulate in their consciousness.”

The breakneck pace of modern life all but eliminates this gradual approach. We dash back and forth, operating on “the rather thoughtless assumption that people can change places as rapidly as their bodies can be transported,” and in our rush, we drown out conversational introductions. Running reinstates these formalities.

As I crossed the highway from the hotel, navigated around construction at a local school, and ducked behind the carriages that populate Beale Street, I came to know Memphis as alive. The city is not the lifeless dot I saw on the map, or the indistinct image I caught from the plane window. It is a community, an ecosystem, a living entity. Memphis, I came to know with each stride, is the smell of freshly cut grass in the city park. The clip-clop of horse hooves on asphalt. The dart of a sparrow from a rooftop. The music of voices from patios, and backyards, and car windows. The gentle rain that peppered my hot skin. In submitting my body to this place, I came to know it, and gave it a chance to know me.

In one of the O’odham creation stories, First Born sings a song as he finishes the work of creation:

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Earth medicine man
finished the earth.
Come near and
see it and do
something to it.
He made it round.
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Come near and see it
and do something to it. 49

In my experience, we tend to jump to the final act of the refrain. Do something to it. But the song, like the nawait ceremony, the kickball games, and marathon runs, reminds us that there are other steps that must come first. Come near. See it. After you have done these things, you may participate, you may leave your mark and do your work. But this comes third.

When the Tohono O’odham Cultural Center was built, the ground was broken, not by golden shovels, but by ironwood planting sticks, prepared by an elder. After the wood was harvested, a small piece of bright cloth was tied to the tree. “Just a thank you,” I was told, “our way of showing our respect.” When the center was opened. The first activity was a prayer run—thirteen miles from Baboquivari Peak to the new doors. “We view it as these runners bringing the blessings of our creator to our event,” the man said proudly.

Running demands we participate in the early work of creation. For all the work it requires, the impact of each footfall on the receiving earth is minimal. But the impact on our spirits is not. Running opens our ears and our eyes. It invites us to ignore the safe distance of the scenic. Come near and see it and do something to it. This is Himdag—this is the way of life
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