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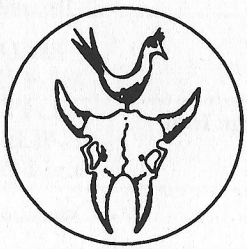

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Birding While Indian

Though they had great curiosity about nature and understood it well, the Indians satisfied their curiosity more by being descriptive than by being analytic. [...] For all their skill as observers, the Indians do not qualify, in modern terms, as birders. [...] The Indians, as far as anyone seems to know, did not keep [birding] lists. The white man, as soon as he came to America, did.
—Joseph Kastner [1]

A long-running joke among Native Americans in South Dakota is that the criminal charge of DWI (Driving While Intoxicated) actually means "Driving While Indian." There are variants: "Driving With Indians," "Drinking With Indians," and the like, depending upon the speaker and audience. But the general meaning of the "Indian" reinscription, whether uttered by Native or white, is that South Dakota has been—hell, it *is*—a pretty racist place for its original inhabitants.

As a part-Lakota who has also been a lifelong birder—who has been "birding while Indian"—I can safely assert that the birding world, too, is a "pretty racist place." No, it's not through some conscious official dictate by some plutocratic ornithological cabal of little old white women in tennis shoes, with a home office in Central Park. Rather, it's another (quite subtle) example of what sociologists call "institutional" racism: that is, given the very structure of American society, itself determined by and large by an ongoing history of racism, it's a fact that Native Americans are much less likely to become birders. And while a rather inchoate group of hobbyists—let's call them Birder Nation—may not wield the same disciplinary power as a school system or a business workplace, the subtle forces of white privilege are at work all the same, both in the vast literature about birds and birding and through such organizations as the ABA (American Birding Association).

The ABA is now aware of this problem. A recent ABA blog bears the title "Moving forward: increasing racial diversity in birding" and voices birding officialdom's interest in "expanding the appeal of birding to a non-white audience."[2] A comparable *National Geographic* article is boldly titled "Colorful World of Birding Has Conspicuous Lack of People of Color: More diversity among bird-watchers is in everyone's best interest." Understandably, it focuses on the problems of being an African-American birder and begins, "If you're a black bird-watcher, 'be prepared to be confused with the other black birder'"! Such "black humor" (pun intended) scenarios have already been brilliantly treated in YouTube videos: we can (sadly) easily imagine "how onlookers might react to seeing a black or Hispanic man with binoculars wandering the woods—or a suburban neighborhood—at dusk, dawn, or night."[3] My own excursions have sometimes been almost as uncomfortable, as a long-haired fellow of "uncertain" ethnicity. On a birding trip to the U.S. South a few years back, I discovered that such a person driving slowly through Arkansas graveyards, binoculars in hand, received enough evil glances from the locals that I quickly stopped the practice. (But hey, graveyards *are* often great birding venues, especially if they have conifers!)

As for the bare statistics, a 2011 federal survey found that "93 percent of American birders were white, 5 percent

were Hispanic [...] 4 percent were black, 1 percent were Asian American, and 2 percent were 'other.'"[4] (It's hard to express what it feels like to be that "other.") I do like Hamilton's ultimate reason for this call for greater human diversity or social justice. It's for greater *bio*-diversity and for greater *environmental* justice at last: "developing more diversity among birders will broaden support for measures needed to protect birds." Birders—minority or not—are (or should be) more conscious than most people that, in the grand order of things, it's finally *not* all about human intramural politics.

Of course—as always in the U.S.—this institutional racism is inextricably tied to socioeconomic inequities; moreover, among U.S. ethnic groups, Native Americans are the poorest of all. If classism and racism are the two great black sheep—or "black beasts" (*bêtes noires*)—of U.S. history, they are also harder than hell to tell apart; sometimes I suspect that they're pretty much one creature. (So—if you're one of those people who adamantly believes that "racism is over," that we live in an Edenic post-racial society—you can simply read this whole essay as about birding while—*poor*. But you would be wrong.)

The classism of birding is more manifest. Growing up on welfare and food stamps, I eventually managed to acquire a $5 bird guide and a $20 pair of K-Mart binoculars—which I got for Christmas but which I don't think were *ever* in alignment; and as a grade-schooler, I walked miles and miles, freezing or sweating, to a few select birding venues on the outskirts of my hometown of Rapid City, South Dakota. And I enjoyed every minute of it. But I was really missing out on many of what are now considered the *de rigeur* pleasures and privileges of being a birder. It took me many years into adulthood to realize the facts that 1) you have to spend a good several hundred dollars on a pair of binoculars that is functionally worth a damn; and 2) you can't really identify all those tiny distant look-alike shorebirds without a spotting scope, a decent one of which will run at least $1,500; and 3) you can't really bird with any genuine freedom without a reliable car and a wallet with enough money to buy tank of gas after tank of gas. I really didn't have all of these privileges until well into my 50's.[5] And for the "average" Native on the reservation, of course, such requirements are inexorably prohibitive.

A quick examination of perhaps the most famous "bird book" of all time, Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, is revelatory in this regard. First published in 1934, it has inspired generations of Americans to start birding because, according to Peterson, the book allows for the "possibility of quickly identifying almost any bird, with amazing certainty, at the snap of a finger." And the hobby entails a "zest that many of us would like to interpret as 'scientific zeal' rather than the quickening of our sporting blood. Field birding [. .] is a game—a most absorbing game."[6] This "game"—part science, part surrogate for the "blood sport" of hunting?—is apparently now completely democratized by the advent of such guides, although, for starters, it does require the literacy to navigate through a text filled with Latinate names for avian body parts and other "heavy" ornithological apparati. More to the point, its stance of scientific objectivity and/or pure hobbyist fun mystifies and occludes the ultimately white-bourgeois elitist assumptions of Peterson's (and might I say birding's?) entire enterprise. Beneath the *Guide*'s text and drawings, then, the alterities of race and class lie submerged, and the birds on its pages are thus (and also) displacements for the *human* abject, demonstrating once again that even the most apparently objective inscriptions of the non-human are often inextricably fraught with the human-all-too-human politics of the Other.

In terms of economic class, Peterson's project assumes the kind of leisure for the class-privileged "game" that I have already detailed. Such naturalist pastimes are at last a 19th-century Romantic "view of nature" that "depends on individual feeling, on consciousness, on the leisure to enjoy

sunsets and spring days,"[7] an attitude towards nature, at last, available only to the moneyed class. If the *Guide* were indeed "packaged by Peterson to be played by all comers,"[8] his democratic gesture was a failure: rather, it appears that Peterson's oft-invoked "student" (of birds) is actually a code-word for—the privileged.

As for "race," the analogue between imperialist human ethnological hierarchies and the evolutionarily ordering taxonomy of ornithology must be acknowledged. In general, from Linnaeus's 18th-century taxonomical system to 20th-century museums, Western classifications of nature have been bound up with a naturalization of the human hierarchies of race, class, and gender. If we accept the nature-to-human historical progression of taxonomy for a moment, it's a small (and no doubt Self-justifying) step from valuing relatively evolutionarily "advanced" songbirds over more "primitive" waterfowl to valuing one (colonizing) human "race" over other human "races." Thus birds (and other species in general) become fill-ins for the "inferior" ethnic other, as Nature itself continues to be the ideological playground for human racial politics. In sum, birds and nature can be read, on one level, as metonymic displacements for the anxiety-ridden modalities of race, class, and gender. "Nature" itself, finally, is another site of "recognition and disavowal," to use Homi Bhabha's phrase, through which the Western subject achieves that "ideal ego that is white and whole."[9]

"Birding while Indian," on the Great Plains in particular, can be difficult because of *language* itself. The dominant discourse is replete with the dark shadow of colonialism and genocide. For instance: "Pioneering New Frontiers" has been the University of Nebraska's "slogan" for a good while now. And it certainly well represents an ongoing colonialist ideology that still permeates the Great Plains region, in terms of both place names and good ol' boy attitudes, be they conscious or unconscious. Birding the back roads around Lincoln, NE, I am always struck at how inordinately symptomatic the names of the lakes and SRAs (State Recreational Areas) are: names like Stagecoach, and Wagon Train, and Conestoga. (As I drag my binoculars out of the car upon my arrival at one of these venues, I half-expect Hoss Cartwright or Rowdy Yates to show up on a fast horse and ask me, "Boy. [Dramatic pause.] You from 'round these parts?") And so, in the county I live in alone, you can relive the glory and excitement of Manifest Destiny by hitching your stars to a stagecoach, or a Conestoga wagon, or an entire wagon train; you can also brave the savage dangers of—*play Native tom-tom in the background*—Pawnee Lake. And on the edge of Lincoln is Pioneers Park, if you haven't had enough cowboying up.

Yes, there are also the apparent acknowledgements to a Native American legacy nearby, evidenced by the names of Pawnee Lake and Indian Cave State Park. But for some reason, whenever I think of Indian Cave (in the southeast corner of Nebraska), I keep hearing in my mind's ear "Indian *Joe* State Park." And I feel the flash-of-a-moment hope that Tom and Becky are safe from that savage ne'er-do-well's dastardly doings. In other words, yes: there's something exotically sinister in the connotations of the very phrase "Indian Cave" that makes me very sad. For at last, such place names are really guilty elegies, half-hearted half-tributes to a supposed "race long gone." Just a short drive south of Indian Cave is the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, just across the Missouri border. Oh, wait, they *just* recently changed the name of that area to the less "colorful" Loess Bluffs NWR. "It was the least they could do."

In sum, I'm constantly aware of the ongoing irony that many of my favorite birding places on the Great Plains are also some of worst closet-racist tourist-trap examples of Christo-Custer colonialism. Western South Dakota, where I grew up, is probably even worse in this ideology of naming. I offer as evidence *Custer* State Park, in the southern Black Hills. To paraphrase a Native acquaintance during a

Holocaust presentation from Custer township itself: "Here I am in a town called Custer. What the hell? It's as if I'm a Jew living in Germany, and the town is called Hitler. Do you think *they'd* be able to get away with that?" Maybe the analogy is a bit hyperbolic, but the truth is there: beside the nearly completely victorious Christian churches on the Great Plains are these incredibly strident examples of Euro-American military conquest; the names of Colonel Custer, General Sheridan, et al. infect many of the town and school names in South Dakota; the innumerable tourist traps laud the exploits of gold-lusting hooligans, at last. The "rah-rah" brainwashing is still going on, creating a painful cognitive dissonance in the few who are "birding while Indian."

I have elsewhere employed the term *Christo-Custer colonialism* for the imperialist ideology that still dominates the very names and signage of the state parks and tourist traps of the northern Plains that have been, as I've said, the stomping grounds of my birding journeys. U.S. settler colonialism was spearheaded not only by the military forces of the Custers and Sheridans of the U.S. Army and Cavalry, but by their complicit confreres of religious proselytizing, the Christian missionaries. Together, they performed a two-fisted attack upon the Plains Indian tribes, and must have seemed a very strange Janus-faced figure, with a Winchester rifle in one hand and a King James Bible in the other—the "bad cop" brute force of avaricious gold-and-land-grabbing conquest justified by "good cop" ideological rationalizations and sanctimoniousness. Or, as Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor puts it, the colonial enterprise combined the "bilingual signs of calvary and cavalry."[10]

Even simply seeing or hearing a Western Meadowlark becomes a birding act fraught with a good deal of angst. For many, the meadowlark and other Great Plains icons (still) evoke a nostalgia for the "frontier"—for an American West and Midwest where cowboy and settler (still) meet the human Native and the non-human "wild." But nostalgia is ultimately the consciousness that one is now beyond that past, a belated modernist point of view that includes both an implicit hubris in having transcended such things and a yearning for, an ongoing mourning for the loss of, said past. This specific nostalgia for the "primitive" West, from the Euro-colonizers' stance, also necessarily involves the liminality of borders, the fear of and fascination with the sheer difference between "us" and "them": of the Western Self versus the indigenous Other, of the "civilized" human versus the incredible alterity of the American environment itself. Most fascinating is that the Others that the settlers encountered in this new land were both human and non-human, those feather-wearing Indians and those even more alien beings born with feathers—like, oh, the Western Meadowlark.

Another place in the Black Hills that's hard to bird, that's hard to even handle, psychologically, is the Crazy Horse Memorial, a huge sculpture cut out of Black Hills granite not far from Custer township, which for decades has been but a head and the outline of an arm. According to the official tourist-trap literature and lore of the monument, Crazy Horse's (unfinished) outstretched arm is pointing towards the western South Dakota landscape itself so that we can imagine him uttering his famous (but likely apocryphal) words, "My lands are where my dead lie buried." But my 13-year-old daughter, denizen of some Denver suburb, is unaware of all this. I ask her, "You know what he's saying, Em?" *Huh*-uh. I exclaim triumphantly, "Get off our fucking land!" I've subsequently told this story to my undergraduate students so many times that I'm no longer sure of my exact words. I suspect that I added "fucking" after the fact for the benefit of a classroom full of 20-year-olds. But I have been to the Crazy Horse monument a good number of times before and since the trip with Emma, and so I have been immersed in the troubled politics of the whole monolithic enterprise.

For instance, there have been moments when I have imagined some veritable "face of the Other" peering out

from the interstices of this commercialized and appropriative "white man" sculpture. It is indubitably saying, "Fuck you." (Or maybe "Free me from this static stone prison. You tried to capture me enough when I was alive!") But much more often I despair at the irony of it all, this celebration of a Native warrior, in the cause (at last) of a Western grubbing capitalism that this particular warrior had vehemently despised. And of course these tributes to dead Natives are always also implicit/unconscious celebrations that the "Injuns" *are* good'n'dead, that *we* have conquered them. (Note that the motto reiterated all over the Memorial—"My lands are where my dead lie buried"—has as its most crucial word, *dead*.) Indeed, the tourist site, this monumental site, continues to be a center of ideological conflict, an ongoing battle of worldviews, fraught with the all the ironies noted above. On one of my returns to the monument a few years later, this "Indian birder" saw a vulture circling Crazy Horse's huge head in slow, perhaps even "sinister" flight, and I thought, "How fitting. Scavenger colonialism in a nutshell." In principle, I hate when birds are used as tropes for human politics; but even I couldn't help myself this time.

And then there are other names—that is, those of the birds themselves, most of which entail another set of Euro-colonial(-and-nominal) acts. Some examples seem fairly innocuous, even humorous, as in the whole "goatsucker" order of avians—both the European origins and many of the American species names.

Flash back to Indian Cave State Park. Driving slowly, windows down, through the various campgrounds in the dark, I was stopped by a Game and Parks guy, who asked me what I was doing. I replied, "Listening for goatsuckers." This answer did not appear to immediately satisfy him. I could have replied, "Listening to nightjars," but that's nearly as strange and confusing; plus, I think the latter term is even a greater insult to this order of avians (*Caprimulgiformes*). I'd rather be known as a clandestine sucker of goat teats than one whose nocturnal vocalization is deemed *jarring*. I could also have said, "I'm listening for Eastern Whip-poor-wills, Chuck-will's-widows, and Common Nighthawks," but that's too much of a mouthful. Besides, why and by whom is poor Willy being *whipped*? (Is there some good ol' state-park-campground S/M going on here?) And under what mysterious circumstances did Chuck Will's wife become a widow? These are questions that inquiring birder minds want to know.

Collins' ancient guide to North American wildlife (1959) describes the Whip-poor-will's song as "*whip-poor-WILL*, more accurately written *pur-ple RIB*."[11] But once again, we well might wonder how that rib got so purple and bruised? What sado-masochistic species is making up all these supposedly descriptive syllables of other species—as we project our own species' eons of cruelty and suffering? Yes, these birds—can I call them *caprimulgids* without sounding too pedantic?—are insectivores who feed in flight and thus, like cowbirds and Cattle Egrets, can commonly be found near livestock, and so the old European belief that they hung around goats to suck their milk behind our plow-bent, pox-marked backs has at least a modicum of understandability. But there remains a whole discourse in their very names—of sucking, and whipping, and widowing—that smacks of a bad soft-porn romance and doesn't make the civilization that devised them look good before any "objective" alien observer.

If we look once more at Peterson's acclaimed *Field Guide*, we'll notice that the bird names in the *Guide*—most formulated long before Peterson, of course—often bear the burden of the colonizers' nostalgia for their European home. That is, many native American birds have been given British names that may have little bearing to scientific taxonomy: for example, the "thrasher" was originally the British Song Thrush; but it is now (also) "an American word denoting

New World species"—species not even of the same taxonomic family—the name having been "carried abroad by early settlers."[12] And thus has the "original" European Robin been provided a namesake in the New World—the American Robin, related more to the Song Thrush and (European) Blackbird than to its nominal Euro-"twin." Bird by bird, the New World species have been Europeanized, often by simply having "American" prefixed to a European bird name.

The presence in the *Field Guide* of such European-introduced imports as the European Starling and House Sparrow, too, denotes a similar yearning for the "same old place." Both species were introduced by "homesick" Euro-Americans; and ironically (and yet appropriately, as a case of colonialist parallelism), the "colonizing" propensities of these two European birds have resulted in the displacement of many native species of songbirds—and the lamentable (to the birder, at least) ubiquitous domination of these two imports in many U.S. towns and cities. At last, the "Euro-American" birder is *privileged* enough to be able to use Peterson's *Guide* to identify various avian denizens of the New World; but even this identification of the "new" often implies a desire for the "old," a desire whose residues are thus still evident in the "proselytizing" handbooks that are the legacy of 19th-century imperialist natural science. For colonialism's will-to-power and science's will-to-knowledge were two sides of the same coin, and what M. L. Pratt has described as a "Victorian discovery rhetoric" applies equally to the earlier colonization of North America: the rhetoric was an othering and ordering of nature that included a "sprinkling" of the native scene "with some little bits of England."[13]

It still strikes me as incredibly *interesting* that two of our most common and well-known "American" birds, the starling and the "English" sparrow, are actually "foreigners," and that both were brought here intentionally by Euro-humankind. The European Starling was introduced in New York City in 1892, thanks to the efforts of an eccentric who was "determined to introduce into America all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare."[14] And so "North American birds and people have been suffering ever since"![15] Its advent to the Great Plains came only a few decades later:

> Starlings were first reported in Nebraska [...] in 1932. [In that same year, Nebraskan ornithologist] Myron Swenk [...] noted that "they will increase in abundance rapidly, and soon the obnoxious traits of the species will be revealed," adding that the starling "nicely combines all the detestable features of the English sparrow [...]and adds a few of its own for good measure[!]."[16]

Pearson et al.'s venerable *Birds of America* likewise expresses a fear of the ecological results of this "interloper in the new land" relatively early (1917), even suggesting that the bird's "undesirable qualities" may be "accentuated when [...] introduced into a new country": these fears led to a good deal of ornithological angst and "apprehension" even then, for the interlopers were already the "persistent enemy of many native birds."[17] But what one also might note, if "birding while Indian," is that not once do these natural scientists make the analogical leap to *human* immigrants overrunning the native populations, or having their "undesirable qualities" worsened in their exposure to a "brave new world."

Such an ideological regime of Eurocentric projections tended (and still tends) to erase the real Western Hemisphere, the real indigenous human, and the real bird. This symptomatic move is evident in Willa Cather's more general erasure of the Great Plains life that preceded Euro-American colonialism. In *My Ántonia* (1918), for instance, the narrator Jim Burden experiences an ontological crisis of sorts upon his first view of the Plains, as if he were face-to-face with a geographical vacuum: "There seemed to be *nothing* to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. [...]There was *nothing but land*: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."[18] But of course these plains were

actually teeming with the "countries" of other species and the tribes of other humans—as already recorded in the 19th-century journals of Lewis and Clark, and John James Audubon, and George A. Custer. If the dominant large mammal, the American Bison, had already had its numbers decimated by hunting and outright slaughter, the songs of the meadowlark and the flights of the crane still attested, in Cather's day, to a native bioregion very much vibrant and alive. Cather also conveniently (and characteristically) ignores other human cultures and nations—those of the American indigenous—who had peopled these plains for millennia, and whose own myths, folklore, and songs revealed a longtime close co-evolution with both the bison and the birds of this region. It's pretty lamentable, then, that this very quotation from *My Ántonia*—about the Plains as *nothingness*—is inscribed on the first wall that the visitor sees upon entering Lincoln's Great Plains Art Museum. As the discourse of colonialism marches on.

I love Texas highways. Everybody's going 85, sure of their God and their white privilege. If they knew my mind, they'd probably just shoot my liberal mixed-blood ass.

Was that a Chihuahuan raven? Fuck. I *could* slow down.

Long birding trips mostly involve syncing your three basic needs: gas, a piss, and your next Diet Coke.

Another small southern plains town, another shitload of great-tailed grackles and Eurasian collared-doves acting as if they owned the place because they do. And one half-obligatory Mississippi kite in desultory flopping flight on the edge of town by the water tower. Did I just count nine house sparrows? Let's just round it up to ten. It's TEXas.

Rush Limbaugh or country music or Bible talk. Christ. Choices in a democracy. Might as well listen to the Spanish station because I don't understand it well enough to get pissed off enough to want to turn my Subaru into an oncoming semi.

Yep, that's a goddamn Cattle Egret. Write it down. 7:35, TX Hwy 15, uh—DAMN. Five map apps on my iPhone and not one can tell me what county I'm in.

This is the worst gas-station beef jerky I've ever had.

If you forget about the song and erase the yellow, meadowlarks are pretty goofy-looking birds.

If I lived here, I'd be home by now. (How many times do I tell myself that same old joke? I gotta get me a hobby.) What was THAT? A bird. Order Aves. What the world needs now is a little Avian Order. Shut your mind the fuck up. I swear, Tom, I'll stop this car.

There's something about a two-lane highway that can make you regret your entire life.

Then—oh!—a scissor-tailed flycatcher on a barbed-wire fence and something warm wells up inside and you want to bless or save the world or not even care that it will never be blessed or saved.

Hawk. Not a good enough look to tell—? Red-tailed hawk, then. Yep. Sure. That's the ticket. Write it down.

I could turn all these random thoughts into a poem, but that would just be stupid.

I love Texas highways. Everybody going 85, smug in their God and their white privilege. If they knew my mind, they'd probably just blow away my commie mixed-blood ass.

> My bird is a genuine little savage, doubtless, but I value him as a neighbor [...] [Nature] is an Indian maiden, dark, subtle, dreaming, with glances now and then that thrill the wild blood in one's veins.
> —John Burroughs[19]

Burrough's conflation of bird and human Native—both metyonyms for a more general "wild" American "Nature"—is a ubiquitous trope in Euro-American literature. And so again, the "birding Indian" always already inhabits a very liminal place, a double stance of both imperial Self and specular Other. Certainly, many American tribal peoples were

very skilled in observing their environment, in closely studying the behaviors of other species, including (and maybe especially) avian life. And yet, "[f]or all their skill as observers, the Indians do not qualify, in modern terms, as birders."[20]

Before exploring the "why" of this statement, it might be illuminating to look at an exception that proves the rule, as it were, the fact that one of the greatest experts on the Passenger Pigeon in the 19th century just happened to be a Native American—Pottawattomie chief Simon Pokagon. But while he made valuable ornithological contributions regarding this bird, his liminal, Other-cultural status remained paramount. He pointedly noted, for instance, that "they [Euro-Americans] naturally called" the Passenger Pigeon "a wild pigeon, as they called us wild men"—as the old bird-equals-Indian trope strikes again. Pokagon also contrasted Native and white relationships to and treatments of the bird: although the pigeon had been "always a great source of" food for his tribe, the species "continued to increase" until the whites' rampant commercial netting thereof, in the years 1840-1878.[21] Kastner cites Pokagon as a "reliable authority" on the bird because he "had clearly studied the white man's way of writing about nature and adopted it with panache[!]," becoming the "most eminent birder of his race."[22] (As should be clear by now, he probably didn't have a lot of competition for this accolade.)

But significantly, Pokagon's naturalist "panache" was never completely assimilated into the Western perspective, for it included a particularly Native empathy for other species, including an impulse to comprehend their discourse: "I tried to understand their strange language," he says, at one nesting site, "and why they all chatted in concert."[23] Contrast this attitude with Audubon's observations: despite his sometime empathy for the avian, Audubon's attitude is still the Western spectating "eye/I"—and gun—of objectification and distance; Pokagon's is an indigenous ear, if you will, more open to the possibilities of humankind's familial (and discursive) relationship with other species. I will put aside the specifics of "mythic" and/or "superstitious" Native American tribal beliefs about the Passenger Pigeon as a "sacred" bird; my general point can be succinctly made, that a cultural mythos that incorporates another species as part of life, not death, is more conducive to the *life* of both species.

Again: "for all their skill as observers, the Indians do not qualify, in modern terms, as birders." Why? It's ultimately a matter of *worldview*, of ideology. Birding per se has been historically embedded in a Western way of seeing and knowing the bird from its outset. Anglo-American popular interest in ornithology began circa 1800, fostered both by a newfound infatuation with natural science in general and by the special "social" and symbolic status that birds had acquired through the centuries; soon "ornithology became the most popular scientific disciple," supplemented by a good many "handbooks and periodicals" for its new tag-along hobbyist public.[24] Meanwhile, this same ever-curious Western "I" or "eye" had already well established itself in the New World, looking around and seeing mere/empty "landscape"—like Cather's Jim Burden did—or seeing Native Americans as little-more-than-animals ready to be colonized, to be "penned up" on reservations (à la wildlife reserves). It also saw other native animals themselves as fit fodder for the same taxonomical classification it had applied/would apply to other, human "races." The West's natural-history taxonomical system initiated by Linnaeus must indeed be seen as the regime of "knowledge" behind the "power" of the actual ships and gunpowder of New World colonization, itself a "European knowledge-building enterprise of unprecedented scale and appeal"[25]—and an enterprise to be continued in the gun-and-easel collecting and categorizing of 19th-century American ornithologists like Alexander Wilson and Audubon. This "naturalist's narrative" of order is thus a Foucaultian discourse that has held "enormous ideological force" from the 19th century to this day.[26] Its colonizing, taxonomical "I"

finds ample ground for its "vision" even in such supposedly objective and scientific texts as Peterson's *Guide*.

Indeed, Peterson's ostensibly benign hobbyist emphasis on birding as a "most absorbing game," as a "most fascinating diversion," conceals the Nietzschean will to knowledge and power entailed in this mere "hobby." The birder in fact achieves a certain sense of ontological and epistemological security, I would argue, in the very act of identification, of "knowing": he/she is initially "puzzled" by an (oh, no!) *unknown* bird; but, empowered by the wonders of Peterson's scientific method, the birder can soon "feel confident"[27] in assigning that particular Other a comfortable categorical niche within the cognitive universe of the imperial Self.

A final crack in the naturalist edifice shows through in the last paragraph of Peterson's introduction, as he congratulates himself for the humaneness of his enterprise. While previous ornithologists "seldom accepted a sight record unless it was made along the barrel of a shotgun[!]," now we only need binoculars and the ability to "trust our eyes."[28] Yes, we are no longer gunning down odd-colored birds, to carry them off to the "bird guy" who lives down the road; but we are still wielding the "gun" of our colonial gaze (a gun with a high-powered scope, to be sure), bringing order to our own worldview and psyches, as the non-human Other is finally rendered an object of our imperative desire for "categorical" completion.

No doubt one doesn't have to have been "birding while Indian" to have written the paragraphs immediately above. My analysis, moreover, can and should be taken as evidence that not only is birding itself necessarily complicit with Western ideology, but the notion of "Indian birder" is itself fraught with an inevitable cultural hybridity. And it may not be ironic at all, at last, that my own academic writing refers as often to Baudrillard as it does to Black Elk.

But on the other hand, birding-while-Indian remains a *peculiarly* enlightening lens through which to view my lifelong hobby. There is, for instance, that (at least momentary) pain of being an Other every December when the local birding groups tout their Christmas bird counts—as if believing in a particular Old World desert-sand-tribe deity had some essential connection with identifying those invasive finches from Canada that show up at the winter feeders. (That's not what it means at all!, some will counter; but these people are working within an ideological frame in which "Christmas" is a natural—though really a cultural—given.) Then there is also the weird feeling I get when coming upon "No Trespassing" signs and wondering about the whole enterprise of (mostly white) privately owned land, of fences, and borders, and even of the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, which was ultimately aimed at assimilating Natives into also recognizing the ideological might of fences, and borders, and "No Trespassing" signs.

One might even wonder why even a part-Indian would ever *want* to be a birder. Birding *is*, as I have argued, yet another Western colonial act—of *epistemological* violence—however "benign." This makes it hard to be on the side of objectifying humans who want to chase birds down and—*count* them. And then there's the whole whitestream discourse, as we've seen, that has historically conflated avians and Indians as two wings of the same "wild" and "savage" bird, a discourse that played no small role in the fact that several American bird species and many human Native tribes have met the same fate at the hands of Euro-American colonialism—extinction—and that the remaining Native tribes, like the buffalo, have just barely avoided a similar end.

But at last, the "Indian birder" is, like the American Dipper, a "border" creature. The dipper is a passerine—a perching bird, a songbird—that apparently gave up its arboreal ways in its evolutionary journey just so that it could stand on a wet, mossy rock in a mountain stream and play at being a seabird of sorts, diving and walking under water in search of aquatic bugs and the like. So am I part white,

part Indian, a messed-up and forever anxious fellow of both "rock and air." I'm pretty sure that the American Dipper is comfortable in its "liminal" status. But I doubt that I will ever be.

I think it was in the fourth grade when my best friend asked me, "*Do you know that your mom's a squaw?*" "Huh?"—I looked at my mom again, closely now, and lo and behold, she was indeed a quite dark-skinned woman. Damn. I realized that I was just a poor Indian boy, doomed for years to live on food stamps and commodities and to hide from being seen with my more obviously Indian mother whenever we went to K-Mart. From pure shame. A decade followed, then, as a withdrawn teenager with a vast inferiority complex. This new consciousness of my mixed-blood status may well have led to my subsequent retreat, from grade school on, to the "hills," to the margins, to frequent lone hikes into that finger of the Black Hills that jutted into north Rapid City, SD. There I saw my first Great Horned Owl, my first Golden Eagle, etc.—and there I avoided the taunts of "squaw" and *ieska* (a now derogatory Lakota word for "halfbreed"/mixed-blood). Besides, who wanted to be part . . . INDIAN? Or *part* anything? One's very self-identity needed more order and meaning than that "part of," that hybrid stuff. After all, a Black-capped Chickadee was—"simply"—a Black-capped Chickadee. *Hmmm.* Thank whatever monotheistic deity is ruling the present moment that humankind is too sophisticated and evolved to think that a human is "simply" a human.

The Long-tailed Duck used to be called the Oldsquaw.

That was its longtime official name in all the bird guides and ornithological tomes. The ornithologists recently changed the name for obvious reasons: "squaw" is perhaps the most pejorative word-arrow applied to Indians, the closest thing to the N- word in its intentionally hurtful vitriol, and science can't be involved in such things, obviously, as an "objective" discourse above and beyond such paltry matters as racial epithets.

The sad truth is that I *still* have never seen an Oldsquaw. I mean, a Long-tailed Duck. Oh, I've shown up beside nearby big lakes in the winter when the bird has been reported as a rarity. But I never had a decent spotting scope to span the usually several hundred yards to the middle of these big lakes where such deep-water diving ducks like to reside. My binoculars have always failed me, and the bird has remained one of a handful of rarities that occur in my spot of ground once or twice a year as a huge tease, but forever remain as mysterious as a unicorn, or a god.

The Long-tailed Duck used to be called the Oldsquaw.

And the name—the older, oh-so-"poetic" one—has also always haunted me, too, as I thumb through my old bird guides—as, yes, an odd reminder of *human* racial politics. You see, my Irish father used to come home shit-faced drunk and proceed to beat the hell out of my Indian mother as we small kids watched in howling agony. One of my first memories, in fact, was of dear old Dad beating my mom down this set of outside stairs that ran along the side of our tenement-apartment building. During these beatings, "squaw" was his favorite term of endearment for her. Restraining orders and divorce would follow. As a witness to such batterings, I may have already unconsciously longed to be somewhere else, away from all that human crap. Oh, maybe birding or something, you never know…

The Long-tailed Duck used to be called the Oldsquaw.

Endnotes:

1. Joseph Kastner, *A World of Watchers* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 7.
2. Michael Retter, "Moving forward: increasing racial diversity in birding," aba blog, *American Birding Association*, Aug. 13, 2015, http://blog.aba.org/2015/08/moving-forward-increasing-racial-diversity-in-birding.html (accessed

July 29, 2017).

3. Martha H. Hamilton, "Colorful World of Birding Has Conspicuous Lack of People of Color: More diversity among bird-watchers is in everyone's best interest," *National Geographic*, Sept. 23, 2014, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/09/140923-bird-watching-diversity-environment-science/ (accessed July 29, 2017).
4. Hamilton, "Colorful World of Birding."
5. To be able to jump on a plane and visit some tropical island for a few "lifers" (new species) now seems to be another assumed privilege of the birder. I'm still waiting to afford this one. Hamilton refers to this group of birders as the "Have Equipment, Will Travel" crowd.
6. Roger Tory Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds: Giving Field Marks of All Species Found in Eastern North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), xviii.
7. Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991): 53.
8. Felton Gibbons and Deborah Strom, *Neighbors to the Birds: A History of Birdwatching in Americ*a (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 300.
9. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1984), 76.
10. Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990), 108.
    Henry Hill Collins, Jr., *Complete Field Guide to American Wildlife: East, Central and North* (New York: Harper, 1959), 143.
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14. Paul R. Ehrlich, Davis S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, The Birder's Handbook: A *Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds* (New York: Simon, 1988), 633.
15. Jon Farrar, *Birding Nebraska* [NEBRASKAland Magazine 82.1.] (Lincoln: Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 2004), 86.
16. T. Gilbert Pearson , et al., eds. *Birds of America* [1917]. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1936), 2.238, 2.236, 3.18.
17. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* [1918] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 7-8 (emphasis mine).
18. John Burroughs, T*he Birds of John Burroughs: Keeping a Sharp Lookout,* ed. Jack Kligerman (New York: Hawthorn, 1976), 49, 134.
19. Kastner, *A World of Watchers,* 7.
20. Simon Pokagon, "The Wild Pigeon of North America," in *The Passenger Pigeon*, ed. W. B. Mershon (New York: Outing, 1907), 48, 54.
21, Kastner, *A World of Watchers,* 36, 35.
22. Pokagon, "The Wild Pigeon of North America," 51.
23. Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York: Norton, 1988), 369.
24. Mary Louise Pratt, I*mperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 25.
26. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 28.
27. Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, xviii, xvii.
28. Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, xxi.

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