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The Keeping of Ray A. Young Bear

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“Can the subaltern speak?” So Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wondered in a seminal essay of twenty years ago, only to answer the question with a resounding *no*. For Spivak, the “continuing construction of the subaltern” exercised by the hegemonic culture appeared sufficiently powerful to foreclose the possibilities of self-articulation by the subaltern subject.¹ But shifting from the British commonwealth context to the American context, one might shift Spivak’s question from “can the subaltern speak?” to “should the subaltern speak?” along with the necessary corollary, “speak to whom?” These questions prove especially pertinent to the wide range of Native American cultures that remain relatively underrepresented and understudied even within a diversifying contemporary academy, whether this neglect comes as a consequence of hegemonic neglect or subaltern indifference.

Ostensibly welcomed of late into national polities enabled by and predicated upon their own exclusion and elimination, the indigenous populations of the Americas retain a significant measure of cultural agency and independence despite centuries of depredation and disinheritance. While certainly capable of speaking, and doubtless cognizant whereof they speak, they often elect to forego speech whether in outrage against their ongoing debasement or in deference to their enduring sense of veneration for tradition. Such dynamics become especially evident when attending to contemporary Native American poetry and perhaps nowhere more strongly

than in the work of Meskwaki poet Ray A. Young Bear. Though Young Bear has condemned the environmental and social abuses visited upon his settlement, he has also been checked by a relatively indifferent reading public and by a tribal decorum that keeps the better part of Meskwaki discourse shielded from wider view.² As such, the cultural dynamics of Young Bear's poetic milieu have played a defining role in his work, eliciting a representation of his environment whose holding forth simultaneously functions as a holding back. Even in speaking, Young Bear's rhetorical thrust is driven by that which he keeps from articulating. To hazard an interpretation of such a corpus is fraught with several difficulties, not the least of which is its proper emplacement.

Students of U.S. literature and culture run into a unique quagmire with respect to Young Bear and his fellow Meskwaki (known more commonly to their dispossessors as the Fox): do they exist in a cultural space inside or outside the United States? . . . *or* do they exist in a cultural space *both* inside *and* outside the United States? While the Meskwaki are contained within the state of Iowa, and as such are irredeemably subject to its whims, they also stand apart from that polity in various cultural, economic, and legal respects. The relationship between the Meskwaki and the surrounding population in Tama County has long been fraught with hostility and tension—a tension compounded by the legal vagaries that divide jurisdiction over Meskwaki affairs among tribal, state, and federal authorities.

Within the Byzantine orders of jurisprudence to which the Meskwaki have been subjected, the law stands less as a multilayered line of defense than as a multidimensional means of exploitation. As Eric Mazur rather delicately puts it, “incongruous understandings” between “Native Americans and the American legal system” have left “powerful meanings ascribed by Native Americans to the notions of tribal sovereignty or sacred land . . . virtually unrecognizable in the American constitutional order.”³ Denied rights for generations, and thus perhaps more intent to exist apart from rights discourse than to gain purchase within it, a prevailing Meskwaki opinion holds that “there is a white man's law . . . [which is] for the white man and protects the white man.”⁴ That the order of things should be thus is, for Young Bear, a fact encoded on the landscape itself, insofar as “all the beautiful places in America belong to the white people now.”⁵

Driven from the St. Lawrence River Valley westward into the upper Great Lakes, then south to Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa, and finally further westward to Kansas and Oklahoma, the Meskwaki were beset by a series of military conflicts with British, French, and U.S. colonizers, including the First and Second Fox Wars (1712–14

and 1728) and the Black Hawk War (1832). Finally, in an effort to preserve and retain a “beautiful place” of their own, the Meskwaki—uniquely among Native American tribes—elected to actively buy into the U.S. economy instead of passively acceding to their rendition as legal wards of the federal government. Purchased from the state of Iowa in 1856 by Young Bear’s great-great grandfather, Mamwianike, the Meskwaki Settlement (colloquially known as “the Sett”) originally totaled a few dozen acres, but today extends upward of seven thousand acres. The resulting area—effectively a conglomeration of separate but contiguous real-estate purchases—stands as a peculiar geographic anomaly, distinct not only from its surroundings but also from the cultural, ecological, and political underpinnings that typify most reservations.⁶ Such distinctions, highly apparent on the ground, are visible even from space (see figure 1), where the Meskwaki model of subsistence farming and forest cultivation stands in relief against the agribusiness model of intensively irrigated monoculture that characterizes the surrounding Iowa landscape.

In short, then, the Meskwaki Settlement stands as an exceptional exception. Even while the United States continues to foster global and transnational identity formations beyond its own borders, its very integrity as a nation remains predicated upon a fiction that would incorporate exceptions such as its reservations even while rendering them extranational. But the Meskwaki Settlement does not submit to such twisted logic. Not only does its existence trouble long-standing discourses of the reservation and the nation-state, but it also stands apart from emerging discourses of the global. It does not grow food for interstate or international trade; it grows food for its own. Its visions of environmental and social justice stand thoroughly incommensurate with that political structure theorized by Michael Walzer and Wai Chee Dimock as “global civil society,” which, per Walzer, establishes “another *place*” and, per Dimock’s elaboration, unfolds in “a place not territorial but associative . . . extending as far as those associations extend.”⁷ Before such political formulations stands a Meskwaki conception of society, articulated by Young Bear and others, whose foundations are rooted underfoot rather than elsewhere, and whose conceptions of the associative are fundamentally territorial.

Young Bear’s poetics further depart from those of global civil society insofar as they depend not on transparency but on obliquity, predicated not upon access and universality but upon discretion and particularity. In poetry collections and more extended narratives alike, Young Bear has crafted a literary world closely aligned to the world that he himself inhabits, though quite closely guarded with

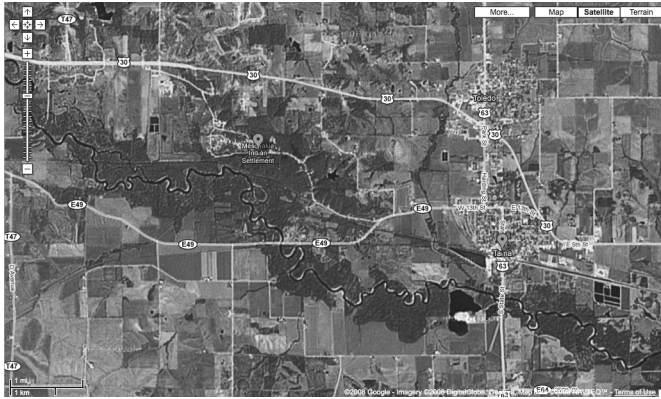


Figure 1. Meskwaki Settlement and Tama, Iowa, via Google Maps.

respect to the cultural inheritance under his stewardship. His fictional settlement, Black Eagle Child, first taken up in *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives* (1992), has its analogue in the actual Meskwaki settlement just as surely as Thomas Hardy's Wessex, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and R. K. Narayan's Malgudi have their respective analogues in Dorset, Mississippi, and Tamil Nadu. But, whereas Hardy, Faulkner, and Narayan crafted their invented place-worlds with exhaustive and painstaking detail, keying their inventions to the broadest possible range of environmental and social realities on which they were based, Young Bear has shaped his imagined place-world with much more restraint, presenting a deliberately partial portrait of Black Eagle Child. Though Jace Weaver claims that Young Bear "artfully grants readers an entrée into a Mesquakie world," I would argue that Young Bear fragments, frustrates, and finally withholds that entrée more artfully still.⁸

This commitment to discretion dates to Young Bear's earliest published poems, first collected in *Winter of the Salamander: The Keeper of Importance* (1980). Discretion is encoded into the book's very epigraph, offered in both Meskwaki and English:

A gwi ma i • na ta wi • a sa mi
 ke ko • i i na tti mo ya nini • a yo
 shes ki • ne ko qua ta be ya i ke

There are no elucidations or foresights
 merely
 experiments with words⁹

Those without knowledge of the Meskwaki language are immediately put in a position of ignorance here, unclear as to whether the English epigraph is a translation of the Meskwaki epigraph or an addition to the Meskwaki epigraph. Young Bear offers no indication either way, electing instead to keep the significance to himself and his immediate linguistic community.

As a direct descendent of Meskwaki chiefs stretching over several generations, Young Bear's place as a keeper of importance revolves around a series of manuscripts, songs, and stories that—taken together with corresponding ritual and spiritual practices—constitutes the assembled wisdom of the Meskwaki people. His published writings, while highly preoccupied with this tribal role, are also largely separate from it. As he explains in “four songs of life,”

i remember well
 my people's
 songs.
 i will not
 reveal to anyone
 that i know
 these songs.
 it was intended
 for me
 to keep
 them
 in secrecy
 for they are now
 mine to die with
 me.¹⁰

Young Bear here engages in an act of disclosure that is simultaneously an act of discretion; in this respect, he can be linked to figures along the continuum of confessional poetry ranging from John Berryman and Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. But whereas Lowell and Sexton divulge and demur out of coyness or neurosis, Young Bear's confession—more parts reticence than revelation—retains a valence more strongly cultural than psychological. Pressed in an interview about the symbolic significance of the salamander in his debut collection, Young Bear rebuffed his questioner. “That one I better leave alone,” he explained. “It is a powerful image. It symbolizes something that can be discussed, but for safety reasons, I refrain.”¹¹

One of the few sustained portraits of Young Bear to emerge from this formative period comes in Fred McTaggart's *Wolf That I Am* (1976), a record of McTaggart's struggles in a frustrated attempt to document Meskwaki storytelling traditions. Among the Meskwaki portrayed in the narrative is one James North, a rather thinly veiled fictionalization of Young Bear, who, though more open than some, constantly qualifies the knowledge he transmits with disclaimers about his unreliable memory and ultimately refuses to participate in the work of cross-cultural translation. Among the more compelling stories that McTaggart transcribes in his narrative is an encounter with North in which North tells the following story:

There were two Raccoons and a Deer. And I guess one of the Raccoons shat in the other one's eyes. Then the Raccoon went to the river, but he couldn't get across. So he asked the Deer, "Can you carry me to the other side?"

"I don't have any room on my back," said the Deer. So the Raccoon asked if he could ride inside his ass.

"All right," said the Deer, "but don't eat anything."

So the Deer started to swim across the water with the Raccoon inside his asshole. Pretty soon, the Raccoon got hungry and he started to eat. He ate his way up through the Deer's body to his heart and the Deer died.

But so did the Raccoon.

Perplexed by this brief allegory, McTaggart asks North for a gloss, which comes in the form of a surprisingly pithy reply: "Don't be too open or people will take advantage of you."¹² After North relates the story for a second time, to a somewhat larger audience, increasing the number of raccoons from two to five, McTaggart comes to the conclusion that the Deer represents a Native American, whereas the Raccoons represent European Americans. As such, North's story represents the colonizer-critic as a deadly parasite: one that in compromising his colonized-storyteller host also compromises himself.

In this same period, Young Bear himself had thought to assemble "a book on Native American folk stories" but was met with silence from all corners, being left to conclude "that the whole concept of telling a story is still regarded with a lot of veneration among Native American tribes." Turning to his own Meskwaki traditions, and conferring with various elders, he came to accept that such a project was "simply impossible," even within his own tribal context.¹³ What, then, do we make of Young Bear's poetry collections and prose narratives? Are they simply a diversion, standing clear of the core principles of his cultural traditions? Not precisely, though such work also comes at a considerable remove from a representative cross section

of Young Bear's more profound and serious cultural thought, which is likely reserved for intra-Meskwaki affairs.

What relation, then, if any, do Young Bear's poems bear to more traditional Meskwaki poems? While the published record of such poetry is largely confined to antiquated anthropological accounts,¹⁴ Jerome Rothenberg, whose work in *ethnopoetics*, defined as "a redefinition of poetry in terms of cultural specifics, with an emphasis on . . . alternative traditions,"¹⁵ has rendered one Meskwaki sweat-bath poem accordingly:

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi ya ni

Sky

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i
 A gi ya ni

Rothenberg takes for granted that this poem emerges from "a system of Native American mantra"¹⁶ and classifies it as an instance of sound poetry. Yet, he also insists that while such instances "have no translatable words . . . they do have meaning, that is, they're full of meaning," whether meaning here comes encoded in the form of "an old forgotten language" or a "mapping device" or "the language of the gods."¹⁷ Lacking a definitive key to that meaning, other commentators have seized upon Rothenberg's Meskwaki sweat-bath poem as an "unmistakable" example of "the presence of 'nonsense' syllables in tribal literature,"¹⁸ reading it as an imaginative making that is ultimately "without meaning."¹⁹

Young Bear has done little to disabuse those who stand convinced of the meaninglessness of traditional Meskwaki poetry. Asked by McTaggart about a song combining English and Meskwaki elements, North explained of the Meskwaki parts that "they don't have any meaning. They're just a chant. Just something you say." Similarly cagey about his own representations, when asked by McTaggart about a "jagged line" resembling a "symbol of lightning" in one of his line drawings, North replied, "That? Oh, that's nothing. That's just something I felt like putting in."²⁰ Nevertheless, in his second collection of poetry, *The Invisible Musician* (1990), Young Bear included a bilingual suite of love songs and tribal celebration songs,²¹ and he has implied a measure of disdain regarding the per-

vasive misreading of his own project. In *Remnants of the First Earth* (1996), when his fictional stand-in, Edgar Bearchild, returns from college in California and enrolls in a creative-writing class in Iowa, he finds himself questioning, “after a night of barhopping,” whether “anyone had the background knowledge of my tribe to see that mythical complexities superseded line structure and rhythm.”²²

However one parses (or fails to parse) the “mythical complexities” that underlie traditional and contemporary Meskwaki approaches to representation, it would seem that when the Meskwaki speak they speak to and for one another. Yet, the culture of tourism that pervades Native American life has brought some outsiders to the misguided conclusion that tribal traditions are necessarily constructed for and addressed to outsiders. In these instances, cross-cultural incomprehension can easily shade into the realm of unsympathetic generalization. Such callousness typifies W. D. Snodgrass’s poem “Powwow (Tama Reservation, Iowa, 1949),” which fails to identify the Meskwaki as such, mislabels their settlement as a “Reservation,” styles the respective dances of the Chippewa, Dakota, and Sioux as “all the same,” and portrays “a shrunken fierce-eyed man” at the drum as one who uses “words of such great age, / not even he remembers what they mean.”²³ James Wright attributes a similar lack of sapience to the native subject in “I Am a Sioux Brave, He Said in Minneapolis,” where the individual in question, “just plain drunk,” stands, in Wright’s eyes, as one who

knows no more than I do
 What true waters to mourn for
 Or what kind of words to sing
 When he dies.²⁴

Though Wright condescends in this case to a single individual rather than to a convocation of several tribes, Wright, like Snodgrass, presents himself as a subject who somehow knows enough to know that the native subject lacks knowledge: a poetic posture that is presumptuous in the extreme.

Coming to these poems in early adulthood, Young Bear took great umbrage with their representations of native subjects and subsequently incorporated rebukes of Snodgrass and Wright into an extended diatribe titled “for the rain in march: the blackened hearts of herons.” The poem begins by calling out the “ignorant people / locked securely in their houses,” thoroughly removed from their environmental context and thus “unaware of the soft dawn-lit / furbearing animals” whose habitat is—or should be—of a piece with

their own. From here a series of anecdotes, dreams, and encounters bespeaking Meskwaki experience leads up to Snodgrass's visit among them, of which Young Bear explains,

he was only shown what was allowed
to be shown
what the hell did he expect
out of his admission fee?
and as far as thinking that he knew
more about Indians than they themselves did
he should have thought twice

Young Bear links Snodgrass with "countless others" who have presumed to speak on subjects beyond their own cultural grasp, positing Snodgrass as their most representative type, one who

will never know the meanings
of the songs he heard
nor will he ever know that these
songs were being sung long before
his grandfathers had notions
of riding across the ocean.²⁵

Asked by Joseph Bruchac about "for the rain in march," Young Bear outlined the "great offense" he took at Snodgrass's poem, pointing to his amazement that a tourist could "think that the whole world of the Mesquakie people was going to be revealed to him in one program."²⁶

Indeed, any would-be student of the Meskwaki quickly comes to understand that Meskwaki revelations are rather difficult to come by. Following in a long tradition of ambivalent Meskwaki informants, Young Bear has been loath to compose freely whereof he must speak selectively. Among the Meskwaki, he has been criticized at times for being too forthcoming, well aware that "openness and freedom of expression are not prized on the settlement,"²⁷ even as he has pushed forward with his own program despite such instances of disapproval.

While the distancing effect of alter ego Edgar Bearchild allows Young Bear a certain amount of latitude in terms of cross-cultural communication, much of that communication tends toward the enigmatic and verges in places upon the false lead. Young Bear has implied as much, suggesting that his published output amounts in effect to a "minute and insignificant fraction" of his larger Meskwaki experience, beholden as he is to a "delicate ritual of weighing what

can and cannot be shared." The resulting body of work is therefore less "an act of revealing" than "an exercise in creative detachment." Such detachment has been ingrained in Young Bear through the counsel of his grandmother, who taught him from a young age that "there were certain things I could not write about."²⁸

Nevertheless, there are instances where Young Bear does speak with great authority and conviction, as in the often-anthologized poem "in viewpoint: poem for 14 catfish and the town of tama, iowa." Here Young Bear's senses of environmental and social justice come to the forefront, with the leisure activities of the "local whites" depicted as a callous infringement upon the subsistence effort of the "tribal spearfishermen." Even in this instance, however, the act of speaking is not exactly a cross-cultural address, but rather a gift of sorts, offered "for" rather than "to" its recipients, with no expectation of reciprocity. Moreover, the poem is not "for" the town of Tama alone, nor even primarily "for" Tama. Instead, it is offered in the first place to "14 catfish," who stand in consequence as the principal addressees of the poem. This strategy is of a piece with Young Bear's approach in "for the rain in march," which, though concerned to deride a cynical poet, addresses itself to a seasonal phenomenon.

"Into whose world do we go on living?" It is a pointed question with which Young Bear begins "in viewpoint," and he proceeds to present two possible answers, counterpoising the "ignorance and disregard" of "the farmers the local whites / from the nearby town of tama and surrounding towns" with those who "have an unparalleled / respect for the iowa river." The "pickups and snowmobiles" of the former disrupt the "dwindling fish / and wildlife" of the latter and undermine the "holes / made by tribal spearfishermen in / search of food." Young Bear's contempt for those "lesser / intelligent animals who can't adapt / and get along with their environmental / surroundings" is scarcely disguised, and he concludes the poem with the following lament:

until they learn that the world and time
has moved on regardless of whether they still
believe and harbor antiquated ideas and notions
of being superior because of their pale light skin
alone, and until they learn that in their paranoia
to compare us to their desensitized lives,
they will never progress into what they
themselves call a community,
or even for the least,
a human.²⁹

If there is a certain amount of anger in these lines and others—“perhaps too much anger,” as Young Bear himself has allowed—Gretchen M. Bataille has noted in Young Bear’s defense that this “anger is real, nurtured by years of living on the edge of a white mid-western community that still knows little about its Mesquaki neighbors and generally avoids the dirt road through the Settlement.”³⁰

Cognizant of such avoidance patterns, Young Bear’s choice to address the people of Tama as “they” rather than as “you” proves a significant detail of the closing movement. In writing a poem “for” a “they” rather than “to” a “you,” Young Bear distances himself from the recipients of his gift even as he impugns them, with his address running more decidedly to the tribal “us” than to the neighboring “they.” By dehumanizing the “they” of Tama in the poem’s final flourish, Young Bear co-opts and recasts the logic by which native subjects have been dehumanized, putting such logic “in viewpoint” and implicitly reasserting Meskwaki claims to belonging over and against claims by settler colonists whose connections to the region also stretch back over several generations.

By literary extension, Young Bear casts off his role as the “other” of Rothenberg’s ethnopoetics, reframing Rothenberg’s cultural matrix as true other. Such a move is of a piece with Young Bear’s subsequent descriptions of the colonizer as extraterrestrial, undertaken in *The Invisible Musician* and in *Black Eagle Child*.³¹ Rendering the hegemonic culture as inhuman and alien, Young Bear accomplishes what John Beverly has described as a key turn in the relationship between “subalternity and representation,” namely, the way in which “the subaltern represents the dominant subject to itself, and thus unsettles that subject, in the form of a negation or displacement.”³²

If not precisely or strictly for the Meskwaki and not fully or wholeheartedly for a broader U.S. readership, then whom, exactly, does Young Bear’s audience consist of? Upon being asked as much, he pointed not only to “my own tribal members, including the people within my home state,” but also to “the west coast and east coast” and to those “critics or scholars who may have an interest in my work.”³³ What, then, do the critics make of “in viewpoint”? Reviews are mixed. James Ruppert has read “in viewpoint” as a poem in which Young Bear “integrates the discourse into his own defined frame of reference, at once common and public.”³⁴ Yet, Robert Gish concluded that here and elsewhere, “Young Bear is singing to himself and to his people—Sac and Fox, living and dead.”³⁵ Whereas Cary Nelson credits “in viewpoint” as a “towering poem of protest and indictment” against the “genocidal mentality of the frontier,” at pains “to detail the ways white abuse of the Mesquakie permeates every element of daily life,”³⁶ Michael Sheridan found this particu-

lar poem and *Winter of the Salamander* more generally to be a “seriously flawed” work, marked by frequent “lapses into stilted or bloated language” and typified by commentaries that “sound like letters to the editor” rather than poetry proper.³⁷

What all of these commentaries share—and what links them with my own remarks here—is a ticklish lack of immersion in Young Bear’s Meskwaki culture. As such, these commentaries serve as tenuous explications at best. From Young Bear’s subject position, they also risk harm where they intend good, for as “grandmother forewarned, commentary was destructive when untethered.”³⁸ These destructive tendencies are characteristic of and indeed invited by the extensions of print culture and digital culture in general: though such works can be widely disseminated, they are in consequence less thoroughly tethered to a particular community than their equivalents in oral culture and performance culture.

This is not to suggest that all critical commentary about Young Bear has been insensible of his commitments to emplacement: many have pointed to place as a crucial nexus of Young Bear’s work and of Native American literature more generally. Craig Howe contrasts “the conventional academic perspective,” which is “abstract,” “linear,” and “sequential,” with “the indigenous tribal perspective, which “is more likely to be recited in relationship to specific landscapes, waterscapes, and skylines.”³⁹ Laura J. Beard sees Young Bear in particular as a writer who “reflects that sense of belonging to a place, where the place is not just a setting for the story or the life but a part of the story, a part of the sense of identity of the character or narrator.”⁴⁰ And Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has convincingly articulated “the indigenous view of the world” as “rooted in a specific geography (place),” such that “mythology (soul) and geography (land) are inseparable, that even language is rooted in a specific place.”⁴¹ Hailing the Meskwaki culture as one that has managed to “remain connected to and placed in a specific geography through tribal creation stories,” she has praised Young Bear for his commitments to “the geography of indigenosity” and to “a realism framed within a tribal belief system and tribal experience”:⁴² commitments that locate him as other than modern and in contention with modernism and modernity.

Nevertheless, Young Bear’s print corpus wages a sort of uphill battle in this cause, for even as it has, per Robert Warrior, “taken a European written form thousands of years old and transformed it so easily to become a form of resistance against other European forms and systems,”⁴³ its material form nevertheless cuts against its will to emplacement. For all its rooting in place, Young Bear’s work proceeds via a genre that tends toward disemplacement, through a

medium that tends toward disemplacement, in an era that tends toward disemplacement.⁴⁴ As William Waters explains, while the traditional Ancient Greek lyric utterance—much like the traditional Meskwaki lyric utterance—was embedded in a specific context of use, a “detachment from context . . . has become constitutive of the modern lyric,” and in its “‘uprootedness,’ from any specified communicative situation,” poetry has become, “of all the ways we use language, the one with the most tenuous relation to a context of use.”⁴⁵ While just as tenuous and transferable as most other contemporary print-culture poetry in material terms, Young Bear’s published poetry nevertheless attempts to work against the conditions of its own materiality, holding fast to a cultural orientation that is yoked to a particular society and a particular topography. In this respect, somewhat in spite of itself, it resembles the sacred bundles of the Meskwaki culture, which, though highly portable, have always been tied to their tribal context of use, to the point that they are effectively denuded of meaning when removed from their setting and fossilized within the space of the museum.⁴⁶

Is it possible, then, to discern Ray A. Young Bear’s environmental ethics from afar, beyond his generalized commitments to emplacement and to the ecological well-being of his particular settlement? A better way of framing the question might be to ask after the collective environmental ethics of the Meskwaki as a whole, given that Young Bear’s ethics seem to be squarely centered upon that collectivity. Addressing the question of environmental ethics, Young Bear has spoken not for himself but for the whole of his people, whom, as “part of this area historically . . . have beliefs that are animistic” and, as such, are founded on “a wide, unbridled respect for all earthly kinds of life, be it a tree, a stone, or a river.” Young Bear here draws a sharp contrast between Meskwaki conceptions of respect and those furnished by “the Euro-American polity that sought to annihilate us in the name of Christianity.”⁴⁷

Beyond Young Bear’s own testimony, the print archive provides ample, though fragmentary, supporting evidence of a Meskwaki tradition that is inextricably tied to land and to place. To this extent, in category, though not in exact kind, Meskwaki practices are rather typical of indigenous practices throughout the continent, for, as Vine Deloria Jr. has argued, “tribal religions are actually complexes of attitudes, beliefs, and practices, fine-tuned to harmonize with the lands on which the people live.”⁴⁸ Because the Meskwaki culture defines itself on an autochthony finally foreign to mainstream U.S. culture, the Meskwaki and their neighbors are faced with a certain problematic divide. For one anthropologist, this divide “can never be solved,” for “to be one of the Mesquakie means, first of all, to

belong to a community which exists physically, localized in space; a place which is home, and which the tribe itself owns,"⁴⁹ whereas mainstream U.S. identity is less predicated upon place than upon deterritorialized associations and ideological affinities. To participate fully in Meskwaki society, one needs to lead one's life within a relatively delimited space; to participate fully in U.S. society, one might live anywhere at all within the diffuse, far-flung, noncontiguous borders of the nation, and, indeed, almost anywhere at all beyond them.

Whereas the U.S. economy depends upon agribusiness as a means to capital accumulation, Meskwaki farming practices unfold as a means to bodily nourishment in a subsistence approach undertaken out of respect for the very dependence that binds them to the land. As Frederick Gearing explained it, in contrast to the Iowan, who farms out of a "moral obligation to subdue and exploit nature" and therefore "stands on top of what he sees," generations upon generations of Meskwaki have stood forth from within "an order that [has] bound together" the cultivator and the cultivar in "reciprocal necessity," such that the cultivator is not above, but rather "enveloped" within, the land to which he tends.⁵⁰ A Meskwaki that McTaggart identifies as Charlie Laveur attests to this ethic of envelopment as an autochthony of shallow rooting, neither standing too proudly over the land nor digging too deeply beneath its crust. "We told the white man," Laveur explained, "to leave all but six inches. And what does he do today? He plows the ground and doesn't leave all but six inches. And when he buries a man, what does he do? He doesn't leave all but the six inches. The top six inches is for man. That you can plow. The rest belongs to God."⁵¹ In advancing such an argument, Laveur evokes an ancient distinction between the living surface of the land, known to the Greeks as *gaia* or *khora*, and the subterranean interior, which was considered chthonic and therefore sacred.⁵²

Laveur's individual perspective on the question of land use dovetails with sentiments expressed in an unpublished editorial prepared for the *Tama (Iowa) News Herald* but finally withheld from that newspaper's subscribers. Here the collective voice of the Meskwaki, mediated through Gearing's filter, presents an environmental ethics founded in capital but transcendent of capital, wholly scornful of the proprietary principles that organize the surrounding counties beyond the settlement. As they see it,

The land, to us, is not something to be *used*, not something from which to earn a living. The land is a piece of safety, a refuge, a permanent home. The white farmer looks at his land and says: How much will it yield? He buys and sells the land according to the market. He landscapes it and cuts

down trees and dams the rivers and builds bins and fills them every fall. These things we do not do because the land means something altogether different to us. OUR LAND WAS NOT BOUGHT TO BE USED. It was bought just to be there for us, always. Some white people say we should divide up the land so each person would own the land he lives on and therefore have more reason to 'fix it up' and make money from it. We don't divide the land, though, because in the first place, we don't figure 'fixing it up' is so important. And in the second place, we know that if we did, sooner or later a man would need some money bad and he might sell his share. Soon we would have less and less land and then none. . . . So we keep the land in one piece, owned by the tribe, and any of us can build a home here and find room for a garden or get a few acres to farm if he wants. But no one can sell the land and the land will always be here for everyone.⁵³

In its historical context, this withheld statement of principles presents a particularly compelling nonintervention vis-à-vis the dialectic of capitalism and communism that marked the Cold War era. Though the rhetoric of the editorial is communalistic, its values are anterior to the Soviet imprint, standing neither with nor against U.S. political economy so much as dovetailing with the nonaligned states of the Third World.

Suffice it to say that Meskwaki environmental ethics stand or fall on collective rather than individual agency, that they are based upon reciprocity and subsistence rather than mastery and profit, and that they are connected to rather than separated from the earth with which they are concerned. Such ethics have been circumscribed by those hydroelectric experimentations of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that have driven the Meskwaki to higher ground,⁵⁴ and such ethics would likely point to recent inundations in Iowa (like the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina) as a disaster at once given and made. But, most of all, Meskwaki environmental ethics are finally unfathomable to the outsider, for they are of the Meskwaki, by the Meskwaki, for the Meskwaki.⁵⁵ In this sense, Meskwaki ethics proceed from a Meskwaki imaginary whose terms precede and supersede the U.S. imaginary within the space of the settlement. As such, it is possible to read the Meskwaki as functioning less in opposition to the U.S. imaginary than outside of it. As the other to the "yes we can" of mainstream progressive politics, Meskwaki ethics outstrip the contradictory position of "no, I would prefer not to," extending into the more fully subversive realm of "I do not understand the affirmative of your 'yes we can.'"

In abjuring the U.S. imaginary, Young Bear effectively resists resistance, thus transgressing the terms of a national imaginary founded on the image of the maverick. Though Young Bear's reasons for resistance are myriad, he turns his attention instead to "three reasons for transgression: / the fierce head of the eagle, / the

otter, and the daylight” in a lengthy lyric bespeaking an ontology that does not go against the norm so much as it goes *beyond* the norm. When, in this poem, Young Bear warns the reader not to “ever contest me / in courts / you would lose,” he ironically invokes a sordid history of legal manipulation against Native American peoples even as he implicitly pleads “no contest” on his own behalf. “i am unaffected,” he writes: “i hold readings and workshops / for subsistence,” working past oppressive structures and imposed economic norms, making good on teaching occasions in Cedar Falls, Iowa, and Gordon, Nebraska, where

i tell the students
of sidewalks and factory-centered
towns
of the poison produced and distributed
by their white fathers
through the rivers
and waters
of the poison their babies
will suck through the breasts
of their mothers.⁵⁶

That this unnerving prophecy should be delivered with such a glancing mock-archaic reference to “white fathers” only goes to suggest the persistent environmental degradation of the Native American, from the onset of colonization up through the present day.⁵⁷

To conclude, whereas Spivak’s interest in explicating “the consciousness of the subaltern” was bent upon thinking through “what the work *cannot* say,” thereby construing the subaltern subject as one locked in an inevitable dialectic with the hegemonic culture, and thus functioning as an inevitable “counterpossibility” to the dominant paradigm,⁵⁸ it is also possible to read the subaltern subject as one who abstains from speaking truth to power, electing instead to reserve such truths for those people and places to whom and to which they were meant to inhere. As Robin Riley Fast explains it, Native American poets such as Young Bear often “honor tradition by protecting the old stories and alluding to sacred or otherwise culturally vital materials cryptically, indirectly, partially, or not at all.”⁵⁹

In redirecting, reframing, and restricting his various modes of discourse, Young Bear’s larger project suggests the cultural approach theorized by Eva Marie Garroutte as “radical indigenism,” an epistemological and ontological method advanced not as a form of otherness in relation to a more standard practice, but rather as a

standard practice in and of itself, centered upon “tribal philosophies” and “tribal relations” as “rational, articulable, coherent logics for ordering and knowing the world.”⁶⁰ As a consequence of this radical indigenism, Young Bear presents a particular challenge for the unaffiliated critic, whose commentary springs from necessarily partial knowledge and understanding.

I make no claims to decode Young Bear’s published corpus here; I wish merely to foreground the importance of emplacement to its vision and to suggest that its silences spring both from imposition *and* inclination.⁶¹ As Paula Gunn Allen explained in critiquing the “troublesome” revelations of Leslie Marmon Silko’s debut novel *Ceremony* (1977), there is a profound disconnect between “traditional materials” tied to the “day to day context” and the set of values held by the “white world . . . which requires learning all and telling all in the interests of knowledge, objectivity, and freedom,” irregardless of context. In view of this disconnect, Allen concludes that, from some cultural positions, “preserving tradition in print is not worth the price.”⁶²

Young Bear would seem to agree. At the very least, he was the pivotal example from which Allen was moved to arrive at such a conclusion. While he has described “the problems caused by non-Indian representation of the Indian” as both “horrendous” and “almost irreversible,” he has also acknowledged that he is “not sure Mesquakie people would like to make themselves known.” Even as Young Bear continues to establish his reputation as a literary figure, he depends on a strategy of concealment as a crucial element of his poetics. As such, the published record is far from the whole story; beyond its bounds rests the keeping that Young Bear retains for himself and his fellow Meskwaki as an entrusted keeper of importance. Suffice it to report, on this limited basis, that the Meskwaki “intent,” in Young Bear’s view, “has always been to remain culturally and geographically isolated” in a space both inside and outside: fenced in, perhaps, but less preoccupied with such confinement than with the self-chosen work of “fencing out.”⁶³

Notes

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313, quotation on 294.

² Douglas E. Foley discusses the survival strategy of silence as rebellion and retreat among Meskwaki teenagers in his anthropological study *The Heartland Chronicles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 63–68.

³ Eric Mazur, "The Supreme Law of the Land': Sources of Conflict between Native Americans and the Constitutional Order," in *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues*, ed. Dane Morrison (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 233–59, quotations on 236–37.

⁴ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Iowa Advisory Committee, *Race Relations in Tama County: A Report* (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1981), 51.

⁵ Quoted in David Moore and Michael Wilson, "Staying Afloat in a Chaotic World: A Conversation with Ray Young Bear," in *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 17, no. 1 (1994): 205–13, quotation on 206.

⁶ Young Bear discusses his family connections to this unique transaction at some length in his "Journal of a Mesquakie Poet," in *Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus*, ed. Ray González (Seattle: Broken Moon, 1992), 145–52.

⁷ Michael Walzer, *Toward a Global Civil Society* (Providence, RI: Beghahn, 1995), 4; and Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 7.

⁸ Jace Weaver, "Splitting the Earth: First Utterances and Pluralist Separatism," in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, with Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 1–89; 33. In his artful withholdings, Young Bear's representation of Black Eagle Child recalls Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo.

⁹ Ray A. Young Bear, epigraph to *Winter of the Salamander: The Keeper of Importance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), viii.

¹⁰ Young Bear, *Winter of the Salamander*, 6–7.

¹¹ Quoted in Moore and Wilson, "Staying Afloat," 209.

¹² Fred McTaggart, *Wolf That I Am: In Search of the Red Earth People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 31–32. For McTaggart on James North, see esp. 30–33 and 82–104.

¹³ Quoted in Ray Young Bear, "Connected to the Past: An Interview with Ray A. Young Bear," in *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*, ed. Joseph Bruchac (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 337–48, quotations on 347–48.

¹⁴ See a pair of related texts by William Jones: *Fox Texts* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1907) and *Ethnography of the Fox Indians*, ed. Margaret Welpley Fisher (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

¹⁵ Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-Face," in *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi–xviii, quotation on xi.

¹⁶ Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 281, 407.

¹⁷ Jerome Rothenberg, "Changing the Present, Changing the Past: A New Poetics," in *Talking Poetics from the Naropa Institute*, ed. Anne Waldman and Marilyn Webb, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 1979), 2:253–90, quotation on 284.

¹⁸ Ron Silliman, "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, suppl. 3 (October 1981): 2–12, quotation on 4; reprinted in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 121–32, quotation on 123.

¹⁹ J. H. de Roder, "Poetry: The Missing Link," *Antwerp Papers in Linguistics* 101 (2002): 15–27, quotation on 22, <http://webh01.ua.ac.be/apil/apil101/> (accessed 23 July 2008).

²⁰ McTaggart, *Wolf That I Am*, 90, 93.

²¹ Ray A. Young Bear, *The Invisible Musician* (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1990), 20, 40, 65, 93.

²² Ray A. Young Bear, *Remnants of the First Earth* (New York: Grove, 1996), 260.

²³ W. D. Snodgrass, "Powwow (Tama Reservation, Iowa, 1949)," *New Yorker*, 2 June 1962, 28; reprinted as "Powwow" in Snodgrass's *After Experience: Poems and Translations* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 51–52; and in *The New Yorker Book of Poems* (New York: Viking, 1969), 566–67.

²⁴ James Wright, "I Am a Sioux Brave, He Said in Minneapolis," first published in Wright's *Shall We Gather at the River* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1968); reprinted in Wright's *Above the River: The Collected Poems* (Middletown, CT: University Press of New England, 1992), 152.

²⁵ Young Bear, *Winter of the Salamander*, 163–72, 163, 171–72. Robert Dale Parker parses this rebuke at length in "To Be There, No Authority to Anything: Ontological Desire and Cultural and Poetic Authority in the Poetry of Ray A. Young Bear," *Arizona Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1994): 89–115; reprinted in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson, www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/youngbear/authority.htm (accessed 13 June 2008).

²⁶ Quoted in Bruchac, *Survival This Way*, 346–47.

²⁷ Mike Kilen, "The Word Collector: Ray Young Bear Toils to Tie His Roots and the Modern World Together in His Works," *Des Moines Register*, 25 September 2001; reprinted at www.hanksville.org/storytellers/youngbear/IowaLife.html (accessed 13 June 2008).

²⁸ Ray A. Young Bear, "Afterword," in *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 253–61, quotations on 254–55.

²⁹ Young Bear, *Winter of the Salamander*, 135–38.

³⁰ Quoted in Gretchen M. Bataille, "Ray A. Young Bear: Tribal History & Personal Vision," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 5, no. 2 (1993): 17–20, quotation on 19.

³¹ In "Debut of the Woodland Drum," from *The Invisible Musician*, Young Bear writes of a band of "extraterrestrials" who in traveling the Mississippi are reminded of the "home planet" and consequently "establish a colony / in the name of Scandinavia [*sic*]" (60). In *Black Eagle Child*, Edgar's Uncle Severt keeps a diary that mentions his plans for a novel about "a Midwestern colony of extraterrestrials in the guise of Scandinavians" (51).

³² John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 26.

³³ Moore and Wilson, "Staying Afloat," 207.

³⁴ James Ruppert, "The Poetic Languages of Ray Young Bear," in *Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization*, ed. Bo Schöler (Aarhus, Denmark: Seklos, 1984), 124–33, quotation on 128.

³⁵ Robert Gish, *Beyond Bounds: Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American Indian, & Chicano Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 95.

³⁶ Cary Nelson, "Multiculturalism Without Guarantees: From Anthologies to the Social Text," in *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 29–38, quotations on 32–33; first published in *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 26, no. 1 (1993): 47–57.

³⁷ Michael Sheridan, "Secret Places," review of *Winter of the Salamander*, by Ray Young Bear, *Southwest Review* 66, no. 4 (1981): 427–29, quotation on 428.

³⁸ Young Bear, *Black Eagle Child*, 256.

³⁹ Craig Howe, "Keep Your Thoughts Above the Trees: Ideas on Developing and Presenting Tribal Histories," in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 2002), 161–79.

⁴⁰ Laura J. Beard, "A Society Based on Names: Ray Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives*," *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 2 (2006): 127–45, quotation on 138.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty," in *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 78–96, quotation on 88.

⁴² Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *New Indians, Old Wars* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 40, 52–53.

⁴³ Robert Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 117.

⁴⁴ The importance of relationality and positionality in Young Bear's work is discussed at some length in David L. Moore's "Myth, History, and Identity in Silko and Young Bear: Postcolonial Praxis," in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 370–95.

⁴⁵ William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 8–10.

⁴⁶ The sacred bundles of the Meskwaki are described in McTaggart, *Wolf That I Am* (36–37, 87, 121), and in Fredrick O. Gearing, *The Face of the Fox* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 81.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Elias Ellefson, "A 1994 Interview with Ray Young Bear," *Des Moines Register*; 4 September 1994; reprinted in Nelson, *Modern American Poetry* (see note 25).

⁴⁸ Vine Deloria Jr., "Thinking in Time and Space," in *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (New York: Putnam, 1973; repr., Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2003), 61–76, quotation on 69.

⁴⁹ Lisa Peattie, Exhibit 13: "Being a Mesquakie Indian," in *Documentary History of the Fox Project, 1949–1959: A Program in Action Anthropology Directed by Sol Tax*, ed. Fred Gearing, Robert McC. Netting, and Lisa R. Peattie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 39–62, quotations on 40–41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41–42, 47.

⁵¹ McTaggart, *Wolf That I Am*, 112–13.

⁵² On the Greek attitude toward autochthony, see Vincent J. Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 37, no. 2 (1987): 294–306.

⁵³ Exhibit 31: “We Are the Mesquakie Nation”; two articles selected from a series of sixteen prepared for the *Tama (Iowa) News Herald* (as told to Fred Gearing), in Gearing et al., *Documentary History* (see note 49), 206–10, quotation on 208–9.

⁵⁴ Young Bear provides a fictionalized account of this process in *Remnants* (30).

⁵⁵ They thus extend well beyond even as they explain dismissive accounts that would style native commitments to the environment in the past tense; for example, see Shepherd Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999), 211.

⁵⁶ Young Bear, *Winter of the Salamander*, 188–200, quotations on 188–89, 199.

⁵⁷ Certain representative dimensions of this degradation are discussed at length in Donald E. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen’s *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction Of Indian Lands and People* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light, 1995).

⁵⁸ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287.

⁵⁹ Robin Riley Fast, “Who Speaks, Who Listens? Questions of Community and Audience,” in *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 47–84, quotation on 51.

⁶⁰ Eva Marie Garrouette, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 110, 113.

⁶¹ Even with this modest claim, I may be on relatively shaky ground. See Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–92): 5–32.

⁶² Paula Gunn Allen, “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1990): 379–86, quotations on 380–82.

⁶³ “‘Reaching Out, Keeping Away’: An Interview with Ray A. Young Bear,” *Tamaqua* 2, no. 2 (1991): 19–29; reprinted in Nelson, *Modern American Poetry* (see note 25).