



Metaphorical and Literal Groundings: Unsettling Groundless Normativity in Environmental Ethics

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Metaphorical and Literal Groundings: Unsettling Groundless Normativity in Environmental Ethics

Anna Cook and Bonnie Sheehey*

Accounts of grounded normativity in Indigenous philosophy can be used to challenge the groundlessness of Western environmental ethical approaches such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Attempts to ground normativity in mainstream Western ethical theory deploy a metaphorical grounding that covers up the literal grounded normativity of Indigenous philosophical practices. Furthermore, Leopold's land ethic functions as a form of settler philosophical guardianship that works to erase, assimilate, and effectively silence localized Indigenous knowledges through a delocalized ethical standard. Finally, grounded normativity challenges settlers to question their desire for groundless normative theory and practice as reflective of their evasion of ethical responsibility for the destruction and genocide of Indigenous communities.

INTRODUCTION

The model of grounded normativity in Indigenous philosophy proposes an ethical framework that emerges from "Indigenous land-connected practices and long-standing experiential knowledge."¹ Instead of applying theory to help solve problems on the ground, it attends to relationships to and with land in order to form a basis of normative evaluation. An understanding of grounded normativity explicitly rejects the groundlessness of Western normativity by considering land as a source of knowledge and understanding. This groundlessness amounts to a severing of ethics from connections to land and place. Attempts to ground normativity in mainstream Western ethical theory deploy grounding as metaphorical and not literal as in the case of the grounded normativity of Indigenous philosophical practices. This metaphorical grounding can be witnessed, for instance, in ethical theories such as Kantian deontology, which is grounded in a transcendental metaphysic, as

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The authors write this paper as settlers on stolen lands, specifically the traditional and unceded territories of the Stó:lō and the Crow.

¹Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2014), p. 13.

well as in more naturalist ethical approaches such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which is grounded in evolutionary history and ecological science. What it means to ground normativity for both thinkers consists in severing ethics from specific connections to or relationships with specific lands and places.

Cherokee philosopher Brian Yazzie Burkhart's framework of settler philosophical guardianship highlights the need to call into question the very project of integrating Western and Indigenous environmental philosophy that does not also challenge a groundless account of normativity. In this respect, any attempt to "Indigenize" environmental ethics must pay attention to whether the act of integration is an act of lamination (that is, covering over Indigenous locality with a delocalized European locality) that delocalizes an account of grounded normativity.

This model of "Indigenizing" environmental ethics can be found in the work of J. Baird Callicott, who uses Leopold's land ethic as a universal ethical standard of comparison with Indigenous ethical approaches.² In *Earth's Insights*, Callicott seeks to unite the world's various, and often conflicting, environmental ethics into a systematic whole. He finds a solution for this unity in Leopold's land ethic, which offers a universal standard from which to evaluate other environmental ethical approaches, including Indigenous ethics. The land ethic, he writes, is "proffered as a universal environmental ethic, with globally acceptable credentials, underwriting and reinforcing each of the others."³ These credentials come from the land ethic's scientific insights into human-ecosystem interactions. Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Whyte has recently critiqued Callicott's universalization of the land ethic, arguing that this move grants "unsubstantiated and even offensive privilege to Leopold in relation to some Indigenous ethics."⁴ Universalizing Leopold's land ethic is an instance of settler philosophical guardianship that functions to erase, assimilate, and effectively silence localized Indigenous knowledges through a delocalized ethical standard.

Against efforts to "Indigenize" environmental ethics through Leopold's land ethic, we contend that his land ethic commits a form of groundless normativity, which can be witnessed in his historical account of ethical progress in *A Sand County Almanac*. This account problematically reinforces settler colonial tropes about history and progress while neglecting the role of power that conditions this settler history. By relying on a concept of ethical extension that functions as a universal norm justifying obligations to land and the more-than-human world, the land ethic (ironically) "float[s] free from the land," in the words of Brian Burkhart.⁵ As is

² See J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 188.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kyle Whyte, "How Similar are Indigenous North American and Leopoldian Environmental Ethics?" in William Forbes, ed., *Revisiting Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic: Emerging Cultures of Sustainability* (Nacogdoches, Tex.: Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2020), p. 8.

⁵ Brian Burkhart, "The Groundedness of Normativity or Indigenous Normativity through the Land," in Colin Marshall, ed., *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality* (New York: Routledge 2020), p. 47.

clear from the Greco-European history that Leopold relates, as well as his own elision of the Indigenous communities that are native to the territory upon which he occupies and writes, the land ethic commits an act of lamination by covering over Indigenous locality with a delocalized European locality. This delocalization amounts to a form of groundless normativity.

In addition to Whyte's concerns about integration, we add a meta-ethical concern about what it means to "Indigenize" environmental ethics. The impetus to treat Western ethical theory as a universal standard of comparison or integration of varying ethical approaches can be understood as a practice of what Burkhart calls "settler philosophical guardianship," which names the operation of assimilating Indigenous philosophy to a dominant paradigm or at least translatable to settler views of knowledge and morality.⁶ This guardianship principle must be rejected in order to see the contributions of Indigenous philosophy to environmental ethics (and philosophy more broadly) on its own terms. In this paper, we strive to bracket the assumed validity of a metaphorical grounding of morality as evidenced in Leopold and instead consider the lessons of grounded normativity of Indigenous morality-through-the-land, which is grounded literally.⁷ Moreover, an understanding of grounded normativity provides a critical interpretation of groundless normativity as a function of the settler colonial drive for the expansion of settler relations to land and elimination through assimilation. Hence, an emphasis on locality reveals the settler colonial legacies within environmental philosophy's groundless account of normativity.

We suggest that the integration of Indigenous philosophizing⁸ into the field of environmental ethics radically transforms it as it challenges some core assumptions about the very viability and desirability of groundless normativity. As such, the project of working towards integrating Indigenous philosophy in environmental philosophy must begin from a critical re-valuation of the groundlessness of value theory. To do so, we begin the next section with a summary of grounded normativity and land-based education in Indigenous philosophy. We then explain, in section three, how groundless normativity functions as a form of settler philosophical guardianship by drawing on the work of Burkhart. Following this, in section four,

⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷ This echoes Nelson Maldoando-Torres' account of decolonial phenomenology as a method that brackets "the assumed validity and general legitimacy of European traditions of thought." See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Post-continental Philosophy: Its Definition, Contours, and Fundamental Sources," *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 1, no. 3 (2006): 11. This bracketing can create space for Indigenous morality through the land without suspicion that it falls under religious or superstitious thought. Moreover, decolonial phenomenology begins with the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous people on their own terms, rather than understood through the lens of the dominant abstract or universal framework of settler philosophy.

⁸ Burkhart suggests the term Indigenous *philosophizing* in order to reflect philosophy as active and dynamic so that it is a "movement back to the land, regrounding our language, being, knowing, meaning, and so on back in the land." Brian Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019), p. xxv.

we critically examine the groundless normativity at work in Leopold's land ethic through his historical narrative of the progressive evolution of ethical extension. Finally, we conclude by offering a set of meta-ethical reflections on what it means to Indigenize environmental ethics.

GROUNDING NORMATIVITY IN INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHY

The turn to an Indigenous environmental philosophy begins from a distinct understanding of the relationship between self and place. Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) and Daniel Wildcat (Yuchi) put forward a distinctly Indigenous metaphysics and epistemology that centers on a consideration of land, place and power. They define Indigenous philosophy as philosophy "of a place."⁹ Deloria claims that in most Native American traditions, the land is an active participant in the life of the community. The emphasis of being 'of a place' puts forward an ontology in which place, defined as "the relationship of things to each other," is an agent.¹⁰ For this reason, Scott Pratt characterizes Deloria and Wildcat's metaphysics as an agent ontology in which "entities are persons whose particular character will be a matter of their interactions and where knowledge will be a matter of knowing their personalities."¹¹ An agent ontology states that all things are, or are parts of, agents, meaning they are things that act with a purpose. Deloria and Wildcat assert that "power and place produce personality."¹² This means that agents or persons are the intersection of power and place, where power names a kind of motivating force and place names the complex network of relations that make agents what they are. A human, for example, is *generated* by a particular place. In this respect, Wildcat affirms that identity—"who one is"—is emergent from place.¹³

This ontological starting point leads to an alternative epistemology as well. Deloria and Wildcat describe reality as an interweaving of relations. Accordingly, the universe is alive and personal, such that "it must be approached in a personal manner."¹⁴ If things to be known are themselves agents, then knowing involves not only noting their behavior but also learning their purposes and interests. For example, I come to know my friend by coming to know her interests to the point that I can predict (though never with complete certainty) her behavior. Knowing others is not simply a process of acquiring objective facts but is a moral activity. To know is to be familiar and to be familiarly related. Learning is a moral activity

⁹ Vine Deloria, Jr. and Daniel R. Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing 2001), p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

¹¹ Scott L. Pratt, "Persons in Place: The Agent Ontology of Vine Deloria, Jr.," *APA Newsletter* 6, no. 1 (2006): 5.

¹² Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 114. For example, Albert "Sonny" McHalsie (Naxaxalhts'i)'s research into Stó:lō place names reveals Stó:lō understandings of place and relationships with land. See *A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas*, ed. Keith Carlson (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001).

¹⁴ Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, p. 23.

insofar as my “subject” of study is an agent in her own right with her own interests and purposes. Moreover, since every action toward a purpose affects the actions of others toward their purposes, every act is necessarily moral in that it affords or constrains the pursuit of goals. Knowing is not about the acquisition of discrete facts, but rather has the aim of nurturing relationships between community members, which include human and nonhuman persons.

Burkhart expands on Deloria’s insistence on the role of land to Indigenous thought in terms of locality, which he defines as “being-from-the-land, knowing-from-the-land, and meaning-from-the-land.”¹⁵ Locality is a relationship with land as material, rather than as an abstract or immaterial concept.¹⁶ The epistemological framework between land and knowing, what he calls “epistemic locality,” not only reconnects knowledge (which is delocalized in abstract conceptions central to Western theory) to the land, but also points to a particular conception of normativity as literally *grounded*.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Yellowknives Dene philosopher Glen Coulthard uses the term *grounded normativity* to point to the “place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice.”¹⁸ Grounded normativity is the ethical framework that emerges from “Indigenous land-connected practices and long-standing experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time.”¹⁹ Land here refers to material as well as “people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on.”²⁰ Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg philosopher Leanne Betasamosake Simpson affirms that grounded normativity does not have a pre-determined structure or conclusion but is generated and “maintained from deep engagement with Indigenous processes that are inherently physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.”²¹ Because land is a connection of relationships, a land-based ethics is one that emerges from the particular obligations to the particular relationships in place.

The land, and the particular relationships in place, play a foundational role in shaping both identity and ethical relations. A relational understanding of self and morality highlights relationships of interdependence that motivate reciprocal responsibility. As such, a relational understanding of the self calls for an “awareness of one’s place in a web of different connections spanning many different parties,

¹⁵ Burkart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, p. xvii.

¹⁶ Burkhart affirms that locality calls for a reconceptualization of materiality itself away from a delocalized understanding of materiality and so uses the term *premateriality* to name material land that has not yet been conceptualized.

¹⁷ An understanding of knowing-from-the-land is a stark departure from Western epistemology’s aim to articulate a “view from nowhere.” See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Coulthard, *Red Skins*, p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²¹ Leanne Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2, no. 3 (2014): 23.

including humans, nonhuman beings and entities (e.g., wild rice, bodies of water), and collectives (e.g., forests, seasonal cycles).²² A relational understanding of the self whereby relationships are ontologically primary means that morality “can be understood as a feature of relationships rather than founded on the value of things.”²³ Moral connections involve interdependent relationships and so motivate an appreciation of reciprocal responsibilities. Whyte puts it succinctly, “As responsible agents, a range of human and nonhuman entities, understood as relatives of one another, have caretaking roles within their communities and networks.”²⁴ The emphasis on reciprocal responsibility teaches one to live in relation “to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner.”²⁵

Simpson illustrates a model of grounded normativity through her turn to land-based education and the embodied resurgence within language, governance, and spiritual traditions. She turns to traditions of governance and resurgence within the Nishnaabeg language, Creation Stories, and relationships with Elders. Simpson proposes that a return to land, as opposed to efforts to “Indigenize the academy,” can nurture a generation of people that can think “within the land and have tremendous knowledge and connection to aki [the land].”²⁶ Resurgence involves a turn to Indigenous experiential knowing. She uses Nishnaabeg stories to reclaim land as pedagogy, in which “stories direct, inspire and affirm ancient code of ethics.”²⁷ She recounts the story “Kwezens makes a lovely discovery,” a story she learned from her Elder Doug Williams, to showcase a model of a young girl learning from a red squirrel (*Ajidamoo*) about licking sap from maple trees (*Ninaatigoog*), in a context of loving support from family. The story showcases a model of learning that emphasizes the importance of observing and learning from animals in a context of sharing, love and trust. The story highlights more than the sentiment that Kwezens learns *from* the land, but that she also learns *with* the land. The land is an agent that can teach Kwezens once she properly acknowledges her reciprocal responsibilities. Kwezens knows to give tobacco (*semaa*) to the tree before collecting the sap in thanks and in order to build a relationship based on “mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring.”²⁸ Kwezens forms relationships built on

²² Kyle Whyte and Chris Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring in Environmental Ethics: Indigenous and Feminist Philosophies” in Stephen M Gardiner and Allen Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 5.

²³ Burkhardt, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, p. xxxv.

²⁴ Whyte and Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring,” p. 12.

²⁵ Coulthard and Simpson respond to Jared Sexton and Nandita Sharma’s concerns that Indigenous commitments to land imply anti-immigrant and anti-Black sentiments in “Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 254. Burkhardt argues that Sexton and Sharma’s critique misunderstands Indigenous people’s ethical commitment to land as an authoritarian, dominating, and exclusionary “Fatherland normativity” (Burkhardt, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 40).

²⁶ Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy,” p. 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

these principles with all those she encounters in this story, including the squirrel, her family, and the spirits of her ancestors. Importantly, the “context is the curriculum and land, aki, is the context.”²⁹ For Simpson, Kwezens embodies the core teachings and philosophies of Michi Nishnaabeg culture and, as such, is a model and leader of resurgence.³⁰ Simpson’s model of land-based education does not aim for reconciliation through the tokenized inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies within settler education but seeks to revitalize Indigenous communities in order to work towards decolonization.

The lessons of understanding land as pedagogy has critical implications for environmental justice movements. An exploration of land as a “system of reciprocal social relations and ethical practices” provides an epistemic and ontological framework for the reparation of structurally connected harms against Indigenous lands and communities.³¹ For example, the Kari-Oca 2 Declaration, produced by a gathering of some 500 Indigenous persons at the RIO+20 Earth Summit, states that environmental policy must respect that “Our lands and territories are at the core of our existence—we are the land and the land is us.”³² The Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration, written in 2003 by Indigenous participants in the World Water Forum, states that water is “sacred and sustains all life” and that Indigenous “traditional knowledge, laws and ways of life teach us to be responsible in caring for this sacred gift that connects all life.”³³ The Water Declaration of the Anishinaabek, Mushkegowuk, and Onkwehonwe, convened by the Chiefs of Ontario affirm that they have “their own inherent responsibilities and intimate relationships to the waters” and “have the responsibility to care for the land and the waters by our Creator.”³⁴

These examples of Indigenous-led environmental justice movements illustrate an understanding of ethical responsibilities as involving relationships with human and nonhuman beings and entities.³⁵ The ethical responsibilities to maintain and strengthen these relationships emerge from the intimacy and interdependence of these relationships. These ethical responsibilities arise from intimate relationships

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 12–13.

³¹ Matthew Wildcat, Mande McDonald, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox and Glen Coulthard, “Learning from the land: Indigenous Land-based Pedagogy and Decolonization,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3 no. 3 (2014), p. ii. Moreover, the turn to land-based education is inherently decolonial insofar as its primary aim is to resist land dispossession by “putting Indigenous folks back into relationship with the land” (ibid.).

³² Kari-Oca 2 Declaration, “Indigenous Peoples Global Conference on Rio+20 and Mother Earth,” <https://www.ienearth.org/kari-oca-2-declaration>.

³³ Third World Water Forum. Cited in Whyte and Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring,” p. 11.

³⁴ Quoted in Whyte and Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring.”

³⁵ This means that ethical responsibilities are not only conceived as “the province of human beings.” In fact, several emphasize the responsibilities of water to humans and other.” Whyte and Cuomo, “Ethics of Caring,” p. 11.

with land and so exemplify how understandings of grounded normativity lead to important and powerful challenges to environmental devastation. Furthermore, these relationships with land are “morally weighty because they motivate responsibilities involving reciprocity, harmony, solidarity, and collectivity.”³⁶

GROUNDLESS NORMATIVITY AS SETTLER PHILOSOPHICAL GUARDIANSHIP

Patrick Wolfe describes settler colonialism in terms of a logic of elimination whereby settler colonialism functions to eliminate Indigenous peoples, both physically and discursively. The motivation for the *elimination* of Indigenous populations is, first and foremost, territory: “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”³⁷ Crucially, Wolfe explains that the invasion of Native lands in North America and Australia, for example, is not an event in the past, but is an ongoing *structure* that is reasserted each day of occupation.³⁸ Settler colonization is a structure insofar as it is both a “complex social formation and [a] continuity through time.”³⁹ This land-centered project of the expansion of the settler-colonial state manifests the logic of elimination in the form of “spatial removal, mass killings and biocultural assimilation.”⁴⁰ The settler colonial logic of elimination takes many forms, including statistical elimination, elimination through settler nation-building myths, and an elimination via what Burkhart calls the settler guardianship principle.⁴¹

One technique of eliminating Indigenous peoples and their ways of life is the use of the settler guardianship principle, which is the “legal and political doctrine that settler states have the right and obligation to protect Native people and Native tribes, particularly from themselves.”⁴² This paternalistic principle has been used to justify laws prohibiting ceremonies and the legal destruction of kinship structures.⁴³ In addition to the guardianship principle through law, such as the legal definition of American Indians as ‘domestic subjects’ during the Assimilation Period (1879-1934),

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁷ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 no. 4 (2006): p. 388. Patrick Wolfe puts it succinctly—“Settler colonizers come to stay” (*ibid.*).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁴¹ This list is by no means exhaustive of the manifestations of the settler colonial logic of elimination. Juaneño/Jaqi scholar Annette Jaimes has termed the procedure of minimizing the statistical populations through blood quantum requirements “statistical elimination.” Annette Jaimes, ed., *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

⁴² Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 42.

⁴³ Burkhart enumerates instances of the use of the guardianship principle to justify the outlawing of “the potlach ceremony, the sundance ceremony, the gourd dance ceremony, and the removal of commonly held tribal land in favor of individual allotment as private property” (*Ibid.*). Potlach and ghost dance ceremonies were banned, in Canada, according to the Indian Act until 1951.

Burkhart shows how this settler guardianship doctrine operates in philosophy as well.⁴⁴ This doctrine aims at the elimination or dismissal of Indigenous philosophies as well as Indigenous communities. Settler philosophical guardianship refers to the act of assimilating and translating Indigenous philosophy into the “realm of proper civilized philosophy in contrast to what is seen as mere religious thought or mythopoetics.”⁴⁵ Settler philosophical guardianship functions, in part, by hiding or erasing the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous people by deeming them meaningful or intelligible only insofar as “they assimilate to or are translatable to dominant settler philosophical paradigms.”⁴⁶ This guardianship is mostly done with good intentions as the superiority of Western theory is experienced as natural and necessary in settler societies.⁴⁷

One manifestation of the settler philosophical guardianship principle is the attempt to assimilate an account of locality and grounded normativity into one of delocality and groundless normativity. According to Burkhart, coloniality attempts to delocalize locality through the “unmooring of the roots of being, meaning, and knowing from out of the land itself, or the attempted breaking apart of being-from-the-land and knowing-from-the-land.”⁴⁸ Delocality articulates a *groundless* framework of meaning, knowing, and being insofar as it aims to understand meaning, knowing, and being as “floating free from the land.”⁴⁹ This groundless understanding of normativity *makes sense* according to a settler conception of the world, which presupposes a supremacy of settler colonial thought. An account of knowing through abstract relations sets the standard in the colonial world. It is an unquestioned assumption that both confirms and justifies the settler philosophical guardianship. The settler guardianship principle creates epistemic closure by closing settler supremacy off from critique. Insofar as settler colonialism aims for complete *settlement*, it demands both the elimination of Indigenous peoples and the ignorance of its own operations. Settler colonialism aims to make itself invisible, and delocalization is a way of furthering this invisibility.

In other words, the attempt to assimilate an understanding of identity and ethical responsibilities as arising from an intimate relationship to and with land into one where being and morality are reconceived as “floating free from the land” is a feature of the settler logic of elimination.⁵⁰ Following the settler colonial logic of elimination, land is remade and reconceptualized as property and, as such, epistemological, ontological, and ethical relationships to land other than as property are interpreted

⁴⁴ Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁴⁵ Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ Consider, for example, the mandate of both the United States’ boarding schools and Canada’s residential school policy. Captain Richard Pratt famously stated that the goal of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was to “kill the Indian, and save the Man.”

⁴⁸ Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, p. xv.

⁴⁹ Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

as “pre-modern and backward.”⁵¹ More than a mere dismissal, settler conceptions of groundless normativity both justify seizure of land and also actively *remake* land as delocalized. This occurs through the attempt to “lamine one locality (European) that has been delocalized or made groundless onto an actual locality, the Indigenous one.”⁵² To inject a delocalized European locality obscures both the origins of Indigenous locality (and so continues the work of justifying settler colonial expansion by defining a populated land as belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)) and the origins of the European locality “from which the settlers originate and are formed.”⁵³ As such, the attempt to remove locality in favor of delocality or groundlessness is in line with the aim of complete settlement through the removal and erasure of Indigenous presence.⁵⁴

In philosophy, the lamination of locality involves enforcing a groundless framework of knowing and meaning onto Indigenous philosophical concepts. A groundless account of normativity denies the agential role of land and so devalues and rejects Indigenous epistemologies and ethics. Deloria and Wildcat’s definitions of power and place, Coulthard and Simpson’s account of grounded normativity, and Burkhart’s description of morality through the land are all fundamentally at odds with a groundless account of being and normativity. An account of identity in which power and place produce personality means that inquiry that takes something (an agent or a part of an agent) out of its context or environment changes “what it is.” Hence, the desire for objective and universal knowledge, whether in the domain of science or ethics, aligns with a desire for complete “settlement” through delocality. In order to challenge the settler philosophical guardianship that seeks to delocalize Indigenous philosophy in order to make it intelligible or more palatable, settlers first need to *see* locality through the “blanket of European delocalized locality that attempts to hide and deny it as the original and true locality of this land.”⁵⁵ Burkhart names “epistemic locality” as the framework that creates an opening to see delocality as a function of coloniality and make visible the process of colonial lamination. Epistemic locality makes clear that the attempt to laminate a European locality, like the attempt for complete settlement, is always incomplete, or “ill-fitted.” Colonial lamination is incomplete because it fails to completely obscure, or cover over, locality. There is always a remainder. Simply put, this epistemic locality shows how delocality aims to cover over the relationship between morality and

⁵¹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2011): 5.

⁵² Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Carole Pateman tracks the application of the doctrine of *terra nullius* to legitimize the interests of white settlers in Australia. The doctrine of *terra nullius*, meaning “land belonging to nobody” is a legal concept that came to be used in the seventeenth century to allow European colonial powers the right to occupy what belonged to no one. Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Maldon, Mass.: Polity Press, 2007), p. 36.

⁵⁴ This project is, however, always incomplete given Indigenous peoples’ struggle to survive against a structure aimed at their elimination.

⁵⁵ Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land*, p. xvii.

the land by putting forward a groundless normativity in which values arise from a consideration of universal, abstract principles as well as from delocalized histories of ethical progress. Such abstract universals and histories require conceiving individuals as either having no relationship to, and with, land, or as capable of settling any land. An epistemic locality shows how the attempt to provide a metaphorical grounding of morality is a function of delocality. If normativity is groundless, i.e., delocalized or detached from place, it can go anywhere. A similar logic informing settlers' relation to land has functioned to justify settler colonial expansionism. This metaphorical grounding ultimately amounts to a groundless normativity, which can be seen even in Western ethical theories that attempt to foreground relations between humans and land, such as Leopold's land ethic.

LAND ETHICS AND GROUNDLESS NORMATIVITY

Leopold's land ethic famously calls for an extension of moral obligations to the biotic community. Extending moral responsibilities to a more-than-human community entails a shift in the role of humans from conquerors to "plain member[s] and citizen[s]" of the land-community.⁵⁶ As Callicott has argued, Leopold's land ethic involves a radical decentering of the human as the locus of ethical reflection and commitment.⁵⁷ Indeed, the land ethic emphasizes the interdependence of agents in a biotic community against the atomistic individualism assumed in traditional ethical theories like virtue ethics and deontology. The land ethic, it would seem, is appealing because it grounds our connection to and interdependence with land and nonhuman agents. This focus on relationships as primary (and individuals as secondary) has made the land ethic an attractive candidate for comparison with certain varieties of Indigenous ethics.⁵⁸ While aiming to get closer to land and place, the land ethic relies on a metaethical vocabulary that ironically entails a kind of groundless normativity and delocality. This groundlessness comes to the fore in the historical narrative Leopold tells about the evolution of ethical extension, which consists in the expansion of settlers' moral community.

Extension, for Leopold, is a matter of ecological evolution. This extension consists in a sequence of ethical evolution that expands or enlarges the "boundaries of the community."⁵⁹ The story Leopold tells in the concluding essay of *A Sand County Almanac* begins with a complicated depiction of ancient Greek ethical life. Upon

⁵⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation* (New York: Oxford University Press 1949), p. 171.

⁵⁷ J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 67–69.

⁵⁸ See Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic*; Callicott, *Earth's Insights*; J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, *American Indian Environmental Ethics: An Ojibwa Case Study* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2004); Dan Shilling, "Aldo Leopold Listens to the Southwest," *Journal of the Southwest* 51, no. 3 (2009): 317–50.

⁵⁹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, p. 171.

arriving home, it is said that Odysseus hung a dozen of his slave girls whom he suspected of misbehaving while he was away. Odysseus's wife, Leopold explains, was not subject to such treatment because of her "fidelity."⁶⁰ This story reveals the limits of ethical extension to property relations in Ancient Greek life. Leopold writes, "The ethical structure of that day covered wives, but had not yet been extended to human chattels."⁶¹ The story Leopold narrates is a familiar one about ethical progress. It is a history (emphasizing here the etymological connection between *history* and *story*) that locates its origin in Ancient Greek culture, and, revealingly, in this culture's practices of slave-holding, violence, and its expectations of women. As expected, our "progress" can be gleaned from the distance we have forged from "our" (i.e., Westerners') Greek ancestors. "During the three thousand years which have since elapsed," Leopold relays, "ethical criteria have been extended to many fields of conduct, with corresponding shrinkages in those judged by expediency only."⁶² He then goes on to detail the expansive shifts in this tale of ethical evolution.⁶³

While commentators have emphasized Leopold's inheritance of a Darwinian perspective on ethical progress, the extent of his reliance on the "state of nature" trope deployed by social contract theorists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau is less acknowledged. Combining social contract theory, Darwinian evolutionary theory, and the then-recent science of ecology, Leopold draws on the "state of nature" trope to explain the introduction of ethics (and politics) to human life. He writes:

The thing [ethics] has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation. The ecologist calls these symbioses. Politics and economics are advanced symbioses in which the original free-for-all competition has been replaced, in part, by co-operative mechanisms with an ethical content.⁶⁴

Ethics is indexical of social, altruistic, and cooperative behavior of interdependent individuals or groups as they overcome their initial state of egoistic competition, a state akin to that depicted in social contract theory as the "state of nature." Hence, the first ethics, according to Leopold, "dealt with the relation between

⁶⁰ This sentiment reveals that had Odysseus's wife, Penelope, not been faithful, she would have suffered the same fate as the slave girls. This situation entails an ethical double-standard that illustrates inconsistent gender norms reflective of unequal power dynamics insofar as Odysseus himself was far from faithful during his twenty-year hiatus, and yet this expectation is applied to his wife. Hence, as we later discuss, Odysseus's treatment of Penelope reveals the ever-present haunting of ethics by violence. Violence or the threat thereof functions as both the condition and limit of ethical extension.

⁶¹ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, p. 167.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Whereas Simpson's story is rooted in Nishnaabeg culture, Leopold provides a story from a different time and place. As such, their stories reveal two disparate ways of relating to place and how this informs ethical thinking. Odysseus is uprooted from place and travels for twenty years, he commits violence both abroad and as soon as he arrives home. The story also heroizes this person who is ungrounded and violent.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

individuals.”⁶⁵ He gives the example of the Mosaic Decalogue or the Ten Commandments from Christian theology that directs individuals to ethical behavior in terms of their commitments or obligations to both God and others. Ethics was then extended to the “relation between the individual and society.”⁶⁶ Here one’s ethical commitments applied not simply to individual others, but to a whole network or community of people. The examples Leopold gives are the Golden Rule, which “tries to integrate the individual to society,” and democracy, which attempts to “integrate social organization to the individual.”⁶⁷ This is the current state of ethical evolution according to Leopold.

His central intervention in this evolution, then, is to develop an ethic that extends humans’ ethical commitments and obligations to “land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.”⁶⁸ The problem, as he sees it, is that land is regarded as Odysseus regarded those slave girls—as property and thus subject to violence, domination, and destruction. Thus, “the land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.”⁶⁹ What is needed is a societal shift in our relations to land and nonhuman others. This “extension of ethics” is “an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.”⁷⁰ It is possible evolutionarily insofar as Leopold takes the conservation movement to offer a seed for its actualization, and it is necessary insofar as the integrity, beauty, and stability of ecological systems will be destroyed without it.

This evolutionary history functions to metaphorically ground Leopold’s land ethic. This grounding is metaphorical insofar as it is established through allegory and is detached from the actual place and site from which Leopold theorizes his ethics, which is located on stolen lands of the Sauk and Meskwaki. The story provides an abstract form of justification for the land ethic, which works in the following way: if humans (i.e., Westerners, i.e., settlers) have shown their tendency to expand ethical relations in their evolutionary history, then it stands to reason that they can (and ought to) continue to extend these relations to even larger systems like the land, environment, or the biotic community. The first two stages (the individual and the social) in this progressive story about ethics are taken as historical facts, whereas the third stage (the environmental) poses a normative possibility. Yet, it is a possibility grounded in historical fact insofar as Leopold accepts a Darwinian narrative about humans as being progressively ethical or social throughout our evolutionary history.

This story of ethical progress undergirding Leopold’s land ethic is problematic insofar as it commits to groundless normativity through delocalization or the injection

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

of an “unmoored European locality into the Indigenous land.”⁷¹ This delocalization functions in the following three ways: First, it offers a delocalized history told from the perspective of white European settlers that obscures Indigenous localized histories. Second, it neglects the role of power that conditions settler history and thus cannot account for how power informs ethics and ethical relations. Finally, it relies on a concept of ethical extension that functions as a universal norm and thus “float[s] free from the land.”⁷² Following Burkhart, the land ethic enacts a form of settler philosophical guardianship through its commitment to groundless normativity.

As Whyte has recently argued, Leopold’s history of ethics is “based on a settler narrative that unfolds in the opposite direction of the historical narratives many Indigenous peoples would provide of their ethics.”⁷³ Leopold’s story of the progressive sequence of ethical relations maps onto a settler narrative of the progress of society from pre-industrial periods, as seen from his locating of the historical origin of ethics in Ancient Greece, to industrial and colonial periods that were productive of environmental crises wrought by an economic mode of relating to land that is the object of Leopold’s critique. This story is told from the perspective of the settler victors of this history and frames it as a story of progress. This framing continues the settler colonialist logic of elimination by neglecting the Indigenous communities who suffered and continue to suffer materially, physically, and psychically at the expense of this “progress.” The story dramatically shifts when it is told from the perspective of Indigenous peoples. As Whyte explains:

Many Indigenous peoples would view their current ethics as inherited from the practices of their ancestors. Their ancestors were likely even more dependent on subsistence lifestyles, and lived lives that had ethics fully inclusive of many living and non-living beings and interdependent collectives. Many Indigenous people would see the colonialisms of the last 500 years as introducing ethics that were *less* inclusive of non-human entities and collectives.⁷⁴

Related from the position of the subjects violently dispossessed of their lands as a result of settler colonialism, the story Leopold narrates becomes one of *regress* rather than progress. Why take this history as instructive of an expansive ethics when it has brought extensive harm to Indigenous communities? Indeed, it does not, and cannot, consider that the environmental crises wrought by an economic relation to land is historically concomitant with and structurally connected to the dispossession and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. This leads us to the second problem with Leopold’s historical narrative and his land ethic more broadly: namely, that it does not account for the role of power in conditioning settler history and ethical relations.

⁷¹ Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷³ Whyte, “Indigenous North American and Leopoldian Environmental Ethics,” p. 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The neglect of power in Leopold's historical narrative and his land ethic is indexical of the position from which he narrates and theorizes his ethics. This is a position that has historically reflected a settler mode of relating to and engaging the world. It is a perspective that, while aspiring to get closer to land and place, reflects a distance and detachment from it. Indeed, the aspiration would not exist without this initial sense of detachment, distance, and groundlessness. Consider Leopold's use of Odysseus at the beginning of his story to clarify the historical origin of ethics. By situating this history in Greek antiquity, Leopold delocalizes the local history of the Indigenous lands he occupied while writing *A Sand County Almanac*.⁷⁵ Odysseus, of course, is the epic hero *par excellence* who escapes many perils in the course of his ten-year return to Ithaca after the Trojan War. In the course of his journey, Odysseus conquers and defeats his many captors and enemies and travels to distant lands and islands with the sailors from his twelve ships. He is an ancestor of wayfaring colonists who journey far from home in pursuit of discovery, spoils and victory.⁷⁶ Upon arriving home, Odysseus kills his slave girls and the suitors who pursued his wife during his absence. This absence, which often seems willed by Odysseus himself, reflects a detachment from his home, family, and community. Odysseus's wayfaring (i.e., colonizing) tendencies indicate both a sense of groundlessness and an inflated sense of power that manifests in his violent and wily interactions with others. And yet, despite this violent power, Leopold insists that Odysseus acts ethically insofar as he does not kill his wife.

Although Leopold relies on the story of Odysseus to clarify Westerners' distance from the uneven ethical world inhabited by Ancient Greeks, what it reflects, if anything, is our proximity to it. The acrobatics of maintaining a sense of ethics toward those "like us" while inflicting violence upon those deemed "other" is a necessary condition for settler colonialism. The reality is that the "extension" of settlers' ethical community is concomitant with a kind of power, captured colloquially under such phrases as "Westward expansion" or "Manifest Destiny," but more truthfully rendered as settler colonialism. This power is largely neglected by Leopold, but when he passingly makes reference to it, he treats it as a very innocent and natural process. In the section on "The Land Pyramid," for instance, he refers to the evolution of food chains: "Thus soil-oak-deer-Indian is a chain that has now been largely converted to soil-corn-cow-farmer."⁷⁷ Leopold makes no attempt to clarify the reason for this "conversion," and he uses this neutral term to describe a process that was incredibly violent and unjust for Indigenous communities. This oscillating

⁷⁵ Even the title is groundless because there is no Sand County in Wisconsin. His farm is located in Sauk County, Wisconsin, which is the native territory of the Sauk and Meskwaki tribes.

⁷⁶ For more on the link between Odysseus and colonization, see Irad Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonialization and Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Yoav Rinon, "The Pivotal Scene: Narration, Colonial Focalization, and Transition in 'Odyssey,'" *The American Journal of Philology* 128, no. 3 (2007): 301–34.

⁷⁷ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, p. 181.

disregard for and whitewashing of the legacy of settler colonialism in Leopold's text is an instance of what Anna Cook has called "structural settler ignorance."⁷⁸ This form of settler ignorance instantiates a "settler move to innocence" that maintains the myth of benevolence on the part of white settlers.⁷⁹ Leopold's willful neglect of the form of power known as settler colonialism simultaneously reflects a kind of delocalized power assumed by settlers and Leopold himself. This is a colonial power that enables the movement of settlers and their theory to go anywhere and erase the presence of Indigenous peoples in their wake. It is the power embodied by Odysseus, who acts out ethical obligations to some while committing gross injustices upon others and whose narration heroizes such actions under the trope of "progress."

The idea that one can rectify a legacy of colonial violence and environmental destruction through the extension of settlers' moral community is a form of settler philosophical guardianship. The concept of extension in Western philosophy has its roots in Cartesian metaphysics. Extension, according to Descartes, is the essence of bodies, marking their capacity to take up space, to extend in space. This is a way of thinking about space that abstracts away from the details or specifics of a locale or place. Extension is a metaphysics and a politics – a way of describing the taking up of space and legitimating a desire to expand one's body, and by extension, one's territory over the world. By deploying extension as its reigning metaphor, the land ethic relies on a metaphor that hearkens colonial tactics of expansion, empire, and erasure of Indigenous presence, that depends on a radical groundlessness such that it can go anywhere.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Burkhardt's concept of settler philosophical guardianship highlights the need to call into question efforts to "Indigenize" environmental ethics that do not also challenge a groundless account of normativity. If the action of integrating Indigenous philosophizing with Leopold's land ethic ends up upholding a groundless account of normativity, then the action of integration does not address differences in ontologies and political concerns or commitments, and ends up performing the settler philosophical guardianship principle. In this respect, any attempt to integrate Indigenous philosophy *into* Western ethical theory must pay attention to whether the act of integration is an act of lamination (that is, covering over Indigenous locality with a delocalized European locality) that delocalizes an account of grounded normativity. The turn to Indigenous land-based education for environmental movements and learning comes from the recognition that the model of grounded normativity is

⁷⁸ Anna Cook, "Recognizing Settler Ignorance in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2018), pp.1–25, <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/fpq/article/view/6229/4986>.

⁷⁹ Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," p. 1.

not only more helpful for thinking through particular problems in environmental ethics (such as water conservation), but offers a more productive and enriching understanding of the very source of normativity. As such, it unsettles the explicit or tacit desire of Western normative theory for universalization, or, the transcending of specific lands and contexts as providing a theory with its normative force. From the perspective of grounded normativity, a practice or position gets its normative force by maintaining contact and relations with land and place, not by transcending them. Moreover, the insertion of locality arises from the recognition that delocality functions as a form of settler philosophical guardianship.

An understanding of being, knowledge, and morality as fundamentally tied to land is challenging, however, within Western philosophy where delocality has been so normalized. What does the insertion of locality *look like* for settler educators? It is not the case that settlers cannot form intimate relationships with the land, but rather that an understanding of land as property, as inert matter to be plotted and assigned, leads to a relationship “from above, floating free from the land.”⁸⁰ As we have argued, even efforts that seek to transform settlers’ proprietary relationship to land, such as Leopold’s land ethic, end up covering over localized Indigenous knowledges, ethical perspectives, histories, and presence.

The activity of challenging internalized settler colonialism (with its understanding of sovereignty as “exercising dominating power over land and people”) involves a critical interrogation of the desire for abstract and universal groundings of normativity.⁸¹ The insertion of locality back into understandings of morality requires an intimate relationship to land (such as the one Kwezens has with the squirrel and the maple tree). A groundless understanding of land precludes an intimate relationship with the land. Oglala Lakota Chief Luther Standing Bear writes that “it is the attempted domination, control, mastery, and subjugation of land—implied in the conception of sovereign or the dominus as he who subdues or has dominion—that keeps the settler from finding an epistemological and moral home on this land.”⁸² This sovereign relation to land is exemplified in Odysseus who serves as the starting point for Leopold’s story of ethical progress. Challenging this form of domination cannot be in the domain of theory alone, but rather must

. . . acknowledge and begin to resolve the legal, moral, and material processes by which I have come to be a settler on these lands, that would, at the very least, include honoring the legal commitments made in the form of treaties and making consistent the moral proclamations of the absolute value of humanity and human dignity with our treatment of Indigenous people.⁸³

⁸⁰ Burkhart, “The Groundedness of Normativity,” p. 47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸² Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1978). Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Burkhart affirms that injecting “even a bit of locality” into our conversations about morality can create new ideas and new relationships to the land.⁸⁴ Most importantly, a consideration of the relationship between morality and the land works to “chip away at the naturalness of the colonial attitude of delocality.”⁸⁵ An exploration of Simpson’s story of Kwezens learning from and with the land in an environmental ethics classroom challenges and unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions of morality as arising from abstract and universal concepts and histories. Simpson’s story both showcases an understanding of morality through an understanding of reciprocal relationships of non-domination. The moral obligation Kwezens has toward the tree does not arise through an abstract theory that is extended to include nonhumans, but from an understanding of morality that is relational and non-anthropocentric from the start. It also serves as an example of epistemic locality insofar as it offers an example of ongoing resurgence (it is not a story from a distant pre-colonial past, but rather envisions a model of Nishnaabeg morality that arises from relationships to and with land that is past, present, and future). Moreover, the meaning of Kwezens’ experience is not “legitimated” by referring to Western thinkers or the academy, but is rather determined by her in relationship with land. Considerations of the value of ecosystems as distinct entities do not enter the conversation. A groundless conception of morality, for a moment, floats away and is out of view.

The insights of Indigenous land-based education have far reaching implications for an account of normativity such that the integration of Indigenous philosophy in environmental ethics calls for a radical re-understanding and re-imagining of the very practice of ethical inquiry. Understanding land as both a teacher, co-investigator, and source of normativity challenges fundamental assumptions of Western ethical theory. The very distinction between theory and application collapses since theory emerges from a particular location, a particular application. This means common distinctions between meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics must be re-evaluated, as well as divisions between ontology, ethics, epistemology, and politics.

A focus on the ethical import of sustaining relationships in place disrupts Western philosophy’s ambitions to a groundless account of the world and reveals that this ambition only serves to justify, and thus evade ethical responsibility for, the destruction and genocide of Indigenous communities. For this reason, a meaningful integration of Indigenous philosophizing into environmental ethics requires a rejection of epistemologies, ontologies, and normative theories that have justified (and continue to justify) settler colonial violence. Indigenous philosophy cannot be an “add-on” to environmental ethics. Instead, it calls settlers to question the way we have grounded normativity by neglecting our ties to the ground. This neglect has been proportionate to our violence, and thus calls for rectification and reparation.

⁸⁴ Burkhart, *Indigening Philosophy through the Land*, p. xxxiv.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*