

Or, So the Stories Go: Colonialist Craft/iness in *A Sand County Almanac*

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Last revised July 22, 2022

A 2020 edition *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) – the canonized, posthumously published work of U.S. settler-conservationist Aldo Leopold – is selling briskly. Its narrative proposes a tale of moral ascension. Settlers rise from land-conquering “pioneers” to become conservationists, land community members, and “land doctors” attending to “land health.” Leopold imagines a scheme, in the incisive words of philosopher, environmental justice organizer, and Potawatomi relative Kyle Powys Whyte, that would “redeem members of a settler society from the historical destruction of the environment that they have caused”(13). “Or, so the stories go,” says Lingít author and educator Ernestine Hayes (24), also unimpressed by settler self-aggrandizements.

In the Foreword to his globally influential book, Leopold introduces himself as part of an admittedly already warm and well-fed minority who prefer “wild things” over “progress.” “Progress” he here defines as greed and human-constructed “property.” “Wild things” encompass what is unre/creatable by human beings, like winds, sunsets, geese and pasque flowers. Leopold’s cultural critique of U.S. capitalist-industrial extractive empire at the expense of more-than-humans remains avowable. Leopold, however, is also responsible for “the wilderness area” idea, and, his wilderness idea grounds his later human-inhabited vision of “land health.” In my own work, as author of *Aldo Leopold’s Odyssey*, I uncritically centered land health.

“Socially constructed wilderness,” as Hayes calls it out (24), feeds the greed of the “pioneers” who must conquer it. On the flip side, “wilderness,” as something they must save, props up colonialists’ fantasies of swelling virtue. Greed and virtue, that is, belong to a two-faced character in the same narrow plot, crafted with some of white supremacy’s common sleights-of-hand. Surfacing techniques by which Leopold slipped race/ism into *A Sand County Almanac* could help form search images for their rampant occurrences within many sources (Gilio-Whitaker, 95. 99). By making them legible, moreover, I can choose to refuse them in my own work. I can choose to listen and learn skills to write from unsettling perspectives that will value and make better relations. Many of Leopold’s writings indicate his likely agreement with Hayes when she underscores, “With our words, we perpetuate our human values” (30).

In *A Sand County Almanac*’s penultimate essay, “Wilderness,” (161-170) Leopold reinforces his earlier arguments on behalf of “wild things.” He details the value of protecting wildernesses—in other words, the geographically unique “raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization” and diverse “world’s cultures.” Leopold imagines some inevitable hybridization of those cultures, homogenizing “the human species.” This global projection sits side-by-side with his second observation—the looming “exhaustion of wilderness.” Leopold thus advocates to preserve some representative “tag ends [of wilderness]...as museum pieces” before it is too late for visitors wishing to experience “the origins of their cultural inheritance.”

In the rest of “Wilderness,” Leopold unrolls overlapping aspects of wilderness’s cultural value worth saving. These include recreation (prioritizing “primitive arts” of subsistence and travel), wildlife (grizzly bears and other, in his words, “relics of the old West”), and science. His section on “wilderness for science” spotlights his ethical vision of land health. In this section,

wilderness becomes a “laboratory” for studying lands’ “capacity for internal self renewal.”

Wilderness, as Leopold explains, becomes one of “two available norms.” Indeed, Leopold says, wilderness is the “most perfect norm” by which to evaluate lands “deranged” and “sickened” by pioneering and its aftermath, and to guide efforts to heal them. The second norm that he proposes is land so well-occupied by human beings that after (mere) centuries “land physiology remains largely normal.”

Regarding examples of healthy human-inhabited lands, Leopold says he knows of “only one such place: northeastern Europe.” Yet, five paragraphs later, he describes another example without making the connection. Leopold observes the health, in his words, of the “Sierra Madre of Chihuahua, never grazed or used for fear of Indians.” He thus acknowledges that “Indians” live there, yet he does not include this clear-rivered, customary geography of Chiricahua Apache and relations in the same category as parts of Europe. Readers are left to infer that Native Americans are outside of Leopold’s recognition of “human species.” A few sentences later, in another rhetorical turn, Leopold appropriates the flourishing Apache-peopled area into what he suddenly (while also dropping the Mexican state name) calls the “Sierra Madre *wilderness*” [italics mine]. This “wilderness” he now praises not only as “a norm for the cure of sick land on both sides of the [Mexican-U.S.] border.” It is also, he dares, a “good-neighbor enterprise.”

Such rhetorical devices allow race/ist values to fester slantwise and, unworded, between phrases and lines. As one’s ear for the maneuvers develops, more rise to hearing. Earlier in “Wilderness,” for instance, Leopold includes, as representative “tag-ends” of wilderness, “expanses of virgin country” in so-called Canada and Alaska, with “wilderness” and “virgin” generally meaning un-human-peopled and assailable. Leopold also describes these geographies by quoting (imperfectly and without citing) the colonialist poet Robert Service: “Where nameless

men by nameless rivers wander / and in strange valleys die strange deaths alone.” Yet, the geographies, occupied by Russian, U.S., and Canadian empires, remain un-ceded by Gwich’in, Iñupiat, Koyukon, and many other Indigenous and First Nations. These Peoples, originating at least dozens of local languages there, have many names for themselves and for their rivers.

Leopold’s essay “Wilderness” ends with the dictate that “to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down...to a question of intellectual humility.” In brief, wilderness is valued as a values generator, that is, as “a single starting point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values.” Underscoring this narrative turn might, paradoxically, daylight settler-colonialist arrogance. Whether subduing or saving a “socially constructed wilderness,” settler-conservation writes out most of the human cultures whose values self-renewing land already has long affirmed. These words enact eco- and geno-icide. Leopold’s seeker treads between abused Lands and a deceitful abstraction that violently deletes their Peoples, smoothing over settlers’ thefts of said Lands from them. This double trouble is both unconscionable and Pyrrhic as the colonialists’ world continues unraveling.

“Wilderness” might have ended *Almanac*, but “The Land Ethic” (171-189) follows, echoing an older tale of return, which is Homer’s epic cycle featuring “God-Like Odysseus,” in Leopold’s words. The ethical structure of this Greek king’s society valued good wives, Leopold says, but not “yet” slaves. As noted by Lauret Savoy, a geologist, author, and woman of African American, Euro-American, and Native American heritage, (33) this is *Almanac*’s only mention of slavery. From Homer, Leopold leaps through a three-millenia sketch of improving relations between individuals and societies before launching the human species’ first human-land ethic. “The Land Ethic” performs yet another round of what his book as a whole enacts—circling repeatedly from and to sincere land care, critique of imperial land-destructive culture, and claims

of redemptive ideas. But, his social-ethical constructions of wilderness and land health, tragically and ironically white-out (and/or assimilate) Indigenous cultures' land-keepers and their knowledges.

As Whyte concludes succinctly, "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" (2, 8). Leopold's story-telling erases hosts of kinship disruptions and obstructions perpetrated by the greed of settler colonialists. Leopold's narrative shows why, as virtuous as it wants to be, settler-conservationist craft can't hold. Nor can its sort of "America/n" hold. Such stories, like *Almanac*'s, even ones contending to be inclusive and expansive, continue severing and not healing good relations. Understanding the crafty rhetoric of U.S. colonialism and white supremacy occurring side-by-side with love for the land community is, for me, a step toward doing better.

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