

Tilley: The Road Ahead

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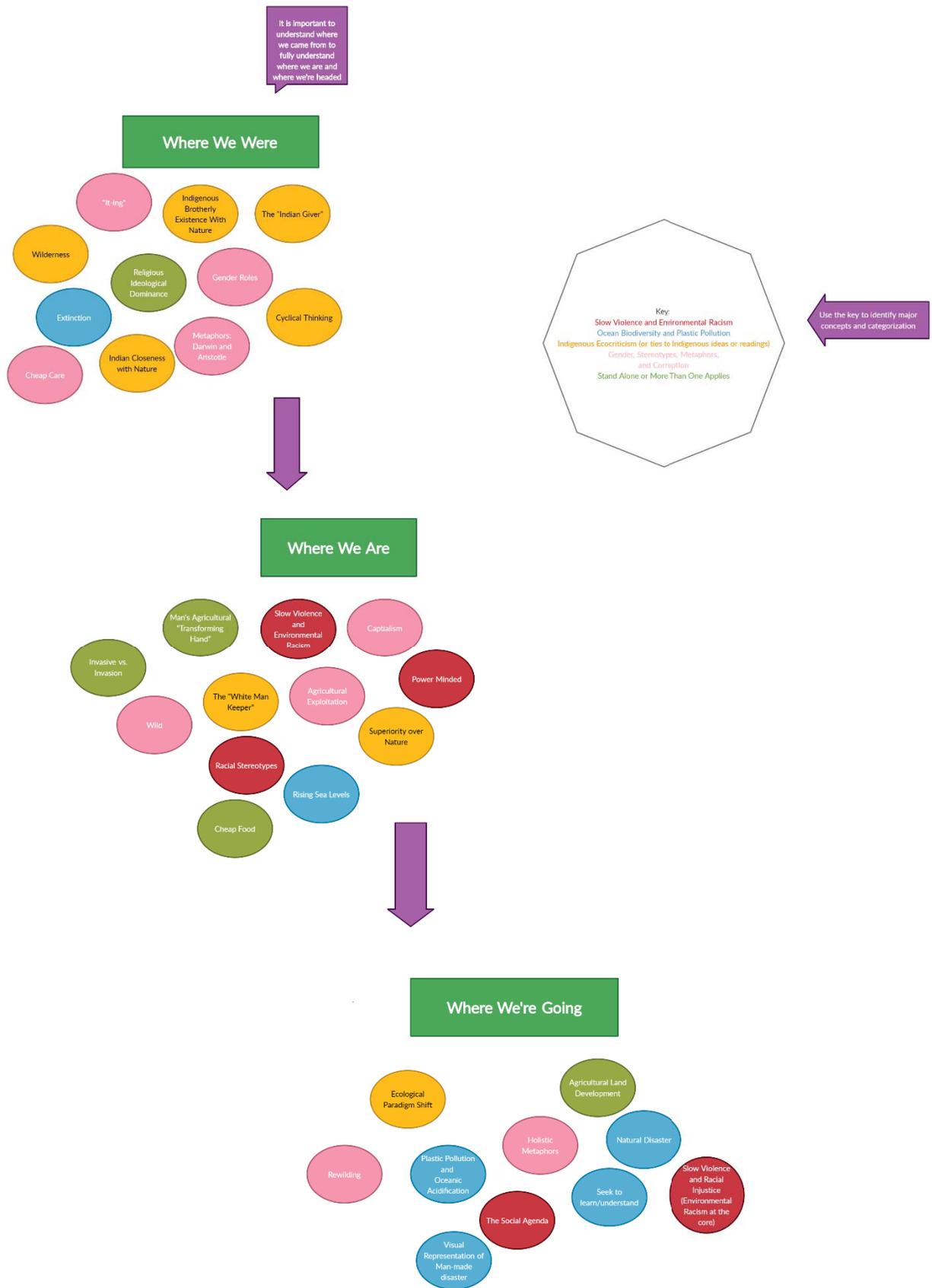


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The Road Ahead

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Introduction

The creative project that I chose to make is a visual representation on the website “Creately” where I created a map of categorizations. I call the map that I created “The Road Ahead.” There are three sections, “where we were”, “where we are”, and “where we’re going”, and within these grounds I made a bank of major concepts and key terms that we have studied and explored throughout this semester; the map is essentially a word bank and concept organization of all the ideas from this course that were discussed and were threaded through the readings. The structure that I followed within my map is categorizations of our readings, where some pertain to explaining where we used to be, some to our current situation, and others reflecting where we are headed (ecologically, environmentally, and socially). I essentially incorporated three of the major topics from the first option (the essay) into my map, consisting of oceanic acidifications and plastic pollution, Indigenous ecocriticism, and slow violence and environmental racism. These topics work collectively and through each other in my project to ultimately explain that understanding the past is key in projecting the future as well as coming to terms with the current environmental troubles

we are experiencing. The overarching purpose of my bank of terms and synthesis is to be able to understand the world in which we have descended to ultimately synthesize the situation we are in today and in the projected future, in the inevitable environmental crisis that we are spiraling toward. The follow essay projects ideas that incorporate topics plastic pollution, Indigenous ecocriticism, slow violence, and environmental racism, in synthesis that collectively explain what choices we have moving forward.

Learning from The Past

“Where we were” has ideas about Indigenous culture as the center, where all creatures and humans existed in cohabitation. Luther Standing Bear describes the bond between nature and Indian man in his “Nature.” He explains that “the Indian man sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up and away from his life-giving forces” (Standing Bear 327), in opposition to the white man who has forgotten his coexistence with nature. The Indian man also raises his children through the environmental eye, using folk tales about bodies of nature that represent larger concepts like gender. The Indian man teaches his children to become in tune with all surroundings and learn the ability of tapping into their senses, unlike the white man’s child who acts in a “foolish manner” (Standing Bear 329), “alley jostling and pushing on another around,” completely dull and unaware of their surroundings. Standing Bear states his belief that it is this difference in childhood instruction that is the root of where the Indian man and the white man differ in principle and way of life. Anne Fausto-Sterling provides the same concept in her *Nature*, where she says it has always been in the Indian’s good nature to “treat all of [mother nature] and all the Earth’s inhabitants with great respect” (Fausto-Sterling 2).

Winona LaDuke’s “Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Futures” explains how cyclical thinking suggests how the planet functions. “Cyclical thinking,” LaDuke claims, is “common in most Indigenous cultures and value-systems” (LaDuke 128). Cyclical thinking is the idea that the world and its parts all function and flow in cycles. In addition to this, she includes the notion of this concept that “you take only what you need, and you leave the rest” (128), like Standing Bear’s description of Indian values. Similarly, Lewis Hyde provides ideas of the “Indian giver” and “gift economies” in his *Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. Winona LaDuke also explains what is called reciprocal thinking, which she defines as “responsibilities and ways of relating between humans and the ecosystem” (128). In other words,

animate resources, such as wild food or animal, are considered “gifts from the Creator” (128). LaDuke explains how there will always be this reciprocity that exists, for when humans feast on animals, a life has ultimately been sacrificed in reciprocation.

In addition, Lewis Hyde depicts a world in *Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, where his ideas of “gift economies” are still present. The idea of gift giving is what Hyde describes as receiving, giving, and giving again. The capitalist mind though, would stop the equation at receiving and replace giving with keeping. Hyde explains this contrast as the “Indian giver” who continually works in this cycle of giving and giving again, a sort of passing it on or paying it forward mentality. The other side of this cycle is what Hyde calls the “white man keeper” which ultimately explains the more selfish, greedy, and capitalistic side of gift giving. Hyde explains these differences in gift giving much like Standing Bear does in “Nature” to depict the deep differences between the Indian and white man and the frame of mind that each possess. Understanding where we come from on this ecological and cultural scale takes synthesizing work from individuals who depict differences between cultures at the root, ultimately leading to understanding where we went wrong.

Robin Kimmerer’s article “Speaking of Nature” describes one of the aspects in which humans have gone wrong in the ecological system. Kimmerer says that it is all about our grammar, where we have subconsciously learned to “*It*” ideas that are out of ourselves. What she means by “*It-ing*” is that when we talk about ourselves or other humans, we will typically use pronouns (he, she, etc.), but when we talk about other beings, animals for example or nature in general, we tend to give them the pronoun “*It*.” One reason for this, Kimmerer suggests, has to do with our cruelty towards animals and nature. She uses an example from a student in her class who lives on his family’s farm. The student explains how the animals on his farm do not have names, therefore he “*Its*” them. His argument is that although he does NOT give them name pronouns that does not mean he doesn’t love the animals and treat them right. Kimmerer uses her student’s point to explain the mechanics of “*It-ing*.” We use *It* because “everyone knows you don’t give a name to the thing that you’re going to eat” (Kimmerer). She explains how this is exactly the point and how “*It-ing*” is used to ultimately “distance ourselves” and “set others outside of our circle of moral consideration.” Kimmerer continues, describing a similar perspective to Standing Bear, where the “Indigenous philosophy recognizes other beings as our relatives, *including* the ones we intend to

eat” (Kimmerer). The Indian man would cherish his food before he makes it his meal, giving many thanks and appreciating what he is about to be given, letting nothing go to waste.

The Land Institute’s “Transforming human life on our home planet, perennially” has a similar take on what exactly has gone wrong causing the Anthropocene to be in the danger that it is in now. This short, blunt article explains how having this human-centric frame of mind and an assumed superiority over nature agriculturally is most definitely one of the “worst mistakes in the history of the human race.” This assumption that man is above nature has created a vast majority of problems, many of the pressing issues today relate to the fact that this frame of mind basically means that humans have come to believe that planet Earth serves as a forever existing trash barrel.

Andrea Hejnal uses his “Ladders, Trees, Complexity, and Other Metaphors in Evolutionary Thinking” to explain another aspect in which humans have gone wrong that has ultimately led to the negative ecological outcomes that we are driving down this road toward. Like man’s assumed superiority over nature, Hejnal synthesizes this idea through an example of classic art and religion. Aristotle’s “Great Chain of Being” ultimately places natural beings below humans, which are all essentially under the regional leaders with the divine right of kings and God himself. The greatest fallacy in this ladder system though is that the human man exists on a plane above nature and creatures, rather than coexisting in equilibrium. This assumption, what the Land Institute refers to as one of the worst mistakes that mankind has ever made in all of history, is a major reason why we are in the ecological crisis that we are currently in. Hejnal not only breaks down the faults in Aristotle’s model, but also in Charles Darwin’s idea of metaphorical trees. He says Darwin’s trees are a toxic metaphor because, like “The Great Chain of Being,” humans are still put at the top (or at least higher than nature and other creatures). Although Hejnal is skeptical about the effectiveness of metaphors, he suggests that we move away from the idea of ladder structured metaphors and lean toward more complex structures, such as images like coral under the sea. Hejnal suggests that we look at this model rather, offering how we might learn to cope with our environmental crisis, in that these more complex models. He explains that shifts of metaphorical thinking (and mostly away from it) will also shift how we value other beings and could ultimately have the power to change how we choose to protect our environment. Even in the coral metaphorical representation Hejnal finds many flaws. The main take away from Hejnal’s piece is the conclusion that he draws about the invalidity and toxicity of metaphors. The use of metaphors to represent ideas so large are essentially the problem, because they are not big enough webs to

capture all the working parts in the unison and opposition that they are. Hejnl ultimately concludes that the best step forward is a movement away from metaphors all together when representing greater concepts, for they simply do not suffice. The changing world is nondirectional and unpredictable, like the world we could possibly be headed for depending on how we act from here on out. Hejnl's suggestion allows us to see how moving away from hierarchical metaphors will open more holistic ways of protecting our environment.

We can use examples from the past to understand where we have landed today, to then synthesize where we are most likely headed in the future both far and near. We can understand gender roles through several of the works we explored this semester. Moore and Patel use 15th century examples of gender roles and the domestication of women to explain ideas about the role of a woman in society and larger concepts such as capitalism. Moore and Patel's "Cheap Care" in *The History of The World in Seven Cheap Things* explain what women's duties were countable centuries ago. Moore and Patel suggest that females are often forgotten in history because their main responsibilities consisted of "cooking, teaching, nurturing, healing, and organizing" (114). This work that made up women's historical duties were jobs that predated capitalism. It is ironic that this work was handed to women before capitalism, because it is work that is immeasurable with monetary value because of how crucial these types of care are.

Evelyn White also synthesizes what it means to be a woman and her connection with nature as a black woman. In her "Black Women and the Wilderness" she explains the concept that because of the mistreatment and enslavement of African Americans in the past, she is ultimately still struggling with coping with this knowledge today (in addition to feeling targeted as a woman). White describes walking into the forest and feeling "exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected" (White 1064) because she cannot help but imagine the vivid images of her ancestors who were brutally beaten and treated with great hatred and disrespect. We can take Evelyn White's synthesis of her "troubled feelings about nature" (1063) in relation to race, and use it as a stepping stone for coming to terms with the presence of racism in past societies as well as in the social structure today. This synthesis can then be used to understand greater concepts like environmental racism, simultaneously connecting to ideas of pollution, emissions, and environmental crisis.

Problems of the Present

David Sibley synthesizes race through instances of stereotyping to create definitive connotations about either party in these situations. In *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, Sibley explains how all stereotyping is used to create representations and are strategically designed to create exclusions. Many stereotypes work to dehumanize the concept of a group, but all stereotypes whether they have negative or positive connotations, are complete distortions of reality. A concept like color, racially speaking, can have different connotations based on generalities and frame of mind. For example, while “light” and “white” tend to symbolize life, happiness, and all things living, “black” or “dark” is generally symbolic of death, dirt, disease, or dying. Personified into human nature, these are indiscreet assumptions made about race based on totally incorrect stereotypes. Sibley says, “black is used routinely to describe dirt” (9), existing within the same stereotype as “disease” also being commonly used in relation to black, which can be connected to the connotation that race, plague, or disease are closely related, causing fear or disgust to be geared toward a specific race (again, all based on false ideas stemming from distortions and social stereotypes).

Very much like White’s experiences with racism and internal struggle with the unavoidable and everlasting consequences, Sibley explains the scenario of thinking about life deeply from black perspective. Sibley starts off with this example by saying that “whites have a deep emotional investment in the myth of ‘sameness’” (Sibley 10), basically meaning that whites do not see themselves as white as much as they just see others different from them as “not-white.” He explains this concept through an example from black perspective; for someone who lives in the “black spaces on the edge of town” (10), they are sometimes conditioned to associate “whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, [and] the terrorizing” (10) – when whites dare to enter the segregated space that wholly belongs to blacks, these intruders are commonly regarded as terrorists. This idea of minorities’ territory and the difference between race in these spaces is an ideal thread for slow violence and environmental racism.

Rob Nixon’s Introduction to his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* explains slow violence as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2). He continues, describing it as “violence that is not viewed as violence at all” (2), and that really is the horror to it. Instead of a wildfire for example, getting all the attention it does, funding, programs to help rehabilitate forests

and homes, something more subtle, but still just as large of a problem, such as oceanic acidification per say, does not get a fourth of that public attention, if any at all. Environmental violence that is right in your face are events that are explosive or exists loudly, such as wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. These are undoubtedly terrible ecological problems today, but they always get more attention than quieter and more gradual disasters, including rising sea levels, oceanic plastic pollution, radioactive aftermaths of war, biomagnification, climate change, or deforestation.

Slow violence can occur anywhere but synthesizing its effects in relation to human being's existence recognize that there are specific groups of individuals and locations that are hit harder with environmental racism and slow violence than others. Nixon explains how it is generally minorities that are affected heavier than others, since they are those who tend to live-in low-income locations. Nixon says that the targets of the "environmentalism of the poor" are generally fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, region, generation, or religion. In the short YouTube video "The Story of Plastic: How Plastic Production Pollutes Small Towns" from The Story Stuff Project, the reason for this higher rate of pollution and physiological effect on the humans that live in this at risk towns is explained; The dynamic of these towns generally consist of homes that are inhabited by low income families, living next to a park, next to a chemical plant that produces plastic, next to a school, next to a refinery, and so on and so forth. The chemical plant harms the humans that live in close vicinity to it because of the quality of air, which has scientifically led to depletion of respiratory, cardiovascular, and logical systems within individuals that are heavily exposed like this. This is a perfect example of environmental racism and slow violence, where these people being affected essentially cannot take a stand and create a movement because they do not have the key ingredients required to bring attention to anything in this country: power and capital. Somini Sengupta explains how people that are affected by slow violence, such as rising temperatures, cannot simply get up and leave, and the root of the issue is just that. The target of slow violence and environmental racism are those who do not have the means to change their situation.

Resistance and Solutions

On the other hand, natural disaster is not an example of slow violence, but that does not take away validation that it is still a monumental problem. There is still a quiet aspect to natural disaster though, and that is the ability to have a positive frame of mind (rather than a negative perspective) where these changes in the environment are embraced and explored to then figure out new solutions. Timothy Morton's article "The Hurricane in My Backyard" explains the importance of embracing inevitable disaster. There are many things that disasters like Hurricane Harvey can teach cities and citizens, one being how to embrace these ecological changes. We need to change with the weather, Morton says; we need to "change the way cities are planned, built, managed" (Morton), and "people need to learn to tolerate, even embrace, the accidental situations they find themselves in as global warming's effects become perpetual." Morton continues, explaining how natural disasters take a toll on oneself as well, not just the physical landscape. Events like hurricanes, he explains, allow you to tap into your inner mind and learn about yourself. For example, he remembers feeling very angry during Hurricane Harvey. He claims to have been acting like a jerk and remembers having to check in with himself and really get in tune with his actions. He concludes, suggesting that since we pretty much must endure disasters like hurricanes at this point in our ecological situation, we might as well figure out ways to embrace and learn from them, like how to adapt to change in a split second.

Another method to embracing and synthesizing the environmental crisis that we are experiencing is to seek to understand the root of the problem. One way to make this happen, as Olafur Eliaison demonstrates, is through visual representations of man-made disaster. Naomi Rea explains Olafur Eliasson's project *Ice Watch London*, which was his display in the city of London that contained 30 large ice blocks that were transported from the southern Greenland glaciers. The idea of this project was to create a visual representation that would make views become awe-stricken, causing them to realize the damage that is being caused directly from human centered faults. Watching the ice melt in front of oneself, Olafur Eliaison believed, would cause a sort of epiphany or guilt emotion where people would be able to recognize the harm they are causing in terms of rising sea levels and warming oceans. Eliaison explains the main purpose of his display as a chance for "the millions of people who live in and visit London the opportunity to have a very tangible encounter with the consequences of their actions" (Rea).

The first step in seeking to understand where we are headed is not only understanding the world in which we have emerged from, but the reasons for why we are spiraling so quickly in this direction of environmental and ecological disaster.

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