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# Under the Molten Mirror of the Sky

Looking Up in the Twenty-First Century

ROBERT BOSCHMAN

As co-convenor of a biennial interdisciplinary conference series on the environment at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, my first thought in calling the series *Under Western Skies* was to pay homage to Donald Worster, the environmental historian whose book by the same name is a landmark in ecocritical studies.<sup>1</sup> As it turns out, that initial evocation entailed, for me, much further thinking about the human bond to the sky and how, in the age of global climate change, the ancient assumptions and questions implicit in looking up will be affected.

Vandana Shiva's first words when she stepped to the podium to speak at the inaugural conference in 2010 were, "Everything is under western skies."<sup>2</sup> In that moment I felt, in the slightly caustic tone with which she uttered those five words, that the sky had become a suffocating cultural mirror covering and reflecting nearly everything. Seeing the sky meant seeing myself as a Westerner Google-mapping the earth, looking down at myself looking back up, caught in an endless circle of reflections that nevertheless contained images of actual changing coastlines and shrinking masses of polar ice.

Our relationship with the sky has likely always been complicated, for as long as self-conscious hominids have considered it. Who can know at what point in time looking up began, or under what conditions? But asking such questions, for me, evokes the deep backdrop, the unimaginable context, for the changes we now face in doing something as old and natural as looking up.



Fig. 1. *Alberta Sky*. Photograph by the author.

That earlier human civilizations were intimate with the sky in its day-and-night variations through time is without question. The Maya measured and plumbed the heavens, as did (in various other ways) the hundred million humans who lived in the Americas immediately before Columbus.<sup>3</sup> The Anasazi people of Chaco Canyon, for instance, possessed an intricate cosmology in which the sun was a dagger, one that recent scholars found piercing hieroglyphs etched on rock walls in the American southwest.<sup>4</sup>

More recent cultures obsess over the sky. Science—since Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo—probes its hidden vaults. In his sonnets, Shakespeare (loving a young man he couldn't realistically ever be with) saw "the stars in secret influence" on "men as plants . . . / Cheerèd and checked even by the selfsame sky."<sup>5</sup> Over the roof-tops of London, his lark sang "at break of day arising / From sullen earth."<sup>6</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe caught the night sky just beyond a conifer, an immortalized tree that still stands steps from D. H. Lawrence's ranch house near Taos, New Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Jimi Hendrix colorfully kissed the sky. And a man fell from the top of it, because he wanted to see if he could do that and live.<sup>8</sup> He did. Eddie Vedder's ex became a "star in somebody else's sky," and he raged over it in a song dedicated to clouds, sun, and horizons.<sup>9</sup> Methane



Fig. 2. *Oil and Sky*. Photograph by the author.

rises to it; starlings navigate by it; dung beetles and mallards follow the stars. Solar rays spike through the atmosphere in the right proportion for the perception of blue to register on the human retina and, definitely important, for a biosphere to exist at all (even as the most lethal sunbeams deflect back into space).



Fig. 3. *Saskatchewan Sky*. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 4. *Skytrak Sales Lot*. Photograph by the author.

The thin membrane of the atmosphere shields all life from the vacuum of the infinite. Shuttles wend upward at their hazard—and there is a history of the sky in meteors and asteroids alone.

In Job, the oldest book of the Judeo-Christian Bible, I located an early example of my mirror metaphor and realized how resilient this trope has been for human beings. In our interpretation of sky as a reflective surface, we have been seeing ourselves for a very long time, alienated and wondering. The Hebrew writer sees in his mirror not an answer but a question, one that sunders his consciousness seemingly from all else: “Hast thou with Him spread out the shekhakim (clouds), hard as a molten mirror?”<sup>10</sup> Almost three thousand years later, early modern translators rendered the verse in terms of the English rhythms and worldview of 1611: “Hast thou with him spread out the sky, which is strong, and as a molten looking glass?”<sup>11</sup>

Today I look at earth as the celebrated “pale blue dot” of Carl Sagan.<sup>12</sup> Today I habitually use dazzling cartographic technologies to pan and spin and zoom to find my own house. Today I gaze up knowing that I am a consuming god, gazing down, emitting up, making my own carbon footprint upon the earth.

Yet kids still ask about the sky, and it continues to bring news. The

really big news is that, as Stanford historian Richard White stated in his keynote address at the 2010 *Under Western Skies* conference, Global Climate Change is the past among us, gathered and gathering in the molten sky.<sup>13</sup> The past is prologue on a planetary scale. And yet I must believe, for now, that the sky is strong and that the conference series I co-organize—at once educational, interdisciplinary, and community minded—can contribute to its resilience (<http://skies.mtroyal.ca>).

#### NOTES

1. Worster, *Under Western Skies*.
2. Shiva, "Soil Not Oil."
3. Mann, 1491, 102–106.
4. Lekson, *The Chaco Meridian*.
5. Shakespeare, sonnet 15, *Oxford Shakespeare*.
6. Shakespeare, sonnet 29, *Oxford Shakespeare*.
7. O'Keeffe, *The Lawrence Tree*.
8. Tierney, "24 Miles, 4 Minutes and 834 M.P.H., All in One Jump."
9. Vedder, "Black."
10. Job 37:18, *Orthodox Jewish Bible*.
11. Job 37:18, *The Holy Bible*.
12. Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*.
13. White, "Injecting History into Climate Change."

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