



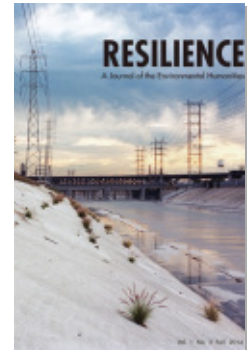
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Witness among the Refugees, Iowa Territory

BARBARA ECKSTEIN

Rocky Mountain surveyor John Frémont remembers his French mentor Joseph Nicollet as he came into a northern prairie Native village: he was “surrounded by [American Indians], with the aid of the interpreter getting them to lay out the form of the lake and the course of the streams entering the river near by, and after repeated pronunciations, entering their names in his notebook.”¹ This 1838 encounter in the Iowa Territory contrasts sharply with Black Hawk’s description of the Americans shooting women of his band as they attempted to swim the Mississippi with their children on their backs.² That travesty of human contact in 1832 not only ended the presence of Black Hawk’s resisters in Illinois but also began a great acceleration: between 1832 and 1857 the Iowa Territory transformed from the promised sanctuary for Native peoples on the west bank of the Mississippi River to more than one state of the United States, including the state of Iowa in 1846, which was surveyed and settled by whites in all its ninety-nine counties by 1857. The published and widely read 1836 journals of another surveyor, Albert Lea, read like racially exclusive real estate brochures for the Iowa River Valley: “the virtuous,” “the intelligent,” and “the wealthy . . . [should] seek, in the favoured and flowery regions beyond these ‘wilds,’ a congenial abode for themselves and their posterity . . . [in a] region too far north for Negroes to be profitable.” Most notes of surveyors employed by the General Land Office are merely instrumental and therefore silent on any prairie species not useable as timber and any prairie person still in place—cataloged as simply “2nd-rate prairie.”³ But Nicollet’s journals

and those descriptions of him by his small party provide a rich scientific and humane record of a diverse place undergoing abrupt ecological and ethnological transformation.⁴ The tsunami of settler culture and agricultural development was turning many Native peoples, nonhuman native species, and the soil and water itself into refugees in place. Given the force of this wave of settlers and settler ideology aimed at the Iowa Territory, Nicollet's deliberate compassion for and curiosity about the dispossessed, both human and more-than-human, appear otherworldly. Edmund C. Bray's translation of Nicollet's journals and geographer Martha Coleman Bray's explanatory notes in *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies* provide a reader of English the opportunity to follow Nicollet, with his botanist colleague Karl (Charles) Geyer, as they sought out and recorded the peoples, plants, animals, watersheds, and topography on the brink of apocalypse in the Iowa Territory.

Having acquired malaria in the American Southeast earlier in the 1830s, Nicollet himself was near his end when he traversed the Iowa Territory, though he may not have known it. An understanding of endings and a recognition of massive transformation pervade the journals nonetheless. The devotion to an accurate record coupled with a willingness to feel the tragedy and minister to the needs of individuals illuminates the text.

Nicollet's journals neither ennoble nor denigrate but rather individuate the people, cultures, and topographies. He learns which Indian nations have suffered from smallpox and when; which have been longest in place; and which, like the Sauk and Fox, are newcomers, eager to aggressively establish their place in the Iowa Territory. He learns which Indian leaders are wise, which are clever, and which are dangerous to strangers. He learns which of his own party are prone to drink, which are prone to bragging, and which are prone to bravery. He dismisses those whose aggressive behavior he cannot bend to his moral vision of appropriate human-to-human contact and scientific inquiry. He learns how to receive different forms of Indian hospitality, and he practices his form of French hospitality liberally. He learns where the bison have been and where they have gone; in his last expedition, in 1839, his party follows the people and the herds as far north and west as Devil's Lake. He observes where the topography arrests his attention and how it has done the same for earlier peoples, whose names for features of the landscape record their appreciation. He notes where fresh water is plenti-

ful and where settlers will drain it from the land. In the whole of the journals, Nicollet makes visible animals, peoples, and landforms exiting stage left, famine chasing food as long as the animal and human refugees are able.

On the one hand, he knows that the prairie bogs will be drained to provide “agreeable” agricultural land; on the other, he bears witness to the destruction wrought by this change.⁵ Surveying the territory near the Blue Earth and upper Des Moines Rivers, he writes,

The Indians of the Wahpekute [a branch of the so-called Sioux] tribe cannot bring themselves to leave the country in spite of the continual danger they run of being attacked by the Sauk and Fox. At this moment they are scattered in little bands of 3 to 6 lodges in *les bois francs* around the lakes to gather wild rice. They see us and we do not see them. From time to time some of them wander alone on the prairie or on the summit of hills where they stop to weep on the tombs of some of their recently buried kin. These come to us for consolation. This morning my heart felt as if it would break when I found on the summit of a little hill a spoon and a blanket, signs of a dying person abandoned by the family which faces this terrible [necessity] that forces the Indians to abandon the dying to save the living who are decimated by famine.⁶

Amid details about the chronometer and barometer that produce accurate readings to correct Zebulon Pike’s previous maps of the territory between the Missouri and the Mississippi Rivers, Nicollet inserts passages that resonate with the tragic costs of imperial encounters. This prose is as rich with human and environmental pathos as J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Nicollet’s journal of humans and environment raises the curtain on a particular but also on a typical place on the front edge of gale-force cultural and environmental change. Its story echoes across the Anthropocene. Its human inhabitants find their home buffeted by different kinds of strangers, some bringing war, some famine, and others disease, all bringing ecological change. Few bring any credible curiosity, compassion, and respect. Nicollet’s unusual position as a US employee with little at stake in its imperial ambitions makes his ways of seeing encounters among humans and between humans and environment unexpected in their own time and resonant in ours. The entries dwell both in the immediate day and locale and

also in the imminent changes that Nicollet accepts as inevitable in this territory and time. Accepting those changes that he cannot stop, he nonetheless rejects the dominant ethos that drives them. He refuses to delay his first journey for fear of smallpox infection but instead determines to vaccinate Native people.⁷ Having been hired by the newly formed US Corps of Topographical Engineers to conduct this survey, he will not accept a military escort but asks for only one assistant. He is given Lt. John Charles Frémont from the Topographical Corps of Engineers.⁸ Nicollet makes use of local geographic and linguistic knowledge gleaned from fur traders, many of mixed race, and from members of diverse Indian nations. He takes on interpreters where he can find them.⁹ Occasionally, his small band finds itself in the territory of Native people whose aggression is best avoided; more often he seeks encounters with Indians so that he can record their geographic knowledge. Mostly he moves freely through the territory by offering health care, food, and gifts and, in some instances, by giving and receiving genuine friendship though he is a strange stranger in this place.

All of this is to say that Nicollet provides one example, a good example in many ways, of how to be a witness to and participant in the kind of massive cultural and natural transformation that climate change and attendant environmental threats produce now in sites across the globe. He is, of course, a perpetrator of the tragedy unfolding. He is making a map for the United States, although, it has to be acknowledged, one that makes a case for bioregions, a case that is ignored by local and national governments with political aims. Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett, who hires Nicollet, wants to establish forts in the newly acquired territory that will in turn enable white settlers to prosper there.¹⁰ Nicollet is European, educated by Jesuits and France's leading scientist Simon-Pierre LaPlace. His first-rate European education notwithstanding, the limitations of his own language and culture pull him, in the United States, toward French planters exiled from Haiti and French capitalists benefitting from the fur trade. As a political migrant himself, having left France in 1830 during the July Revolution, he seems naïve about US politics, especially the conflict over slavery. His stated motives for the 1838 and 1839 expeditions are to make a correct map of the Iowa Territory and to continue to tell the story of the encounters of Frenchmen with the Native peoples of central North America. Yet he readily accepts US funds to conduct a second expedition into the Iowa Territory to fulfill the imperial expectations of the Topographical Engineers, the

secretary of war, and the US Congress. Strange to say, but perhaps we are fortunate that he died in 1843 not only because he did not have time to edit his journals down to the terse geographic report Congress requested but also because he could not lead the surveying of the Rocky Mountains and points farther west.¹¹ That role went to Frémont, whose journals of those expeditions turned him into a buckskin-fringed figure of adulation in the United States and in Europe. Nicollet, the healer of American Indians and crew, was never a hero of westward expansion. Bearing little taint of boosterism of a national or localist bent, his journals are freer to be important records of environmental humanity now.

Having provided vivid images of peoples and prairies in the throes of displacement by settlers and the ideology that sent them, Nicollet's journals illuminate with shocking irony the more recent displacement of many descendants of those settlers and their agricultural land uses for which earlier peoples and species sacrificed their lives and cultures. In the more recent great acceleration following World War II, the theory and practice of industrial agriculture have removed more than half of the farms from the Iowa land.¹² Most often, as farmers go broke or sell out and leave the stage, their neighbors are the ones to buy the land, following the mantra "economy of scale," or, in Earl Butts words, "Get big or get out." In her 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley lays bare the details of commodity cultivation and consolidation that undermine species diversity, soil conservation, water quality, public health, and collective resilience among neighbors. As the push for more acreage, more monocropping, larger hog operations, larger equipment, and larger debt gains momentum, humans' relationships with one another and with the land and water fall into tragedy of a Shakespearean or, for some readers, melodramatic proportion. The result in the novel and on the ground is commodity operations more like plantations than the sort of farms Thomas Jefferson once envisioned for the new Louisiana Territory. Seeing diaspora in the Iowa Territory with Nicollet's eyes, it is easy to imagine the most unfortunate of those 108,000 displaced farmers and their families leaving the stage in tragic disarray (and even modern day hunger) as did the Wahpekute before them. The vast landscape of corn and beans is littered with the ruins of their dwellings and tools. As they depart, the labor conditions among the remaining hog, chicken, turkey, dairy, and cattle plantations for newer migrants from the backside of US cities, Mexico and Central America, Africa and Asia

encourage comparison with the nineteenth-century southern plantations Iowa statehood was established to contain.

If the analogy of Nicollet's subject to Smiley's has merit, it invites from witnesses to settler culture and environment the same sort of curiosity about natural and cultural details and compassion for those most disrupted by change that Nicollet displayed. Recognizing in herself complicit as ignoble as Nicollet's, a reader of his journals feels, nonetheless, the responsibility of that invitation, not to ennoble or denigrate the descendants of settler culture, but to individuate its diverse members, many of whom have been driven from the land with the top soil, clean water, and a diverse array of prairie and agricultural species, leaving behind plantation conditions for human laborers, meat animals, dying soil, and polluted waterways.¹³ Nicollet commits himself to accurate information and a healing presence and, in this way, brings humanities and environments together to dwell in their problems in place. Like many a moral tale, his enables its readers to imagine how to go and do likewise and then nurture the alternate ways of being in this neighborhood of the planet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Eckstein is author of *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) and *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City* (New York: Routledge, 2005), and coeditor, with urban-planning professor James Throgmorton, of *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003). An English professor also on the faculty of the Center for Global and Regional Environmental Research at the University of Iowa, she teaches courses in literature and the environment, in the nature of story, and in theories and practices of environmental humanities and arts. With intermedia artist Mark NeuCollins, geographer Eric Tate, students, and community partners, she is working on an interactive digital map of historical and recent severe-weather stories in Iowa called the *People's Weather Map* (PWW). With environmental historian Tyler Priest and earth scientist Brad Cramer, she is planning a 2015 Obermann Symposium at the University of Iowa called "Energy Cultures in the Age of the Anthropocene." When they aren't covered with snow, the PV panels on her garden shed (née chicken coop) generate enough electricity for her home.

NOTES

1. Joseph N. Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies: The Expeditions of 1838–1839 with Journals, Letters, and Notes on the Dakota Indians*, trans. and ed. Edmund C. Bray and Martha Coleman Bray (1976; repr. St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993), 17.

2. Black Hawk, *Life of Black Hawk, or Mâ-ka-tai-me-she-kiâ-kiâk*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy with Anthony Hoefer (1833; New York: Penguin, 2008), 86.

3. Lea's words come from the popular Albert Miller Lea, *Notes on Wisconsin Territory, with a Map* (Philadelphia: Henry S. Tanner, 1836), 15. Iowa Territory had been part of the larger Wisconsin Territory. Among the utilitarian survey books is Alvin Burt's from 1836–37, the original of which is available at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines (N17/8/5, box 8, folder 14). Burt was one of the sons of William A. Burt, inventor and instructor of many surveyors in the nineteenth century.

4. Geographer Martha Coleman Bray has made the work of Joseph Nicollet available to readers of English through a series of books published in the 1970s and 1980s and translated from the French most often by Edmund C. Bray. In all the books, the reader sees Nicollet apprehend the environment and diverse peoples together, but I write here particularly about Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*.

5. The Swamp Law Act of 1850 extended northward the policy established in Louisiana in 1849—that is, granting state governments acreage of “swamps and overflowed” land on condition that the income from its sale be used for reclamation (i.e., draining). See “General Land Office Timeline,” Department of Landscape Architecture, Iowa State University, last updated November 18, 2004, <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~fridolph/glo/pinfo/timeline.html>.

6. Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, 125–26.

7. Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, 10.

8. Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, 11. A handful of others chose to join him, Geyer among them.

9. The whole issue of translators—Frémont and the mixed-race voyageurs for Nicollet as well as Bray for me—is worthy of a longer discussion than I can give it here. Safe to say, in both cases, Reed Way Dasenbrock's “meaningful unintelligibility” is at play.

10. Nicollet, *Joseph N. Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, 9. Interestingly, ironically, Nicollet observes that the fort at Council Bluffs that the United States opened, following Lewis and Clark's presence, and then closed could have prevented much of the bloodshed among the extant tribes. Having scrambled Natives' territorial understanding of one another through the exploration and in-migration of whites, the US government did not stick around to sort out the resultant conflicts among Natives.

11. Martha Bray makes this observation, although she suggests that Nicollet was fortunate to die in 1843 for the sake of his unedited journals. I think rather that the good fortune is ours, not his.

12. In 1950 there were 200,000 farms in Iowa. In 2012 there were 92,200. Between

2011 and 2012 there was an increase in the number of farms worth \$500,000 or more and in the \$250,000–\$499,999 category. In the other three lower categories, the numbers of farms decreased. From 2011 to 2012 there was an overall decrease of 100 farms. See Dan Pillar, “Iowa Farm Numbers Dip Slightly,” *Des Moines Register*, February 20, 2013, <http://blogs.desmoinesregister.com/dmr/index.php/2013/02/20/iowa-farm-numbers-dip-slightly/article>. The story would be the same throughout the plains and prairies.

13. Iowa poet laureate Mary Swander and her MFA students at Iowa State University have done one version of this individuation in their interviews that became a play, then book, *Farmscape: The Changing Rural Environment* (North Liberty IA: Ice Cube Press, 2012). Subsequently, Swander has been working with students on a similar project: “Vang: A Drama about Recent Immigrant Farmers.”