Search For A Common Language
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When I first started thinking about the topic of this year’s Tanner Symposium, “The Search for a Common Language: Environmental Writing and Education,” it occurred to me again, as it often has in the past, just how language bound, how linguistically mediated, my relationships with the environments around me tend to be. One of the great things about my line of work is that people pay you to sit around and read books, getting smarter and smarter (ideally) about the world around you. So there I sit between four walls, cut off from external distractions, honing my head to a finer and finer point as I peruse and digest works of historical ecology, environmental history, nature writing, and ecocriticism. If I had a daughter, she would find Take Your Daughters to Work Day a huge and boring anticlimax. She would probably soon wander off to find something more exciting to do—probably outside.

But then, suitably sharpened, I go off to my classroom to share with my students some of what I’ve read and discuss their thoughts about and reactions to the words we read together as that week’s assignment. I’ve even been known to commit a few words to paper myself from time to time. And, all flippancy aside, I’m sure readers of this volume agree that the shared possession and work of “common language” and “environmental writing,” and “education” as pursued through those linguistic means are crucially important, today perhaps more than ever. There’s good and vital
stuff in those books—and not just information about how humans have thought about and interacted with the natural world in the past and present but potential applications of that information to our own lives and times: moral lessons, good and bad examples, opportunities for new and better ways of thinking and acting. If my nonexistent daughter tugged on my sleeve and asked me to go for a walk in the woods, I’d explain to her not only that Dad has a class tonight and quickly needs to figure out just what on earth he was thinking when he put this book on the syllabus but also that my reading and writing and teaching are some of the most important things I do.

But I’d also really want to go outside with her—and not only because I am a highly trained procrastinator who is always eager to practice his craft but also because the landscapes around us are rich and complex environmental texts in their own right in much the same way that the books are. They may not be as easy to read as books, may not always be fully legible, may be more suggestive than definitive, but in their form and composition, our everyday landscapes not only provide information about what has happened in a particular environment in the past but also take that important additional step of suggesting why what happened matters. When we’re thinking about education, about taking in and passing on information and ideas about the world around us, it has always struck me as a little artificial and counterproductive to separate conceptually the human, cultural space contained within the four carpentered walls of my reading room from the ostensibly natural space in the woods, and similarly to privilege the linguistic over the nonlinguistic excessively as a means of gaining insight into environmental history, attitudes, experiences, and ethics. I prefer to see continua between spaces and between linguistic and material texts, not frontiers.

One of those books that I like to read, Robert Finch’s *The Primal Place*, contains a nicely self-aware moment when Finch describes the same sense of continuity between the spaces inside and outside his house on Cape Cod, between the meanings he finds on that sandy peninsula and the words that he derives from those meanings, that I intuit in my own life and practice. Noting the mazelike quality of the woods around his house, Finch remarks that “what I wanted, what I was seeking here, was entrance, or rather re-entrance, into that maze.”

Having realized this, Finch enacts his desire while sitting at his writing table:

I take the sheet of paper, half-filled with sentences, out of the typewriter and hold it up before my eyes. Turning the sheet sideways, I look over its edge out the window to the trees beyond. When I do, the vertical lines of black ink begin to blur into the dark, rising bars of the trunks. It is
a self-conscious gesture, but perhaps that is what it takes—a deliberate change of perspective, a loosening of focus, and a bending of your lines of sight to what it is you would see.\textsuperscript{2}

Finch’s gesture erases the boundary between indoors and outdoors and also symbolically demonstrates the continuity between words and the environments that inspire them, with each taking on equal presence and importance as part of a single dark line of significance. In an irony which Finch seems to fully recognize, his book, this product of his human brain, this repository of chewed-up trees, this manufactured artifact is meant to draw readers out of their own reading rooms and into that natural world in which words and artifacts and human minds seem not to matter very much—a contrast which, as it turns out, may not be as firm as may first appear.

At least, that is the way I experience it. When I go outside, the landscapes that I walk through pluck at my sleeve as insistently as my nonexistent daughter. Without language, they whisper to me, try to tell me things about themselves, about who they are and what they mean and why they look the way they do and how they got that way. Landscapes are complexly authored texts, rich blends of natural and cultural process, deeply suggestive artifacts, material culture carrying within it the evidence of the many hands and minds that have shaped it over time. Any scene we sweep our eye across, from the shaggiest forest to the most densely developed suburb, has taken on its form and content because of actions that past humans have decided were possible, appropriate, and right for some combination of economic, technological, aesthetic, and ideological reasons. Sometimes these decisions turned out to be environmentally inappropriate, humans withdrew, and new green growth now stands where once animals grazed or buildings stood. Other times these decisions seemed to be so good that people decided to reproduce them again and again, creating environments that seem almost completely and irrevocably humanized; only time will tell how good these decisions ultimately happen to be.

But no matter where we look, at long-abandoned New England farmscape or metropolitan Phoenix, we see before us an environmental text. And it is a primary text at that: landscapes comprise firsthand archival evidence of how human minds guided human hands to build what amounts to a material embodiment of their cultural relationship to the natural world, and of how that embodiment—and, behind it, that cultural stance—fared once it was released into time and history. There’s a valuable education available out there, an education in not only how past humans have related physically and imaginatively to their environments but in how well both humans and environments have adapted to, if not survived, those
relationships. As we contemplate our collective future, we can learn a lot from the presence of the pasts which surround us every day.

When I was starting to think about composing this essay, I went out for a walk one afternoon down a rural Maine road, planning to do little more than clear my head and enjoy an early spring day. I should have known better: to me the rural New England landscape is a fascinating historical document. When I spend time there, my imagination is usually spurred rather than lulled, as I find myself surrounded by both material and floral evidence of activities that happened there in the past, evidence that challenges me to fill in the temporal gaps between past and present as best I can. Any landscape that we see is not a complete and finished thing but rather stands at a certain point on an arrow of time. Landscapes are cumulative rather than designed whole; they evolve piecemeal as different episodes of natural and cultural activity, of human intention and ecological process, are brought to bear on them. What we see when we walk down the road can best be thought of as a sort of freeze-frame snapshot in a much longer process of change, one that looks the way it does because of combined material and imaginative relationships that people have had with the natural surface of the place in the past, and one that will take on new forms in the future as people decide to either keep manipulating the landscape or leave it alone and let wind and water and plant succession take over the heavy lifting again. This is true of anyplace we look, and so it occurred to me that my three-mile walk down Tuttle Road in Pownal, Maine, a walk taken almost at random, would be as good a place as any to think out loud about reading everyday landscapes as environmental texts, for both what they can tell us about the past and what they can suggest to us about the future.

From one direction, anyway, Tuttle Road actually starts out as Beech Hill Road in the town of Freeport, that well-known New England shopping mecca. If you’ve ever seen the dozens of outlet stores surrounding the huge L. L. Bean retail complex in downtown Freeport, you know that the town speaks volumes for the ways that coastal Maine has changed both on the ground and in the mind over the last several decades. Beech Hill Road itself has a few private roads trailing off it, each leading to a cluster of large new homes for people who likely commute each day to nearby Portland. But as you walk past the last of these roads and go farther inland, you can be forgiven for indulging the illusion that you’ve strolled out of the realm of recent history represented by the outlet stores and new construction and into a place where different, slower laws of time apply. For the remainder of its extent in Freeport, the road passes a small handful of nineteenth-century houses, some with barns attached in the distinctive northern New England, connected-farmhouse style. Behind the houses on each side extend
the meadows of a dairy farm, with woodlots ringing the entire landscape in the near distance.

After a half-mile of this stereotypically and reassuringly bucolic New England scenery, Beech Hill Road crosses into Pownal, becomes dirt rather than paved, and undergoes a name change to Tuttle Road. Not much else changes about it for the next mile or so, though. The houses become fewer, but the fenced-in pastures of another dairy farm continue to create open space between the road and the woods that attempt to encroach on each side. That farm’s two houses, one an old small Cape and the other a full, two-story Federal structure, crowd the road where it curves down to meet a small brook also used as a stock pond.

The farmers aren’t the road’s eponymous Tuttles, though. In fact, the only Tuttles I came across on my walk were Joseph and Dorcas and their children, Willie and Margaret, all of whom now help fill a small neighborhood cemetery across the road from the farmhouses. Willie and Margaret died in childhood, Willie in 1851 at six months and Margaret in 1856 at two, but their parents enjoyed a long adulthood, with Dorcas dying in 1888 at fifty-seven and Joseph following her in 1893 at eighty-one. (Joseph’s first wife, Elizabeth, was not so lucky; she passed away in 1846 at thirty-three.)

So far, so timeless. When you’re in the mood for it, it’s always heartening to walk down a dirt road in the opposite direction from the modern world and hang out in a nineteenth-century cemetery next to a farm where the cows still drink straight from the river. But this therapeutic sense of timelessness is, of course, a willed illusion. The road from Freeport represents a continuum within a landscape shaped and reshaped by history, not a border crossing into a world that history obligingly passed by. The difference on Tuttle Road, of course, is that the biggest evidence of change today comes from human absence rather than presence, from things that people have ceased to do rather than from the frenetic accumulation of new buildings and traffic. The Tuttles aren’t the only family in that old cemetery after all. It’s crowded with several other collections of husbands, wives, and children as well: Soules, Cushings, Davises, McDonalds, Toothakers. And Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle seem to have outlived most of their neighbors as most of the death dates on the cemetery’s headstones are from the 1850s and 1860s. It was quite common in nineteenth-century rural New England for bodies to be interred in small neighborhood cemeteries rather than churchyards or the new parklike garden cemeteries being designed in the region’s cities, and so the old Tuttle Road graveyard amounts to a sort of ongoing census of its immediate social surroundings, suggesting to us the ghostly presence of a far busier and more populous past landscape whose heyday was a good 150 years ago.

Just past and uphill from the brook, the woods thicken and crowd the road on either side for the remaining half-mile or so of its length, but their
form and composition also suggests the shaping hand of a past agricultural community. Judging from the size and spacing of their trunks, these trees largely constitute an even-aged hardwood forest, which began to grow together after the cessation of some past human disturbance on open ground. Their long skinny stems, their general lack of lateral branching except on the sunny side of those trees adjacent to the road, and their bushy crowning tufts of foliage indicate that these shade-intolerant trees were not growing individually in the open but were spending all their energy competing with each other to get up into the sun and not be trapped under the developing canopy. This being northern New England, where dairy farming surpassed crop raising in the nineteenth century to satisfy the region’s need for the perishable milk, cheese, and butter that could not be shipped like other food crops from the fertile Midwest, it is likely that these woods were at one time extensions of the grazing lands which still lie just down the road, an impression bolstered by the stone walls that border the road on either side and occasionally form a right-angled line into the forest. These walls mean that livestock once had to be kept either in or out of the lands that they enclose, and since they are made of a single course of rock, they likely surrounded pasture lands; walls enclosing fields under cultivation in New England were generally double ones containing an infilling of the smaller stones that had to be plucked from the open fields each spring after the previous winter’s heaving frosts. In another common regional pattern, it is also possible that these old fields originally grew up after their initial abandonment to white pine, which then was logged off, releasing the hardwood seedlings growing in its shade to dominate the forest in their turn, but I don’t see any evidence of old decaying stumps from where I stand.

At any rate, my eye and mind have been caught by what I can only think of as the textual aspect of the Tuttle Road scene. Far from being an unaltered slice of the nineteenth century, when the Tuttles and their neighbors built their houses and barns and fields for later residents to maintain and preserve as best they could, this pastoral and wooded landscape carries within it the marks of its own shaping history, having acquired its current form because of the deliberate cultural and material choices made by its human residents in the near and more distant past. Some spaces along the road are quite clearly humanized, designed and engineered and fenced and mowed and built on, while others in their green and shaggy state quite clearly conform to what we conventionally describe as “natural.” But all in one way or another look the way they do because of—and therefore provide evidence of—the same combined mental and physical process of selecting a sequence of material actions (or deliberate nonactions) from among what seems ideologically, economically, technologically, aesthetically, and legally possible and feasible in a particular environment, a
process that produces fields and, eventually, forests just as surely as it produces houses and barns.

I eventually came to the end of Tuttle Road where it T-intersectioned into another rural lane that looked just like it and gazed across at what appeared to be a near-solid wall of trees with a rough path leading into it. I tend to find the allure of rough paths impossible to resist, and so I crossed the road intending to sneak onto whosesoever’s property it was for a few steps and take a look around. I soon noticed a small cardboard sign tacked to a tree, though, informing “park users” that hunters frequented these woods on Sundays during the appropriate seasons. While I was dressed in my usual mud-colored wardrobe, singularly lacking in anything resembling blaze orange, a quick check of my mental calendar assured me that I was not likely to get shot, and so I continued on into what I had determined was one of the outlying edges of Bradbury Mountain State Park, a popular local destination for hiking and camping. And the path was as mud colored as I was, sometimes running over exposed bedrock ledges, sometimes trickling with the remainder of the spring’s runoff.

But despite my having seemingly crossed over a physical and conceptual frontier from cultural space to natural space, from graded road surface to chaotic rock and mud, it quickly became clear as I picked my way along that I was now walking on an extension of Tuttle Road, one that had been completely abandoned for some time by farmers and residents but had once formed part of a busy rural transportation network. The stone walls which bordered the old right-of-way on either side hinted to me about just how bustling and well traveled this stretch of road might once have been. When laying out roads, rural New England surveyors usually made them a certain whole number of rods wide for ease of measurement, with two-rod roads the most common. The stone walls lining the abandoned Tuttle Road were a good four rods apart, leaving plenty of room for two wagons to pass each other with ease. The walls are now crumbling and overgrown, the road impassable to anything but foot traffic, but that road’s scope suggested to me not only how much work and thought had gone into its construction, not only how much the structure and form of today’s green space depended on the ways that rural Mainers had shaped that same space in the past, but also how drastically the landscape had changed since the time of the Tuttles. A scene of work and social life and rigidly managed agricultural spaces had been essentially walked away from and allowed to revert to whatever unplanned growth was suited to replace it, given the condition of the landscape that the people left behind. I was walking through not a timeless natural scene but the end point of a historical process, the point B that follows point A, and it was the distance and movement between those two temporal points, and the reasons for
that distance and movement, that occupied my thoughts as I continued up Tuttle Road.

Sometimes in the New England woods, you can get the same sort of feeling that you get when you walk through a long-abandoned house. The presence of old lives is what strikes you in either case, even when that presence is now obscured under either dust and decay on the one hand or a regrown hardwood forest on the other. You’re always coming across something—an old pot or tool in a house, a wall or foundation in the woods—that reminds you that people lived complex lives here, engaging in their daily round of activity, embedded in culture as well as landscape, creating and being created by the world around them. Even the form of the forest shows you past minds at work, decisions being made, landscapes being designed and made useful. At one point, I stepped over the wall and dawdled in a small park-like stand of pine that stood at the edge of a downward slope. There was little undergrowth here, and the trees spread their branches luxuriously, evidently having stood unmolested long enough to weed out the weak and shade out the competition. The land down the slope, though, was dominated by the same tall skinny hardwoods that I had seen earlier along Tuttle Road, evidence of past clearing and regrowth. The edge between pine and hardwood represented not just a transition between different kinds of woods but also a past decision, a deliberate choice to clear some lands and not others: perhaps the hilltop was too inconvenient to plow, perhaps grazing animals avoided it, perhaps it was part of a remnant woodlot, perhaps something else. Regardless, within the economic calculus of farming in this past neighborhood, it evidently made sense to use certain pieces of the landscape in some ways and not others, and so the present landscape is patterned according to the lives and minds of its past residents.

That same patterning is even evident in some individual trees. As I explored the hardwood forest on the path provided by an old farm lane that wandered away from the road, I noticed many trees that were coppiced—that is, they had many individual trunks growing from a single stump. In New England forests, this pattern generally means that trees have been cut down in the past, but their root systems have been left alive to send up multiple shoots. Here, too, decisions were made: certain trees in certain parts of the landscape were logged off in the past for certain purposes. While the sequence and detail of the history made evident in the landscape are not always fully clear or legible, and while I have confined myself here to the visual and imaginative impressions I garnered during my walk down Tuttle Road and have not delved into the available archival evidence, it’s clear that there is a history here that you can catch glimpses of wherever you look, a temporal sequence of shaping, use, and abandonment, the advance and withdrawal of human agents making the
land over so that it would most clearly match the efficient, useful form that they carried in their heads.

But this isn’t the only kind of history that’s evident here; the landscape has been shaped by changed thinking as well as altered activity. On the one hand, the land along the old Tuttle Road seems to have been abandoned when it no longer made economic sense to use it for farming. But deciding not to use land is just as active and culturally conditioned a choice in our culture as deciding to use it, and the fact that this landscape has been allowed to revert to a green shaggy state over the past decades is in large part due to the fact that the way that such land has been valued and defined has itself shifted over time. What at one time looked to Mainers like little more than lousy farmland appears through a newer, differently ground cultural lens to be valuable open space, and so the landscape has been protected by the state and permitted to become wild looking again according to its own schedule, conforming just as closely and surely to a prevailing visual ideal as did the ordered agricultural lands that it replaced.

Like any landscape—to switch metaphors for a moment—this patch of earth has remained immobile in one place while different meanings and sets of meanings have flowed and ebbed over it, and the scene that we see today is the cumulative result of the material actions that people have taken while guided by those meanings. And high on the list of those motivating meanings are the environmental values and perceptions that human actors have held. Walking the physical and historical length of Tuttle Road demonstrates how, while agricultural and other economic endeavors still rank high among the most strongly endorsed cultural uses of land in New England, new elements and categories of cultural landscape—the state park, the marked walking trail, the camping area—have been more recently invented and applied to this place to reflect a belief in the value of preserving environments for recreational as well as productive use. Not without irony, though: it can certainly be argued that to replace the old Tuttle Road farm neighborhood with Bradbury Mountain State Park is simply to switch one framework of human perception and use for another, not to recognize any inherent right of the nonhuman landscape to be left alone.

And, to be sure, as I continued on my walk, I found that before long the abandoned Tuttle Road intersected another old road that is marked and maintained today for snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, machines which all too often degrade environments in the ironic name of outdoor enjoyment. And, of course, there’s William Cronon’s famous “the trouble with wilderness” argument, whereby setting lands aside in parks implicitly gives us permission to continue messing up the fallen landscapes not sanctified by park boundaries. Still, the material effects of one aspect of what we call environmentalism, or environmental awareness, are as
evident along the old Tuttle Road today as the tumbledown stone walls that once helped tie the landscape into a network of markets and production. What interests me most here, though, is not only the stories that the material text of the landscape is trying to tell me but the lessons and applications that we can draw from those stories—particularly lessons about the ways that people have related, and can relate, to the environments where they live, and how those lessons can help us think about our everyday environmentalisms, our patterns of thinking and acting in the world along the graded and lived-on Tuttle Road, not just the abandoned one turned over to hikers and snowmobilers. I’ve been talking a lot here about humans as agents of historical change, using their brains and tools to reengineer landscapes however they want, but keeping our focus on people tells only part of the story. Nature also has historical agency. Human culture and technology are powerful things, but they must always necessarily operate within particular environments, sets of natural conditions which offer both opportunities for and constraints on human action. Nature is more than just a stage set upon which human dramas play out; it also helps write the script, makes certain plots more feasible than others, and is a close partner in arranging the set design. Any landscape, regardless of how much engineering has been brought to bear on it, is a collaboration between the processes of culture and nature, the end result of the overlap between the plans and patterns that people carry in their heads and the material environs where they decide to bring those plans and patterns into physical being.

We are surrounded everywhere by enactments of cultural relationships with the natural world, by historical artifacts made through collaboration between these two realms, and so when we read a landscape, we should be prepared not only to contemplate what happened in a particular place in the past but to evaluate the environmental relationships and assumptions that that landscape reveals and the thinking that lay behind its creation and modification. Any glance in any direction invites us to consider the implications of the history we are shown, to try to learn from the past to think more critically and with more self-awareness about the landscapes we build and inhabit in the present and the future, that world that we continue to make and remake in our heads and with our hands.

The old Tuttle Road landscape is particularly suggestive in this regard since I think it teaches humility. It tells a story not only of human modification of a particular environment but of an eventual recognition of natural limits. It is a scene where nature’s agency was allowed to retain its power and influence in the end, not denied or engineered ruthlessly into submission. As such, perhaps it stands as an emblem, a reminder that our lives are in fact specifically located whether we want to admit it or not, that we ignore our collaborative natural partner at the peril of both of us.
second-growth woods that I enjoyed on my walk represent one small piece in a much larger regional story: the widespread abandonment of marginal farmlands in New England, especially the northern part, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As more and more settlers moved into northern New England following the end of the French and Indian War in 1760, they attempted as best they could to rebuild the worlds that they had left behind in the southern part of the region, clearing forests for fields and pastures, constructing new houses and barns and farm spaces according to old culturally sanctioned forms and patterns, unquestioningly reproducing a familiar agricultural economy, ecology, and landscape in as-yet unfamiliar spaces.

But nature had a great deal to say about the success of this enterprise. The thin rocky soils and short growing season of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont meant that productive agriculture there was always a strenuous and difficult proposition at best, and once the larger and more fertile farms of the Midwest were connected to eastern markets by canals and railroads during the nineteenth century, farming became as economically unfeasible as it was ecologically tenuous for many families. In response, some individuals and families moved west to start over on what they hoped would be better lands, while others moved to the many burgeoning mill towns and villages that were sprouting along New England’s rivers. Much of the land they left behind, as on Tuttle Road, now looks once again like forest primeval, its straggling stone walls providing the only obvious hint of its agricultural past. It’s tempting to think that nature “won” in much of New England. The landscapes shaped by farmers proved to be untenable given the natural constraints of the region, revealing people’s imperfect understanding of what the environment would and would not let them do over the long term, and so, rather than continue to endure failure, the people withdrew, leaving the land to do what it does best: grow trees.

As I say, I think there’s a lesson here. Those farmers didn’t expect to fail, didn’t know that with every stroke of ax or plow they were carving onto the earth a material confession of their environmental miscalculation, didn’t expect their children to have to move away to make a living. But that’s exactly what happened. Tuttle Road shows us that things change, that landscapes evolve according to shifting cultural and natural conditions, that regardless of our best intentions, we’d be best off doing what we can to conform our actions to the limits inherent in the environment, not making the environment conform to the dreams of our unlimited imaginations. Everyplace is Tuttle Road in the end, even those places which seem unimaginably different from these quiet tangled woods.

True, if the Pownal end of Tuttle Road looks like a place where nature has won, the Freeport end looks like a place where humans have dominated the
field, where the relationship between nature and culture has been adversarial rather than collaborative—which is, of course, the assumption that many of our landscapes today seem to reveal. Any cultural landscape is an embodiment of an environmental ethic, a set of assumptions about what is right and proper to do in, and to, the natural world. And much of what we see around us today seems to reveal an unquestioned ethic of subjugation and domination. We seem in large part to be living more and more in what I think of as a “postnatural” world, where location, and the importance of location, seem not to matter. Transportation and communication networks have annihilated the natural constraints, and even the felt experience, of time and space. Energy is assumed to be unlimited; we don’t even need to locate factories next to rivers anymore, and we feel assured that there’s always another oil field somewhere out there to be tapped. Enormous cities sprawl all over the deserts of the American Southwest, bringing in water from remote rivers and aquifers to support populations much, much larger than could have lived there even in the relatively recent past. Vernacular landscape traditions collapse under the weight of a homogenized national taste. Everywhere we look, we see landscapes that basically tell us, “I don’t have to be here, you know. I could have been built anywhere.”

And to that, I guess my response is, “Just wait.” Phoenix is basically just a big old New England farm, a place where landscapes that worked in the past are assumed to be viable indefinitely into the future—and we know what happened to most of those New England farms. I’m not trying to be unduly apocalyptic here, and I’m certainly not saying anything that lots of people haven’t said before me. But what I am doing is trying to encourage a certain way of seeing and understanding the world around us. More so than through written texts, our everyday landscapes are sites where people directly enact and reveal their understanding of and assumed relationships to their local natural environments. Not everyone writes books or essays, but lots of people build houses, landscape house lots, unquestioningly accept the patterns of movement and thought and behavior that their built surroundings enforce on their lives every day. We all shape and navigate our worlds daily, revealing culture through unreflective acts of making and doing.

The landscape is the most democratic, representative historical resource we have—and, as I’ve said, the history it reveals is one where natural process is inextricably interwound with cultural process. And if that intermingling, that mutual agency and determination, doesn’t seem evident in the current appearance of a place, a Phoenix or a Freeport, I think it will in the future. We need to keep Tuttle Road in mind. Doing so, reading it for its stories and the implications of those stories, for the way it brings natural presence and power firmly into what we tend to think of as an exclusively
human narrative, allows us to see any place as a reflection of who we are and how we relate to the environments around us—and, more importantly, lets us think critically about how we want ourselves and those environments to further our collaboration and continue our mutual story far into the future, hopefully with a happy ending.