Nature as Interlocutor

Nature as Interlocutor: Dialogues with Our Landscapes

Annalee Ring, MA

Introduction

Plato writes, in the Phaedrus, that “[he] is devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach [him]—only the people in the city can do that.”1 This view of nature as having nothing to say, as voiceless, has been inherited throughout most of the European tradition of philosophy. This promotes a kind of anthropocentrism: that rather than learn from nature, human beings can only learn from other human beings. In the inheritance of this idea throughout the history of philosophy, nature has been devalued, as seen in ancient and medieval hierarchical ontologies which subjugate nature, modern philosophy’s mechanistic understandings of nature and other life, and in the commodification of nature in contemporary lifestyles. I will argue against Plato’s claim using Merleau- Ponty (and the Merleau-Ponty scholars: Ted Toadvine, Donald Landes, Jonathan Singer, and David Abram); nature is not voiceless, rather, we are in constant conversation with our landscapes and we can learn from these conversations. Reasons to consider nature as a potential interlocutor (rather than as incapable of teaching) include lives of belonging to one’s environment instead of isolation, relational knowledge instead of abstracted knowledge, holistic approaches to experiencing the world instead of atomistic ones, and an overall sense that one’s own flourishing and the flourishing of the community are interrelated.

Part 1 of this argument will detail Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception as a kind of communication achieved when we attune our senses to our environment. Embodiment entails perceptual communication; so it is that nature becomes our interlocutor in a kind of dialogue. Toadvine suggests we should interpret this perceptual dialogue we have with our environment as literal. Toadvine and Landes write on the reversibility of language and landscapes, that language emerges out of a relationship with a landscape, and that landscapes in turn are expressive. Singer’s writing on consciousness in animals, argued from a Merleau- Pontian stance, describes a radical community. He writes, “[there] are as many consciousnesses in the world as there are living bodies.” Animals, plants, rivers, or landscapes can be considered conscious. Abram argues that we are in a dialogue with all living beings due to our shared corporeality. In such a radical community, our ecosystem speaks and communicates with us; we are able to learn from nature.

Merleau-Ponty is not the first thinker to suggest that we speak with our landscapes and our larger natural community. The Diné (a North American indigenous group who reside in the Southwestern states, also known as the Navajo) have a long tradition of communicating with their environment. In **Part 2** their traditional philosophy will be added to the argument (against Plato's claim that one cannot speak with or learn from nature) because the Diné have a strength that Merleau-Ponty's work does not share. That is, their philosophy of language and nature emerged out of a positive relationship with their specific environment which promoted mutual flourishing. There is much that phenomenology can learn from the Diné, as the Diné traditionally did not abstract themselves from or objectify their natural environment. Their traditions are often parallel to phenomenology's intentions in its emergence. When combined, the Diné and Merleau-Ponty can undermine the tradition of European philosophy which abstracts, alienates, and objectifies their natural environment.

However, while their philosophy provides resources for phenomenology, it should not be assimilated with Merleau- Ponty's. Rather, applied phenomenology with the methodology of *play* can point out weaknesses and strengths in both their tradition and Merleau-Ponty's thought. *Playful world traveling*, a concept of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, will be used in place of a traditional epoché, as it allows for the preservation of difference and ambiguity. I will *play* with three concepts found in Merleau-Ponty and the Diné (1) landscapes as conversant; (2) landscapes as animate; and (3) radical community with one's natural surroundings via intercorporeality.

Methodology

Rather than the traditional *epoché*, this paper will use a modified form of Merleau-Ponty's applied phenomenological approach, with influences from Lugones, whose concept of "world-travelling," allows for a kind of playfulness between communities and cultures. As we shall see, wedding Merleau- Ponty and Lugones allows for the preservation of difference and the recognition that we exist in a plurality of "worlds." Lugones' approach calls for a form of "traveling" or entering into communities that does not seek to merely dominate or know but focuses on coming into authentic contact with others—both human beings and our wider natural community. Lugones writes about her experience of being a woman of color in the U.S., wherein she is required to "travel" from the world of her culture to the world of the mainstream. Mainstream U.S. culture is an often-hostile world for minorities and people of color insofar as it "arrogantly perceives"2 and constructs particular identities as being "outside" the norm or as inherently worthless/foreign or strange. "World-traveling" to the mainstream culture is necessary for outsiders or people of color to avoid the hostility of arrogant perception; they leave behind their worlds in which they are at ease or at home. However, Lugones suggests that this seeming limitation of "world-traveling" for minorities and people of color actually has a significant subversive consequence as it conditions a kind of flexibility and creativity in its practitioners. She writes, "This flexibility is necessary for the outsider but it can *also*be willfully exercised by the outsider or by those who are at ease in the mainstream."3 Lugones' concept of "worlds" and "world-traveling" is therein open, worlds can be flexible, one can travel to several worlds, being an outsider in one, and an insider in another. Lugones argues this *willful* (as opposed to mandated) exercise of "world-travelling" can be a powerful, enriching and life-altering strategy for the oppressed, given that the practitioner uses it as a source for self and other discovery. Consequently, world-traveling allows for a relating contact with the other, a playful experience of the other's world, and an enriching "being-with". Lugones explains, …without knowing the others' 'world,' one does not know the other… through travelling to other people's 'worlds' we discover that there are 'worlds' in which those who are victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resistors, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file- awayable, classifiable.4

Through Lugones' concept of world-traveling, we can actually connect with each other, which is not possible through the lens of arrogant perception. Lugones writes, "only when we have travelled to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other."5 This paper hopes to "playfully world-travel" to the Diné world, instead of arrogantly world-traveling. It hopes to preserve their identity as subjects, as resistors of colonial attempts to remove their language and culture, as lively beings who live a complex lifestyle. Importantly, playful world- travel does not erase the differences in worlds, it allows for plurality of worlds. Lugones writes, "The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged."*6 *Play* can be a tool, as Lugones' *world-traveling* suggests, to travel to other worlds. Consequently this paper modifies applied phenomenology to include playful world- traveling. This method will allow for difference and pluralism rather than assimilation. The change from the *epoché* to *play* allows for an applied phenomenology that world-travels in order to be-with the other rather than to suspend or construct the other.

In brief the following paper will put Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language and nature in *play with Diné philosophy of language and nature. The contact and dialogue between Merleau-Ponty's applied phenomenology (modified with Lugones' concept of playfulness) and the Diné will offer an alternative to damaging and destructive views of nature as seen in hierarchical ontologies, abstracted and atomistic ways of knowing, and alienated ways of being-in-the-world.*7

Part 1

Merleau-Ponty radicalized the tradition of phenomenology in his placement of the human in relation to the things themselves, in de-centering the human mind from the forefront of being, and in locating the human as an experience in and of the world, rather than the consciousness as an 'inner' or inside realm. In his version of phenomenology, the body becomes the locus, the human being is embedded in the world's web of relations, and he negates hierarchical ontologies for a relational, lateral one. Abram, a Merleau-Pontian ecologist, describes the tradition of phenomenology as, originally intended to provide a solid foundation for the empirical sciences, the careful study of perceptual experience unexpectedly began to make evident the hidden centrality of the Earth in all human experience; indeed, phenomenological research began to suggest that the human mind was thoroughly dependent upon (and thoroughly influenced by) our forgotten relation with the encompassing Earth.8

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy acknowledges this relation between the human being and the interconnected earth as vital. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he articulates perception as a kind of communication, achieved when we acclimate, or attune our senses to our environment. He writes, "sensing is this living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life."9 Abram writes that, perception "is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness."10 He continues: perception "is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures."11 To perceive is to attune oneself with what one is always already in relationship with, with what one is among. The body's senses communicate with the world in such a way that the body is not an object in the world, but rather is a "means of communication with it."12 Merleau-Ponty further writes that "the appearances of things are always mediated by our body… the setting of our own life must in fact be all of nature. Nature must be our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue."13 We communicate with our environment through perception, through our bodies. Toadvine's book, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, interprets this dialogue as literal and as foreshadowing Merleau Ponty's later ontology as seen in *The Visible and the Invisible. Toadvine writes that,*

While it may seem easiest to interpret this notion of 'dialogue' metaphorically, Merleau-Ponty indicates that this description is intended literally [especially seen when he writes]: 'It can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them'1415

Perception as an ongoing dialogue is part of the intentional threadwork that relates us to our world. Merleau-Ponty writes, this dialogue between the subject and object, where the subject takes up the sense scattered across the object and the object gathers together the subject's intentions, namely physiognomic perception, arranges a world around the subject that speaks to him on the topic of himself and places his own thoughts in the world.16

This is vital to Merleau-Ponty's argument that the we already perceive the world as a meaningful whole. A living being "transforms the physical world, makes 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have."17 The examples of sense Merleau-Ponty gives are aspects of our landscape that living beings recognize through perception as existential necessities. Our bodies communicate with the landscape through our senses in part by granting the landscape a sense which it would not have on its own.18 Landes explains, "the act of perception itself arranges the perceived things into a world of meaningful relations, and relations are not part of the 'objective world' prior to its perceptual reality."19

This emergence of a sense through the relationship of perception turns perception into an expressive act; he writes, "All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*."20 Merleau Ponty considers perception as expression because, as Landes writes, “Perception, then, is a creative taking up of that which solicits, and thus perception *is* expression.”21 And further, while there is a sense to the objects in our world, it is a reciprocally formed sense between the body and the world. Toadvine writes that “expression is not a creation of the subject but is formed at the confluence of the body and the world.”22 The expression is not imposed onto the world by the subject but emerges in the relationship between the embodied subject and nature. Toadvine writes that “perception is the discovery of a sense that is not of my making, the response to a demand placed on my body from the outside, a manner of being invaded by an alterity, which is why the figure of dialogue is appropriate.”23 This is in part the case because “the natural thing is irreducible to what appears in our sensible encounter with it” even though there is a symbiosis between the world and the body.24 The sensible is inherently expressive, and “its expressive capacity always exceeds the resonating powers of my body” which is how, although revealed in such a way as to be attuned to the body, nature is not anthropomorphized completely.25

Toadvine writes, “this expressive capacity of nature is indeed ‘intertwined’ with bodily existence, but in an important sense precedes and makes this bodily expression possible.”26 This dialogue “between the body and nature is the event of their correlation, their entanglement in an ongoing process of expression.”27 In Merleau-Ponty’s last work, *Visible and the Invisible*, perception becomes intertwined with expression even further. The dialogue, as Toadvine articulated earlier, becomes a literal expression of language. Merleau Ponty writes, “the whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth a variant of speech before our eyes.”28

Merleau-Ponty suggests landscapes speak, in both the ongoing dialogue we have with nature as well as his description of landscapes as overrun with words. Merleau-Ponty writes that “the natural world is the horizon of all horizons, and the style of all styles, which ensure my experiences have a given, not a willed, unity beneath all of the ruptures of my personal and historical life.”29 Nature is the “style of all styles” which allows it to be expressive, to be something from which one can take up the gesture and assimilate its style. Toadvine writes, “Style, understood as nature’s own self-expression through embodied life, therefore offers us a means to understand Cézanne’s remark that ‘the landscape thinks itself in me.’”30 This is dependent upon Merleau-Ponty’s view that rather than imposing our own powers of expression onto the world, that “the body’s powers of expression are derivative from those of nature” so that, rather than “being constituted by the expressive powers of the body, we find that the thing is a node within… nature’s own system of expression.”31 One example of this in Merleau-Ponty’s work is his description of “our contemplation of the sky as the sky's own self-contemplation within us."32 Merleau-Ponty writes,

> As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself33

If our powers of expression are derivative of nature's, and nature expresses itself in embodied life, it is worthwhile to think of the landscapes around us as conversant, as speaking, as interlocutors. In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, nature can teach the human being, can be an interlocutor for the human being, can be a part of nature's own contemplation. Human contemplation and nature's contemplation are similar in kind; contemplation is not reserved for the human being alone.

In order to understand the consequences of landscapes as expressive, or speaking, it is important to recognize one of the most essential components of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression, that language is the accomplishment of thought,34 acts as the body of thought, which gives it a sensible, incarnate nature. Merleau-Ponty writes that, "the word and speech must cease to be a manner of designating the object or the thought in order to become the presence of this thought in the sensible world, and not its clothing, but rather its emblem or its body."35 One cannot strip language off of thought, as if language were an accompaniment of thought, instead of the necessary basis for thought. Merleau-Ponty writes, "speech or words carry a primary layer of signification that adheres to them and that gives the thought as a style, as an affective value, or as an existential mimicry."36 Words have an existential presence to them, which is why "language is much more like a sort of being than a means."37

One consequence of this is that if language and thought are interrelated as Merleau-Ponty argues, and if nature is literally speaking as Toadvine suggests, then this speech implies a kind of thought. Therefore, if in addition to expression, a requirement for being an interlocutor is thought, then in Merleau-Ponty's view, nature meets this requirement as it has a kind of thought, consciousness, or subjectivity. The world communicates with us and in this way the sensible world "is described as active, animate, and in some curious manner, alive."38 Making sense of the landscape as alive puts into question what subjectivity might be, and how we could know a subjective being behind the appearances we see. Singer explains that "Interiority" is not quite as "interior" as it has traditionally been conceived, and that we do not need to *infer* the presence of an Other 'behind' behavior or a living body any more than we need to infer the presence of an animating thought 'behind' an instance of language.39

We do not have to be concerned by interiority, subjectivity, or consciousness of the world around us because for Merleau- Ponty, "every living body is a form of subjectivity."40 Singer writes that, "Mindedness and behavior—just like thought and language—are immediately cogiven, yet not reductively equivalent"4142 Mind and behavior are not equivalent, not identical, but imply one another, as thought and language do too. Things that behave in turn have a mindedness. The tree that responds to the lowered sunlight levels, whose leaves change color, could be thought to behave. The river that moves over rocks in a rhythmic manner, is behaving in response to the specific placement and size of rocks; the river would behave differently if its relations changed, as is seen in a beaver family damning a river, which would change the flow of the water, not to mention the interconnected life in the river.

This relationship between mindedness and behavior, however, does not necessitate clear or unambiguous communication. Singer describes his father's relationship with their family dog, that they know based on his behavior that he loved them. It becomes complicated when one understands the sense of the gesture but not the nuances of it, as dog owners can attest to when a behavior indicates pain, but not the specifics of what is causing them pain in particular. This lack of clear expression can be attributed to nature as a whole as well, seeing as sensible things have a depth to them that is inexhaustible to the individual perceiving them. Nature does not express itself entirely at once, in a transparent manner. Rather, Merleau-Ponty writes, "What is proper to the visible is, we said, to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth: this is what makes it able to be open to visions other than our own."43 All visible things have this depth, which is one of the reasons Merleau-Ponty argues that the human being does not constitute the world. The world is inexhaustible to the perceiver, parts of it will remain opaque.

The concept of the visible leads to another paradox in Merleau- Ponty’s work: the sentient sensible. As described in his Prospectus, “The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind.”44

In order to perceive, one must be perceivable. Everything in the sensible world is participating in this shared world, is coexisting in the sensible world. This is most apparent in the sense of touch, in that when one touches one is also touched,45 but, Merleau-Ponty argues, the “delimitation of the senses is crude”46 and that “it is no different for vision.”47 Because the seer is participating in the visible, “the seer is caught up in what he sees… the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things.”48 The historically divided subject and object can no longer exist as a dichotomy, as a bifurcation; “the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”4950 To perceive is to be perceived, and vice versa. Merleau-Ponty writes,

> It is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world.51

Being is a radical participation, a being-with, which creates a kinship or a familial resemblance between all participants in the sensible world. Things are open to a perceiver through coexistence in the same world and due to a mutual participation in the shared world. Merleau-Ponty writes, if it touches them and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh.52

Belonging to this shared world is unquestionable for the perceiving subject. The human subject cannot extract themselves from the world as "my body is made of the same flesh as the world."53 Singer explains that the intersubjective now becomes the intercorporeal. He writes,

> If subjectivity is essentially incarnate, and if (as Husserl argued) subjectivity is always already intersubjectivity, then intersubjectivity is essentially intercorporeality.54

If the human body is composed of the same material as the sensible world, then, "this common carnal inherence in the world sets…[human beings and] all living beings in contact—in community—with one another."55

Because everything partakes of the same material, and because any sensible matter has a depth or perhaps a consciousness inherent in it, the human being is dethroned from the heights of the hierarchical ontology. Abram explains that in Merleau-Ponty's body-based phenomenology, "we find ourselves in the midst of, rather than on top of, this order."56 Merleau-Ponty writes that, the "concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body."57 This is not to be reductionist toward the human animal, but it is to focus on the wonder of the world and our relationship with it. Instead of thinking of the human being as the rational animal, or the being for whom the world is intelligible, Merleau-Ponty would want to emphasize the human being is a sensible sentient, similar in kind to the rest of the sensible. Merleau-Ponty writes, "there is no intelligible world, *there is* the sensible world."58 And the sensible world cannot be condensed into an intelligible world, as "the world is there prior to every analysis I could give of it."59

Merleau-Ponty further elucidates, “I do not perceive any more than I speak—perception has me as has language.”60 The relation between perception and language is so intertwined for Merleau-Ponty that the scope of perception is that of the scope of language. This could be interpreted as an ability; Merleau- Ponty explains that if one is not a philosopher or a writer, then the sensible world “will offer you nothing” which entails that “one does not know how to speak.”61 This echoes his earlier work in which language is sensibly present, or has a material nature.62 For those who attune themselves to hear it, the voice of the landscape cries out. It can teach us. Merleau-Ponty writes, “to understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, *to hear what it says.”63*

One weakness of Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology,64 which is why he must be paired with the Diné experience of the world in particular, is that phenomenology is the result of a history of philosophy that continuously alienated the human being from the surrounding landscape. In phenomenology’s emergence, Husserl advocated for the suspension of a form or content distinction as found in Kant, and for the suspension of both the inner and outer, appearance or reality, distinctions as seen in Descartes. Phenomenology’s origin was largely in response to modern philosophers, who thought that the mind categorized things into concepts, that the human mind imposed its own structures of understanding onto the surrounding world. Their frameworks failed to account for the sensible, as the sensible was either an illusory appearance or noumena. Husserl advocated to “return to the things themselves” and to remove the epistemological and ontological inheritances from our traditions through the *epoché*. This was also largely in response to modern science, whose knowledge is abstracted through atomizing the world, reducing the world to mechanical or mathematical pieces, and decontextualized from the whole. Phenomenology was a return to the concrete, sensible world rather than the world of abstraction and universalization as seen in philosophy and science throughout ancient, medieval, and modern thought. Phenomenology originated through the desire for the subject to be in relation to the things themselves. Phenomenology also responded to hierarchical ontologies that lead to such a devaluation of nature, wherein the human being no longer had ethical duties towards their landscape or ecosystems of which they are a part, and in which the human subject is elevated as something other than a natural being.

Due to the fact that phenomenology arises out of a tradition that has alienated the human from their environment, and that Merleau-Ponty's work arises from within this history, the Diné language and ontology have a strength in that their thought is outside of this tradition and that their language and ontology emerged in relation with their landscape in particular. It becomes clearer that although phenomenology attempts to reunite the human being with nature in a meaningful relationship, its emergence is contingent upon the philosophy that came before it. Phenomenology has to work hard in order to make the human being relate to their environment, as this integration comes about only in later phenomenology as seen in late Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's work. The claim that one is an indistinguishable part of nature, or that nature is an interlocutor in dialogue, has to be defended and argued in the European tradition of philosophy, although this claim is central to Diné philosophy.

Part 2

Diné ontology provides the strength of emerging out of a positive experience of nature, rather than emerging out of a response to an alienating tradition. Diné ontology can provide phenomenology with examples of humans intertwined with their environment, as these readings of Merleau-Ponty strive to do. Diné philosophy is a philosophy of praxis, which can demonstrate to phenomenology a specific lifestyle resultant of their relational ontology of interwovenness with their environment. Diné traditional beliefs can also demonstrate a specific manner in which one can converse with their landscape. These readings of Merleau-Ponty can be seen as having parallels to Diné thought. I will focus on three examples: (1) Robert McPherson's description of the Diné traditional teaching of the wind as speaking, (2) Grace McNeley's etymology of the Diné word "ket," and (3) Robert Begay's description of the landscape as familial and alive.

Robert McPherson, a historian specializing in Diné traditional teachings, writes about the complex nature of Holy Wind. Holy Wind is believed to be partially responsible for the creation of life in the Diné origin story, instilling animation in human and animal bodies.65 The Wind is still responsible for animating life on earth, as "during the fourth month after conception, this

Holy Wind enters the body, giving animation to the fetus."66 The Wind also communicates with people, as the Wind that enters a person's body in order to animate them, "communicates with the air outside the body."67 This type of communication can be dialogue. McPherson writes, "Many Navajo Myths tell of Holy Wind whispering in the ear of a protagonist in need of assistance, warning of future problems, or helping with protection."6869 Human beings can learn from this dialogue, as the Wind can "warn of bad events that will take place in the future" as well as "gather bad gossip and conversation and report it to the Holy People," who are responsible for creating life in this world, creating the Diné, and teaching the Diné rituals. McPherson writes,

> Holy People should not be taken lightly. They provide warnings and help a person learn. Claus Chee Sonny believes the gods want humans to know the songs and prayers, but this can only be achieved if the "wind people want to communicate them to you."70

The Wind can communicate in order to help the Diné, but also act in the interest of the Holy People. If the Holy People "do not want some [people] to have this power" the Wind will not communicate or share its knowledge. However, "when treated respectfully… winds accurately communicate future events."71 This is in part because the wind acts as a messenger between the Holy People who were stationed in order to animate specific geographic areas. McPherson explains,

> Talking God, Growling God, and Sun Bearer placed throughout the land many of the holy people who were to be prophets and teachers of men in the future. The wind acted as messenger between these spirits and people.

Divination, or the receipt of this communication, is based on consulting the wind or animals with acute hearing such as wolves, coyotes, badgers, and members of the cat family.72

Holy People were placed throughout the Diné landscape and use the wind to communicate amongst themselves. If the Diné are respectful towards and listen to the Wind, they can hear the dialogue coursing through their landscape, and learn from the Holy People who reside in natural landscapes.

One example of a Holy Person placed inside of a landscape, in order to both animate nature and teach the Diné, is Female Pollen Figure in the Black Mesa Mountains. Mamie Salt, a Diné elder, explains,

It is said to be the body of the Female Pollen Range lying there. It is there to protect the people. The Navajo people were told by the Holy Ones to leave it alone. Now the coal companies who hire Navajos have come in and are strip mining the mesa, desecrating it. This coal is said to be the blood of the Female Pollen figure lying there. This coal is considered sacred.73

Mamie Salt identifies an important sacred landscape for the Diné, but as we shall see, the whole of the landscape is sacred. Robert Begay, a Diné environmentalist, explains the belief that the landscape is alive and is familial: In the Navajo version of creation… the earth was created and adorned with plants; the sky was created and clouds decorated it. The mountains were molded and all animals were given a place to reside. The oceans, springs, rivers, ponds, lakes, and all other types of water were created, and acting as a vast circulatory system, they sustain the earth. Furthermore, all the deities took up a place of residence through the world and universe (at locations we now call Sacred Places or Traditional Cultural Places). Most important, the earth is a deity with a humanlike physical anatomy, and just like the human body, the earth reacts to an injury that limits its power to function. The earth, as our mother, protects and nurtures us, and in times of need we turn to her for healing and protection. Furthermore, just as the human body has specific parts for specific tasks and powers to function properly, in the same manner specific landscapes or natural features (or a combination of features) have specific powers to assist the Navajo with their existence.74

The earth is itself animated, as a mother figure, and is full of deities that are powerful. The landscape *acts or behaves* in order to protect and care for the Diné, and the Diné in turn protect and care for their landscape. This idea can be seen as parallel to Merleau-Ponty's description of the sensible sentient, and the landscape as behaving and having a kind of consciousness. Robert Begay further writes on the philosophy of nature as animate,

> The Colorado River is also considered to be a living entity which runs through the Glen and Grand Canyons and acts as a natural boundary for the Navajo people, who thus depend on it for protection. The Colorado River, with its vast tributary system, is a source of power. This power is summoned when the songs of the water are sung in certain ceremonies, such as Tl'eeji. Offerings are deposited into the river or in certain places throughout the canyon. These offerings also summon the deities that reside in locations within the canyon, to protect, to heal, and to bring rain.75

The Diné see the river, canyons, and water as alive and as *behaving*, protecting, healing, and caring for the Diné, who in turn care for their natural environment. The Diné are in a kind of dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's work, but whereas Merleau- Ponty describes in a more abstracted way that all bodies are forms of subjectivity, the Diné have concrete descriptions of the Earth and its natural features as alive and as behaving.

Merleau-Ponty's work on intercorporeality could be considered parallel to Diné thought on the intertwining of Diné with their landscape and deities. Grace McNeley, a Diné writer, explains how the Diné understand the interweaving of their people with their landscape and deities through the etymology of a Diné word: The Navajo term ket—derived from ke, meaning "feet" and "root system"—expresses the concept of having a foundation for one's life in the earth, much as a plant is rooted in the earth. Let us visualize the central root [extends] all the way back to Asdzaan Nadleehi, 'Changing Woman'—who is Earth Mother herself. Developing from this main root is the complex web of kinship relations extending back even to ancestors and including clan relations, the extended family and the immediate family. Tied to this system are material goods, familiar surroundings and livestock. This webbing of earth, of ancestors, of clan and familiar surroundings all constitute a Navajo home, enabling those within it to flourish, to thrive. These thoughts reflect the objective bonds between the land and the people who have customarily produced food and met other basic needs from the land. The flow of family labor into the land produces livestock and crops that each family member consumes. The land, water, air, and sunlight that go into the family's food become the people's flesh. Among these substances are also the essences of the immortal beings like Changing Woman. By consuming the products of the land, one also incorporates the essences of the immortal beings into one's flesh.7677

McNeley illuminates the sedimentation of a rich history and culture into a single word "ket." Her etymology portrays the widespread influence that dialogue with a natural landscape can have. McNeley describes Earth as the root, the foundation for one's existence. The Earth, deities, and Changing Woman are identified: deities are not elsewhere, but can be called upon, and are in relationship with the Diné and are incorporated into natural surroundings. Their intimate relationship with nature is shown in their description of living things as a web of interrelated beings. The distinction between self, nature, and deities, is ambiguous in this worldview as the environment (the land, water, air, sunlight, animals) becomes one's own body.78 Even deities become a part of one's flesh. The Wind, as described previously, also demonstrates an intercorporeal ontology, as it animates the Diné and other living beings. For the Diné, one is not distinct from their environment, as the environment is part of what composes one's body.79

The Diné belief that nature is animate, that one communicates with the Wind, that mountains are embedded with deities, that the Earth is an animate mother figure, that coal is the blood of Female Pollen figure who is embedded in the Black Mesa Mountains, and that rivers are alive can be seen as parallel with Merleau-Ponty. Importantly, similarities between these two philosophies do not equate or assimilate the Diné with Merleau-Ponty as both have strengths and weaknesses the other does not have. One strength of Diné thought (unlike Merleau- Ponty's) is that it developed out of an intimate relationship with a particular landscape, whereas Merleau-Ponty's thought emerged as a correction to the European history of philosophy and is in some ways conditioned by that history. One strength that Merleau-Ponty has which is not necessarily present in Diné traditions, is the ability to uphold ambiguities, pluralism, and differences, especially seen when his work is combined with *playful world-traveling*.80

Because of the differences in strengths and weaknesses in these philosophies, it is necessary to combine the two to undermine Plato's claim that one cannot learn from nature, as Merleau-Ponty alone does not provide a praxis or particular examples and the Diné provide particular examples but do not think of nature as inexhaustible to subjects. Diné traditional philosophy wedded with Merleau-Ponty refutes Plato's claim that one cannot learn from nature. There is a twofold consequence to this wedding: (1) Nature is not voiceless, as the history of the European philosophy considers it; and (2) the human being cannot be made distinct from nature in its ability to express, in its sentience, or in its consciousness. The anthropocentrism found in ancient and medieval hierarchical ontologies, in modern philosophy's mechanistic understanding of nature, and in contemporary commodification of nature is undermined in the combination of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and Diné traditional philosophy. When combined, the Diné and Merleau- Ponty subvert the tradition of European philosophy which abstracts, alienates, and objectifies the natural environment. Further, these philosophies allow for a relationship with our natural environment that places us within it rather than above it; and would allow for a being-with, a belonging to a radical community that considers other beings as expressive. Instead of only learning from other human beings, nature, landscapes, and trees can teach us ideas that do not have anthropocentrism at their heart.

Endnotes

1 John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Plato Complete Works (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), Phaedrus, 230e.
2 María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,”
Hypatia 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19, 4.
3 Lugones, 3.
4 Lugones, 18.
5 Lugones, 17.
6 Lugones, 16.
7 One of the premises of this paper is that hierarchical ontologies and atomistic ways of knowing lead to alienation from one's environment andisolation from one's radical community. It will not be argued for in this paper, due to the limitations of space, but an argument from this can be seen in my work: “Nature's Self-Expression and Linguistic Attunement: The Diné Sing the World,” (Gonzaga University, 2018).
8 Abram, David. The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a more- than-human world, xi.
9 Ibid, 52.
10 Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a More-than- Human World.
11 David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a More- than-Human World, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 54.

12 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 122.
13 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 334.
14 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 369, 372. 15 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature.
16 Ibid, 134.
17 Ibid, 195.
18 Merleau-Ponty writes that "the thing can never be separated… invests it with humanity" (POP 334). And, we make sense of being human through other beings and our landscape.
19 Landes, Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression, 81. 20 Ibid, 67.
21 Landes, Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression, 81.
22 Ted Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 19.
23 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 59. 24 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 59. 25 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 59. Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 59.
26 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature. Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 51.
27 1908-1961. Merleau-Ponty Maurice, The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes. (Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 155.
29 Ibid, 345.
30 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 15. 31 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 60. 32 Todvine, Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature, 60. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 248-9.
33 See Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 183: "Speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought."
35 Ibid, 187.
36 Ibid, 188.
37 Merleau-Ponty, Signs, 43. Ibid, 55.
38 Singer, "The Flesh," 102.
40 Ibid, 103.
41 Jonathan Singer, "'The Flesh of My Flesh': Animality, Difference, and 'Radical' Community in Merleau-Ponty's Late Philosophy," in Animal Ethics and Philosophy : Questioning the Orthodoxy (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015).
42 Singer, "The Flesh," 102.
43 Merleau-Ponty, Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Claude Lefort, and Alphonso Lingis. The Visible and the Invisible: followed by working notes, 143.
44 Merleau-Ponty, Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Thomas Baldwin. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: basic writings, "Prospectus of his own work," 34.
45 See: Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes, 133-139.
46 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes, 133.
47 Merleau-Ponty, 133.
48 Merleau-Ponty, 139.
49 Merleau-Ponty, 139.
50 This undermines the traditional European philosophical concept of sight as something which empowers the seer over the seen, and that sight is something that can objectify its object.

Rather, Merleau-Ponty shows that the visible is a realm which one is within when they see, not as an ultimate seer, but as a visible thing that participates in the visible.
51 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible, 136.
52 Ibid, 137.
53 Ibid, 248.
54 Singer, “The Flesh,” 109.
55 Ibid, 104.
56 Abram, The Spell, 49.
57 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Dominique Séglard, and Robert Vallier. Nature: course notes from the Collège de France, 208. 58 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible, 214.
59 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, lxxv.
60 Ibid, 190.
61 Ibid, 252.
62 See Phenomenology of Perception, especially “The Body as Expression, and Speech.”
63 Ibid, 155.
64 Another being that Merleau-Ponty’s account of intercorporeality and radical community is a more universal, less situated version, as it arises not in attunement with any one landscape in particular, but from an abstracted perspective.
65 Robert McPherson, Dinéjí Na’Nitin: Navajo Traditional Teachings and History (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2012), 16.
66 McPherson, 16.
67 McPherson, 16.
68 McPherson, 16.
69 The Wind from each of the four directions have different prayers, songs, and personalities. See: McPherson, 17.
70 McPherson, 18.
71 McPherson, 18.
72 McPherson, 18.
73 Klara Kelley and Harris Francis, Navajo Sacred Places (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29.
74 Robert Begay, “Doo Dilzin Da: ‘Abuse of the Natural World,’” American Indian Quarterly 25, no. 1 (2001): 21–27.
75 Begay, “Doo Dilzin Da: ‘Abuse of the Natural World,’” 23-24.
76 Klara Kelley and Francis Harris, “Places Important to Navajo People,”
American Indian Quarterly 17, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 158.
77 This harkens Parsons-Yazzie’s thought that there is much to be learned from individual Diné words.
78 Brown explains, “The Navajo see little distinction between the Yei [(the Holy People)], animals, natural forces, and humans.” See: Farella, The Main
Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy, 121.
79 This idea of intercorporeality within the Diné tradition can also be seen in accounts of the Diné people being created out of the skin of Changing Woman. 80 For a more detailed account of this argument, see my work “Nature’s Self- Expression and Linguistic Attunement: The Diné Sing the World,” (Gonzaga University, 2018).

References

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous : Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World.* 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Begay, Robert. “Doo Dilzin Da: ‘Abuse of the Natural World.’”

American Indian Quarterly 25, no. 1 (2001): 21–27.

Brown, Joseph Epes. *Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Cooper, John M., and D. S. Hutchinson. *Plato Complete Works*.

Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Kelley, Klara, and Francis Harris. *Navajo Sacred Places.*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

———. “Places Important to Navajo People.” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1993).

Landes,
Donald. *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression.*

New
York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Lugones, María. “Playfulness,
‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19.

McPherson, Robert. *Dinéjí Na’Nitin: Navajo Traditional Teachings and History.* Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, 1908-1961., Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes.* Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Merleau-Ponty,
Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.*

Abingdon,
Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

———. Signs. Evanston, Ill.: Evanston, Ill.
Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Ring, Annalee. “Nature’s Self-Expression and Linguistic Attunement: The Diné Sing the World.” Gonzaga University, 2018.

Singer, Jonathan. “‘The Flesh of My Flesh’: Animality, Difference, and ‘Radical’ Community in Merleau-Ponty’s Late Philosophy.” In *Animal Ethics and Philosophy : Questioning the Orthodoxy.* London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015.

Toadvine, Ted. *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature.*

Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009.