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Naming coyote in Hebrew: a memoir

Abstract:

Those in settlement societies find that their habitation on the earth is defined through the usurpation of other peoples' cultural legacies and the seizure of their traditional lands. As a result, one is called upon to engage in what Deborah Bird Rose terms recuperative work. One aspect of this work is reopening how one's stories are entangled with a landscape laboring under genocidal and ecocidal histories. In my words – part memoir and part philosophical essay – I would tell stories about coyote that are rooted in my cultural traditions and habitation upon the earth even as the senses of these traditions and my habitation are uncannily altered and renewed by what they and I come to know as coyote, the land upon which coyote would live, and the peoples among which he or she would roam.

Biographical Note

James Hatley teaches courses in the eco-humanities and philosophy at Salisbury University in Maryland. He is currently working on a book focusing on philosophical questions raised by living in a time of mass species extinction.

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And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field,
and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto the man
to see what he would call them (Bereishit Genesis 2:19, 1995)

A *Prarie Wolf* come near the bank and Barked
at us this evening, we made an attempt
but could not git him, the animale barkes
like a large *ferce* dog (12th August 1804, Lewis and Clark 1805)

In the beginning

In the beginning.

*I remember,
from early on.
From the beginning,
I remember –*

*Coyotes.
Coyotes, howling in the night.*

*Yelp, yelp-yelping,
arooing and arauwing,
choruses of prairie hosannahs
going airborne and hovering
over the suburbs of cool, damp lawns
with their newly planted crab apple trees
and lilacs blooming.*

*And just as suddenly
those feral cries dissipate,
retreat back
into the plowed fields and rocky gulches,
lie low in sandy coulees,
crouch in watch on the rises,
rustle in the thistles and thorns,
lope through the barley and wheat,
at the far edge of the world
my parents had named –*

Great Falls ...

Montana ...

*And afterward,
the lulling sound of
sprinklers whirling water
into the starry night.*

*The child remembers,
whether soaked in moonlight
or dampened to pitch black,
in the beginning,
the air speaking with canine ferocity.*

The story of beginning unravels

At the beginning of the Abrahamic canon in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, two accounts are offered of creation, one immediately after the other. This has puzzled many readers. Why is one beginning not enough? Why this double dealing in beginnings, each differing from the other in significant details? But to be severely puzzled by the notion of beginning at work in these paired accounts, one need read no further than the first one. In it something about the very starting of the story is already amiss. In fact, in the very first line, the proverbial beginning of the beginning, the subtleties of the Hebrew formulation stop the reader in mid sentence. In Hebrew this text reads: *'B'rishit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz'*. In the King James Version these words are translated: 'In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth'.

But the Hebrew can also be rendered: 'In the beginning of The Most High's creating the heavens and the earth'. In this second translation, creation is not storied as a *fiat accompli*, a moment definitively begun and then finished in the aorist mode with panache, if not majesty. Rather, creation enters awkwardly, already in mid-sentence, a subject that has opened up before the words describing it could even have begun to be written. The medieval rabbinical commentator Rashi finds that the text 'says nothing but "*Expound me!*"' (1995: 2). Rather than pointing confidently to the origin of all things in a straightforward manner, the Hebraic telling of the story of creation arises anarchically over the face of *'tohu v'bohu'* of 'bewilderment and void'.

Philosophers too have been put to the test by the thought of creation. No less an authority than Kant, in his chapter on the Antinomies in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, has pointed out the pointlessness of attempting to understand the beginning of all things. For no matter how subtly you formulate it, elements that logically should come afterward necessarily creep into play ahead of time. This point finds its metaphorical equivalent in the plight of the Most High in Genesis who is already pictured hovering *'al penei hamayim'*, 'on the face of the waters', before these very waters have a place in which to exist. The elements of the storying of creation inevitably arise both too soon and too late.

In his elegant and thin book of essays titled *The Story Begins*, Amos Oz provides several meditations on works of literature which squarely confront the impossibility of beginning a story and yet show a knack for doing it well nonetheless. Echoing Rashi, he asks: 'Can there exist, in principle, a proper beginning to any story at all? Isn't there always, without exception, a latent beginning-before-the-beginning? A pre-Genesis occurrence?' (1999: 8). At this moment in his thoughts Oz then turns to a distinction made by Edward Said between 'origin', in which all things are understood to come into being passively from out of the means of a transcendent actor, and 'begin-

ning’, which is ‘an *act*’ that will not be done with, that returns to itself and refuses to be the ‘just a departure point for linear progress’. Oz concludes: ‘Beginning and beginning anew are historical matters, whereas origin is divine’ (9).

But perhaps this distinction is itself too easy, allowing one to put aside all too quickly the disruptive provocation of the holy in the Biblical telling of creation. The everyday, the profane, the purely active beginning that is always beginning anew is the hero of Oz and Said’s distinction. But in at least some oral cultures, as well as in Biblical Hebraic culture, the distinction between history and origin is not so clear. In the Rabbinical understanding of these things, the distinction can be made only to find it already slipping away. Disruptively, the story of creation commands from before its very beginning: ‘Expound me’. The beginning begins already in obedience to beginning. Any attempt to appropriate the beginning in one’s own time and place, as if the creature could become the creator, ends in disarray.

‘Expound me’. One takes on the telling of a story not simply to repeat it word for word, but in order to make sense of its words anew. And one does this because one has been commanded by the story’s words to speak on behalf of creation itself. Just as the Most High says, ‘let there be light’ and the light exists, the Most High commands, ‘let there be a story of creation’ and the teller of the stories of creation exists. This latter command or imperative, even if it remains shadowy, continues to interrupt the ongoing storying of creation, to instigate its truing, time and again, with the help of further revelations, revelations that could not have been anticipated in the beginning, revelations in fact that show the beginning to have been, in so far as one actively tried to pin down its emergence into existence, a phantom, an idyll or even an idol.

And so it becomes a bit clearer: Even as the story is told, there is the story of telling the story. This is the plight of being a creature – that no story can reach deep enough and far enough to be the very first story telling the story of all other stories. And so there is here and now the story of telling my coyote story, which is to say, there is commentary.

And so I begin again: In the beginning a young boy heard coyotes baying in the night, their cries calling to him in a manner other than he had heretofore known. The cries were in that sense a teaching, a Torah. Their instruction was in part accomplished by provoking sensitivity in the child to how the landscape surrounding him not only inspired and sustained him, but actually howled him into being. On their impact he shivered secretly, a cry of response stifled in his throat. And now fifty years later the story of this story, the cry of this cry, emerges anew in these words. And, in doing so, these words by no means belong to my adult instantiation in 2012, even though I have penned them with more than a small amount of deliberation and care. Rather, another person appears here in my place, a child whom I once was. Or perhaps even a child I can now never have been. The time in which that child has existed interrupts the time in which this man now speaks, and in doing so, the child shares his secrets with the man through the sharing of a story, a story about coyote.

Memories lost and regained

It is here that I must make an admission that might prove to be fatal: to this day, my memory is uncertain of what actually occurred or whether it ever occurred at all. Did I truly hear or only imagine that distant baying? The memories of early childhood are most often vague and displaced, welling up from darkness, from bewilderment and void into occasional moments of illumination. As an adult, I have clearly heard the howling of coyotes flooding across the prairie some distance from Great Falls, as pack upon pack broke into yips and aroos to greet the dawning day just as its light found them. But as a child, I can point explicitly to no similar moment, no gotcha event, in which I remember coyotes howling. Yet, I can remember moments in my childhood when I remembered remembering those howls. And if I did indeed actually hear them, those cries from out of the darkness, what convinced me coyotes were involved? Perhaps these questions would be more easily answered, these ghostly howls rendered more substantial in my mind's eye, if they had continued to sound out in the night during the remainder of my youth. But too soon, so the story goes, the yips and yaps receded beyond a wall of automobiles speeding along Highway 200 and marking the town limits. The howling disappeared somewhere, its absence barely remarked by the boy I once was or seemingly by the town in which he was growing up. Those sudden cries punctuating the darkness became a questionable visitation, a vague memory hidden in the undergrowth and only emerging occasionally as the dream of a story, and yet all the same, a story persisting even until now a half century later as I write down these words.

A revelation

And here and now, it has become evident that the story that was a dream of story was not without its power even as it drifted abandoned for five decades in the indeterminate depths of memory. The coyote cries had been at work, echoing in the echoes of an ongoing instruction by fellow creatures – human and more than human – into the nature of coyote. And so, as I began to inquire of my memory – ‘What is there to tell of Coyote?’ – a flurry of stories, still looking for more determinate form, was unleashed: ‘The Naming of Coyote in a Blackfoot Drum Song on Lake Cuomo’; ‘Running Over Coyote with Snowmobiles’; ‘Not Knowing the Proper Season in which to Tell the Story of Coyote’; ‘Education Majors Harassing a Tribal Woman for Refusing to tell her Story of Coyote’; ‘A Student Can’t Bring Herself to Howl like Coyotes, at least in front of Others’; and ‘Coyote Tells his own Story at a Sun Dance of Ravens’. Stories of coyote heard anew and now waiting to be spoken.

For instance:

*Not one coyote killed in a Montana classroom.
He was fifteen years old,
a sandy-haired ranch boy,
a fourth-generation settler
who smiled broadly
whenever he spoke*

*of his forebears.
And he loved the daily labor
of tending cattle and herding them
across the hardscrabble hills
of the Jefferson Valley.*

*He came that day to Speech class
at Whitehall High School
with the story
of his grand-uncle,
the greatest hunter
in family memory.*

*It was all written down:
'In one day', the boy began his report,
'not too far from Billings, Montana
my grand uncle killed:
1255 bison
[his number was certain
and very large
but I cannot remember it exactly],
334 deer
[his number was certain
and large
but I cannot remember it exactly],
241 antelope
[his number was certain
and large
but I cannot remember it exactly],
3 grizzlies
[his number was certain
but I cannot remember it exactly]
and a mountain lion
[his number was certain
but I cannot remember it exactly]'*

*No coyotes listed. But as the boy
enumerated the killings,
the class shifted uncomfortably
in their seats
and became quiet.
The boy sat down,
puzzled at his own story.
I dared not say a word.*

Genocidal storyscape

Genocide is lurking in my telling the story of coyote, just as surely as there is genocide lurking in this story of a student's recitation of his grand uncle's hunting exploits. For the holy cannot be named, creation cannot be uttered, without history, the nightmare from which we are forever trying to awaken, intervening. One of the most crucial Hebraic insights is the fact that the search for justice goes just as deep as, if not deeper than the search for origins, for beginnings. And so I am brought at this moment of telling the story of my coyote stories, which is to say, of providing commentary on them, to learn yet again that the story of my dream of a coyote story, in which I was named into being by coyote, was already a genocidal one. In story I have been complicit in the annihilation of living kinds and their stories. For like so many of those Montanans descended from European settlers, the stories I told about the landscape in which I found myself at home, underwent an odd sort of fantasy work: One's story of being named by the landscape became the story of a paradise lost.¹ Not the emergence but the disappearance of the coyote cries provided the fulcrum by which my story was to make itself know. As I struggled to hear again those lost howls, I came to imagine, however fleetingly, that, if they indeed had been in my hearing, they might have been those of a last fabled remnant, a bedraggled band of hold out coyotes, coyote robin hoods still at home near the Great Falls of the Missouri, stealing from the farmers and providing for the animals, still just flourishing before the regimes of poisoning and bounty hunting finally got to them, the familial packs shot out of the nearby prairie by cattle ranchers and their guns, by random hunters looking for target practice. In the child's ears, the remnants of an older soundscape made one last stand in a city's precincts and then fell to the onslaught of lawnmowers, train whistles, sonic booms, combines, blast furnaces, automobiles and radios of the newcomers, we, the Americans, the white men, the frontiersmen, miners and cowboys, ranchers and loggers, train engineers and truck drivers, businessmen and refinery workers, air traffic controllers and atomic bomb bomber pilots, all Abrahamic protectors, whether Catholic, Protestant, Mormon or Jew, of The Most High and the Free World. And every other man pacing the sidewalks assuredly a hunter, an outdoorsman, a citizen of a world as much defined through the genocidal settlement of its landscape as the building of its townscape.

And so I am left in my story not with coyotes in the flesh but their ghosts. And is not this haunting doubled? Not only the coyotes in the story have been rendered as ghosts, but also their story, it turns out, is its own ghost. And this ghosting of the story is itself doubled. On the one hand, the story is one of not knowing the story was there to be told, how the very disappearance of its animal protagonist from the life of the child, a disappearance that no one around the child commented upon, left the him without the means or the audience to whom the story might be related. It takes a village to tell a story. But the boy's town was mute on the subject leaving him no manner in which the prayer of coyotes in those cries he heard once upon a time might be given their due witness. And so his story folded in upon itself, like a flower that withers before it can bloom. Until this moment, here and now, over fifty years removed, the child was not yet ready to seek out an audience for his story. Or even an audience to which he might admit that there was a story to tell.

But this variation of the story's haunting does not stop there. Increasingly the sources of stories for the boy, who is finally more comfortable in the basement with his books than walking ditches hunting pheasant with a family shotgun, emerge ready-made from luminous screens. The story, for instance, of the first day a television set was placed in his house is much more palpable, much more familial and close, even to this day, than the story he told himself or perhaps did not tell himself about the coyotes. That first day of television, the boy came inside and watched intently the station logo, listened intently to the whine of the audio signal and bathed in the flickering light of what he imagined was the magic of the far brought near, of the invisible speaking. And soon the boy was wearing a genuine cloth coonskin cap and singing about 'Davy, Davy Crocket, king of the wild frontier', the very Davy 'who kilt him a baa'r when he was only three'. Even if the image of an avuncular Walt Disney introduced each episode of Davy's saga with a comforting smile and a reassuring tone, finally the white, anonymous, flickering light itself was the boy's comfort and reassurance. The humming of a cathode tube transformed light into specular flesh, brought near the coyote and the killers of coyote too. Coyotes, I am pretty sure, were closer to the child in the saga of Rowdy Yates on the television series *Rawhide* than in any moment he might actually have come nose to nose with a one. Indeed, I do not have any memory of having seen an actual coyote until a time perhaps in my twenties.

On the other hand, other peoples with other stories to tell of coyote underwent regimes of extermination not unlike that to which coyote himself was submitted.² And this extermination too was left unstoried in the child's surroundings. The paradisaical garden of childhood, the green suburban lawns wreathed by a red and yellow howling bracelet of coyote voices, turns out to have been a thicket overgrown by thorns all along, or worse, surrounded on all sides by roads of paved over earth leading to a shopping center parking lot, a landscape peculiarly deaf to coyote's voice and inhospitable to the tellers of coyote's story.³ The ghosts in the story are not only the lost coyotes romantically baying in the child's garden of memory but also the poisoned coyotes, the displaced coyotes with paradise plowed out from underneath their very paws. And gathered together with these coyotes are the first storytellers of Coyote – Crow, Blackfoot, Sioux, Assiniboine, Cheyenne, Pueblo, Hopi, Navajo, Shoshone, Salish, Kootenai, Spokane, Okanagon and yet others. In the beginning, these peoples told the story of coyote – stories, I have heard in stories, they are still thankfully anxious to tell. Yet it must not be forgotten that the attempted administrative genocide of Native American cultures, as it has been termed by Nimachia Hernandez (1999: 19–35) was interwoven with ecocide, the creation of a genocidal landscape, the scraping of bison, grizzlies and coyotes from the prairie like flesh scraped from a bone. And in both moments of this attempted genocide – human and animal – the *names* of bison, grizzly and coyote, as well as the ceremonies associated with those names, were also to have been scraped clean from the minds of their storytellers. Genocide is a practice that focuses not only on the bodies of those to be annihilated but also on their stories. And perhaps the first moment of that genocide was the perception that it was of two kinds – that a distinction might even be made between wiping out the physical presence of living entities and wiping out those who told their stories.

The boy walks over land stolen from others, and, at first, he pays this no mind. But the sound of those lost coyotes and their lost stories will not let him go.

Remembering coyote backwards

I remember not remembering coyote

*I remember,
from early on.
From the beginning,
I remember -*

*My father,
driving his car,
and my stretching to peer
out the windows from
the back seat.*

*All around us shacks,
wooden walls and blanket doors.
All around us children
and men and women,
and dogs too.
All around us people I later
would know to call 'Indians',
on a hill I would later know
To call 'Hill 57'.*

*I remember my father
Rolling down the car window,
Speaking with someone. A man.*

And what happened next dwindles into darkness.

*My mother mentioned it once,
years later.
Dad hired some Indian workers
to roof a house he was building,
the very first house he built,
the one the O'Hare family owns
on Sixth Avenue near water tank park.*

*But they took our money,
Mom added,
Took our money and ran off
in the middle of the job.*

*Dad must have brought me with him
to Hill 57, the hill where for decades
Crees and Metis who arrived too late to be
confined*

*to a reservation
simply built their homes anyway
on stones and dust
beyond the outskirts of Great Falls,
overlooking neatly plowed fields
of prosperous Norwegian farmers
growing wheat and alfalfa.*

*Coyote stories, I suspect,
were lurking on Hill 57.
Only later did I return there,
Following a dusty road cutting through
Thistle and sagebrush
On my last summer in Great Falls before
going to college.
I worked for one month for the Census Bureau
and was responsible for determining the state
of the basements in large sections of rural
Cascade County.*

*No one said so, but the basements were
obviously of interest
if there were ever to be a nuclear war.*

*And so I was asking householders far and wide
about the depth of their basements, the walls of
their basement,
indeed, if they had a basement.*

*And so I found myself on Hill 57,
the settlement now mostly empty.
A few shacks here and there.*

*One man lifted the blanket to his home,
Invited me in, asked me to sit down.
He explained to me carefully why he would
Not answer my questions, even though his
Floor was of earth, even though the notion of his
Having a basement was laughable.
I squirmed in my chair. I did not know what to
say.*

*Later that day, I ate lunch
next to a Minuteman missile silo,
and read the beginning of
James Agee's A Death in the Family,
At no point in that day did I listen
for the howling of coyotes,
nor did I hear them.*

Endnotes

1. Perhaps the most common variant of this story was to imagine oneself stepping in a place that no other human had ever stepped before. In a Montana childhood, one heard these words very often once one was out of the town limits.
2. However, unsuccessfully in both cases! The story of how coyotes have persisted and flourished, even as their canine cousins, the wolves, at least temporarily succumbed to the scorched-earth hunting and eradication practices in the twentieth century, is a remarkable one. A later chapter in this memoir is to treat the coyote's persistent failure to succumb to extinction.
3. I have heard stories of how the Salish People would show up each spring in Missoula (Montana) to camp and harvest bitterroot in a field that now serves as a parking lot for a shopping center.

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