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Zintkala Woihanbla (Bird Dreams):
Drifting and Other Decolonial Performances for Survival and Prison Abolition

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Abstract

Scholarship has often overlooked how Native Americans, who are disproportionately incarcerated, have developed tactics to cope with long-term imprisonment. Drawing on the authors' correspondences and conversations, this essay features decolonial performances for survival and prison abolition, which George Blue Bird (Oglala Lakota) has enacted within conditions of carceral violence. These interlocking tactics are 1. nurturing connections with more-than-humans; 2. "drifting", Blue Bird's term for imagining, traveling, and inhabiting other realms; and 3. activating freedom and futurities. Ultimately, we focus on what these tactics and Lakota epistemologies offer the prison abolition movement.

Keywords: Native American. Settler Colonialism. Prison. Performance. Abolition. Anthropocentrism. Coping.

Zintkala Woihanbla (Sonhos de Pássaros):
deriva e outras performances decoloniais para sobreviver a e abolir a prisão

Resumo

Pesquisas muitas vezes negligenciaram como os nativos americanos, que estão desproporcionalmente presos, desenvolveram táticas para lidar com a prisão a longo prazo. Com base nas correspondências e conversas entre os autores, este ensaio apresenta performances decoloniais praticadas por George Blue Bird, em condições de violência carcerária, para sobreviver a e abolir a prisão. Estas táticas de enfrentamento são: 1. alimentar conexões com mais-que-humanos; 2. deriva, termo adotado por Blue Bird para imaginar, viajar e habitar outros reinos; e 3. ativar a liberdade e o futuro. Em última análise, concentramo-nos no que estas táticas e epistemologias *Lakota* oferecem ao movimento de abolição da prisão.

Palavras-chave: Nativo americano. Colonialismo. Prisão. Performance. Abolição. Antropocentrismo. Enfrentamento.

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Zintkala Woihanbla (Sueños de Pájaro): la deriva y otras actuaciones descoloniales para sobrevivir y abolir la prisión

resumen:

La investigación ha pasado por alto a menudo cómo los nativos americanos, que están desproporcionadamente encarcelados, han desarrollado tácticas para hacer frente a la prisión a largo plazo. Basado en la correspondencia y conversaciones entre los autores, este ensayo presenta las actuaciones descoloniales de George Blue Bird, bajo condiciones de violencia carcelaria, para sobrevivir y abolir la prisión. Estas tácticas de afrontamiento son: 1. alimentar las conexiones con más-que-los-humanos; 2. la deriva, un término de Pájaro Azul adoptado para imaginar, viajar y habitar otros reinos; y 3. activar la libertad y el futuro. En última instancia, nos centramos en lo que estas tácticas y epistemologías Lakota ofrecen al movimiento de abolición de las prisiones.

Palabras clave: Nativo Americano. El colonialismo. Prisión. La actuación. Abolición. Antropocentrismo. Confrontación.

Everything we know was taken from us by forces of theft and destruction which was meant to destroy us.

George Blue Bird, Oglala Lakota
(Blue Bird, 1 jun. 2020)

Words are all that I know in reaching the world out there. They comfort me. Send me some horses after they drink lots of water from the mountains.

Blue Bird (Blue Bird, 21 jun. 2020)

I believe that we can do anything. Freedom has to be enticed away from the chains and boundaries that don't want us to breathe. When we stand in defense of each other . . . we are protecting our right to be creative in all situations.

Blue Bird (Blue Bird, 12 jan. 2020)

I often think about being an indigenous journalist and covering stories about our people in penitentiaries across the lands. I wouldn't mind.

Blue Bird (Blue Bird, 4 jan. 2020)

George Blue Bird³ - an Oglala Lakota elder - is a writer, artist, and activist. He currently serves as President of the Native American Council of Tribes at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, where he has been imprisoned for the last thirty-six years without the possibility of parole. While scholarship has delineated how some people with life sentences have developed tactics that allow them to cope with long-term imprisonment, Native Americans, who are disproportionately imprisoned, have often been overlooked (Crew, Hulley and Wright, 2017; Flanagan, 1981; Zamble, 1992). This essay, written in collaboration with Blue Bird and drawing

³ George Blue Bird is a father, grandfather, self-taught artist, traditional dancer, ceremony man, activist, singer, songmaker, writer, and pow wow announcer. Tasunke Witko (Crazy Horse) and Tecumseh are his role models. Their leadership and warrior abilities impress him. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty lands are his central mindset. These lands were stolen from his ancestors by soldiers who were ordered to begin killing and destroying them. He speaks, writes, interprets, and protects the Lakota language. Hante Wakan Waapiya Tipi (Sacred Cedar Healing Lodge) is a plan that he would like to see turned into the world's largest reentry program designed exclusively for all tribal offenders. His best two mentors for writing are Paul Gregg Jr. and Derrick Jensen. These men know the truth about life. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is a place he would like to walk across at least twice to feel the natural exuberance of freedom. The voices there send messages deep into the ocean, and the whales always respond with songs about unity and endurance. He supports Indigenous people and horseback riders who remember all tribal people who were hanged, massacred, assassinated, tortured, and forced to walk in death marches. The prison system in South Dakota doesn't allow tobacco to be used in their ceremonies, and he asks outside believers to place a lot of it on the lands as an offering.

on the multiple correspondences and phone conversations that we have had since 2018, features three decolonial performances for survival and prison abolition that preserve and activate Lakota epistemologies, which Blue Bird has enacted within the inescapable violence of the carceral system. These interlocking tactics include 1. nurturing connections with more-than-humans⁴; 2. “drifting,” Blue Bird’s term for imagining, traveling to, and inhabiting other realms; and 3. activating freedom and futurities through collective organizing, hard work and persistence, gift-giving, and artistic practices. The valuable contributions that Blue Bird has shared with society, both within and beyond the prison walls, cannot absolve the devastation of carceral logics. Ultimately, we focus on what Blue Bird’s tactics and Lakota epistemologies, especially human and more-than-human relationships, offer the prison abolition movement. Human and more-than-human interdependencies underlie not only Lakota epistemologies, but also prison abolition. As acclaimed prison abolitionist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has articulated, “Abolition is deliberately everything-ist; it’s about the entirety of human and environmental relationships.” (Kushner, 2019).

Yet, the majority of the literature on the coping tactics of people who are sentenced to life in prison is not from an abolitionist perspective (Crew, Hulley and Wright, 2017; Flanagan, 1981; Zamble, 1992). Some of these studies have also overlooked the injustices inherent in U.S. society and how they are inextricably linked to the settler state’s legal system (Johnson and Dovrzanska, 2005; Flanagan, 1981; Zamble, 1992). However, as Luana Ross, whose work is essential to Native American prison studies, emphasizes, “Any explanation of Native criminality that sees individual behavior as significant overlooks the social and historical origins of the behavior. A thorough analysis of Native criminality must include the full context of the criminal behavior—that is, their victimization and the criminalization of Native rights by the United States government” (Ross, 1998, 12). Indeed, in the quote that opens this paper, Blue Bird himself highlights the enduring impacts of settler colonialism, which is evidenced by his decades-long imprisonment on occupied Lakota lands. (Blue Bird, 1 jun. 2020).

⁴ In this essay, we define more-than-humans as air, land, water, and nonhuman animals.

When they fail to account for social structures, scholars may inadvertently criminalize and misrepresent people who are/were incarcerated. Robert Johnson and Ania Dovrzanska refer to people who are/were imprisoned as “inmates” and the tactics that they employ to survive within carceral confines as “mature coping” (Johnson and Dovrzanska, 2005, 8). However, their framework of “mature coping” overlooks how U.S. colonization has “violat[ed] the rights of others” for over 500 years and how state-sanctioned “deception [and] violence” have disproportionately targeted Indigenous and Black peoples (Johnson and Dovrzanska, 2005, 8). Ashley Lucas warns, “We should never forget that our notions of freedom are built on the backs of those who are not free” (Lucas, 2020). Johnson and Dovranska also conflate “maturity” (Johnson and Dovrzanska, 2005, 8) with one’s ability to conform - at least outwardly - to an unjust system and thereby imply that some forms of righteous resistance are “immature.” Unfortunately, Emily Brault - whose work focuses on Native people and accounts for colonization - also uses the concept of “mature coping” without considering how rendering Native people as childish and inferior has been central to the colonial project (Brault, 2005). Another strategy of settler colonialism is the imposition of hierarchies of knowledge, and this essay’s conclusion critiques those hierarchies by challenging Eurocentric constructions as they relate to “maturity.”

Although the current scholarly emphasis on the ways that sanctioned, prison programming can prove powerful for people who are/were incarcerated is important (Brault, 2005; Hanley and Marchetti, 2020; Grant, 2008), it can also positively portray detention centers and detract from the violence that they inflict. Prison reforms can be very meaningful to people who are imprisoned - and perhaps in particular, those with long-term sentences. Nevertheless, literature which advocates for prison reform can strengthen and solidify the carceral system (Davis, 2015). Much of this work accepts prison as a “necessary, natural, and inevitable” solution to the violation of settler state laws (Gilmore, Estes, Hale, and Sepulveda, 2020). Even scholars who conclude that life in prison or what they refer to as “death by incarceration is just as final, just as painful, and just as worthy of the careful scrutiny to which we subject traditional capital sentences” still do not

completely condemn this practice. (Johnson and Mcgunigall-Smith, 2008, 344).

Conversely, Gilmore imagines a world that does not inflict corporeal punishment and cruelty (Kushner, 2019). She proposes a prison abolitionist framework that is “green,” “red” - that is, environmentally just and communist,⁵ respectively - and “international” (Gilmore, Estes, Hale, and Sepulveda, 2020), which Blue Bird’s narratives also evidence. Conducting close readings of conversations and correspondences with Blue Bird, this paper expands Gilmore’s framework by conceptualizing “red” as Native values and practices - which emphasize reciprocity and gift-giving - and being explicit that abolition also requires a “dream” - that is, imagining and enacting possibilities that challenge the “common sense” notions of imprisonment and the ways that it is conflated with “justice.” In making this argument, this essay also enacts Lakota and other Indigenous epistemologies in which dreams are conceptualized as powerful and valid forms of knowledge that may inspire and realize goals. (Posthumus, 2018).⁶

Scholarly attention to prison-sanctioned programming may also laud the interventions of people outside the prison while eclipsing the valuable contributions of people who are/were imprisoned (Hanley and Marchetti, 2020). In other words, the focus on prison-sanctioned activities may obscure the ways that “imprisoned radical intellectuals” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 3) have, in some cases, been central to originating and perpetuating interventions. At the South Dakota State Penitentiary, Lakota men who are/were imprisoned collectively organized in 1976 to form the Native American Council of Tribes and have culturally-relevant gatherings and ceremonies at the prison (Blue Bird, 30 jul. 2020). Centering the contributions of people who are/were incarcerated can reveal alternative forms of knowledge and preserve existences and critiques that unsettle the settler state. As prison abolitionist and scholar Dylan Rodriguez has articulated, circulating the stories of people who are/were imprisoned offers possibilities to grow and strengthen social justice and abolition movements in a way that statistics cannot.

⁵ More specifically, Gilmore advocates for a redistribution of the social wage to protect vulnerable groups rather than police and imprison them (Gilmore, Estes, Hale, and Sepulveda, 2020).

⁶ Notably, because Eurocentric discourses often conceptualize prisons as “common sense” and dreams as utopian, abolitionists have at times sought to distance their work from dreaming (Gilmore and Crispino 2020).

(Critical Resistance, 2017).

This co-authored essay makes an intervention into the current literature on the coping mechanisms of people who are/were imprisoned by foregrounding the inescapable limitations and violence of the carceral environment while highlighting Blue Bird's individual agency and creativity, articulating how his performances can inform the contemporary prison abolition movement, and conducting research *with* a person who is currently incarcerated as opposed to viewing them as a research subject. In conversation with Gilmore's description that abolition is "life in rehearsal, not a resuscitation of rules and wrongs," and Tongva scholar Charles Sepulveda's discussion of decolonization and abolition movements as "continuous creative processes," Blue Bird and I conceive broadly of what constitutes a "performance" (Gilmore, Estes, Hale, and Sepulveda, 2020). We define "decolonial" as centering Lakota epistemologies, countering Eurocentric logics, and challenging the boundaries of settler colonial confinement. As Sepulveda explains, the aims of decolonization and abolition are "intimately connected to one another"; they both entail "the continuous struggle for freedom" (Gilmore, Estes, Hale, and Sepulveda, 2020). Although in some cases, it is vital not to conflate feelings of freedom with actual freedom from imprisonment, Native experts also encourage people not to foreclose the possibility of achieving liberation within the confines of the current system - no matter how fleeting that moment may be. Leanne Simpson theorizes, "we can create a literal island of decolonial love - a bubble for a few minutes at least, we learn what it feels like to escape the chains of colonialism" (Simpson and Winder, 2014). Such "islands of decolonial love" (Simpson and Winder, 2014) - or what we term "decolonial performances" - can combat "the forces of theft and destruction . . . meant to destroy" (Blue Bird, 1 jun. 2020) Indigenous people by sustaining and strengthening their resolve to survive.

This essay also enacts Indigenous, decolonizing research methodologies, which emphasize "respect, reciprocity, and relationality" (Wilson, 2008, p. 99). Throughout the process of writing this paper, Blue Bird and I have been in communication via phone and the online messaging system that the South Dakota State Penitentiary contracts with. However, this essay also grapples with the

failures of the authors' "collaboration" and the limits of "reciprocity" given that Blue Bird is currently imprisoned (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 37-38). For example, Indigenous research methods often emphasize the importance of reporting back to community partners (Smith, 2013, 16); however, Blue Bird's incarceration raises questions about how to navigate sharing research findings in the carceral context. Currently, I am uncertain whether the South Dakota State Penitentiary will allow me to share this essay in print with Blue Bird and whether spotlighting the work we are doing for prison officials - who control whether Blue Bird and I can communicate - is wise, especially since Blue Bird and I have plans to continue to working together. I also find that Indigenous research methodologies and carceral rules and regulations are often at odds. Whereas Indigenous research methodologies emphasize building strong relationships, the South Dakota State Penitentiary's Volunteer Handbook has several rules that highlight how volunteers must maintain clear boundaries with people who are incarcerated (Kaemingk, 2018). At one point while conducting research at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, a volunteer and prison official encouraged me to obtain volunteer status, so I could enter and exit the institution without another person accompanying me. Yet, when I started to read the Handbook, I realized that becoming a volunteer would require me not to accept Blue Bird's phone calls and gain approval from the warden prior to publishing any writing related to the prison (Kaemingk, 2018). It seems to me as researcher - neither volunteer nor staff - I am in a liminal position and therefore always in jeopardy of being refused entry into the prison and communication with Blue Bird, who has become a friend and mentor to me.

Although often I cannot enact reciprocity in my work with Blue Bird as I would with my community partners who are not incarcerated, I do what I can: sharing anecdotes with him, telling him how highly I regard the knowledge that he shares with me and how much I appreciate his powerful and moving words, requesting at the end of almost every conversation that we have to "take care," and remembering him daily in my prayers. Recently, I was listening to a podcast featuring a Diné "community organizer, citizen scientist, activist, water protector,

entrepreneur, writer, [and] gardener,” Kim Smith (Wilbur and Keene, 2020). Articulating an Indigenous approach to harvesting plants, she asked, “what do you need to do, so that when you take from [the more-than-human], it will replenish itself for others and for the next season?” (Wilbur and Keene, 2020). I have been considering Smith’s question in the context of Indigenous research methods: what do we need to do, so that when we take from our community partners, they can replenish themselves for others and for the next season? What are the ways we can replenish community partners even when they are incarcerated? What can our relationships with more-than-humans teach us about prison abolition?

Nurturing Connections with More-than-Humans

Blue Bird counters carceral regulations that separate humans from more-than-humans by engaging in decolonial performances that nurture connections with nonhuman beings in and beyond the prison environment. These performances enact Lakota epistemologies, which understand humans and more-than-humans as interdependent (White Hat, 1999, p. 143). Prison disrupts human and more-than-human interconnections in a multitude of ways. Despite rarely being outside at night and having limited access to view the full moon from his cell window, Blue Bird has continued to mark its presence each month throughout his thirty-six years of confinement. Blue Bird shared with me the significance of the moon to the Lakota people.

Our Lakota tribes use the moon as a reminder for time and place. We have a name for each month. The full moon is an important being. It is celebrated with family love and pure honor. Many will go outside and make a fire. February in other terms is an energy of hearts worldwide. February 9th is our next arrival for the full moon and I hope it will bring you many minutes of beautiful sights as you drive your vehicle. (Blue Bird, 5 feb. 2020).

Although Blue Bird’s imprisonment prevents him from seeing the full moon, as a Lakota person, he still observes its arrival, which allows him to note “time and place” (Blue Bird, 5 feb. 2020). Describing the full moon as an “important being”

implies Lakota ways of knowing, which, unlike Eurocentric epistemologies, do not hierarchize humans over more-than-humans (Blue Bird, 5 feb. 2020). Blue Bird considers the actions that many Lakota people will take to “celebrate” the full moon and the seasonal time (Blue Bird, 5 feb. 2020). His message encourages me as the reader to appreciate the full moon through observing it, which he cannot (Blue Bird, 5 feb. 2020). In this way, Blue Bird teaches non-Lakota people beyond the prison walls to understand and enact Lakota epistemologies.

Some of the recent renovations at the prison have disrupted human and more-than-human interconnections. Blue Bird stated in a message:

I am preparing my creative spirit for the full moon which will give energy and new life to all things on the 10th once again. All of my chances to see it were taken away by the new windows that were put in. We can't see anything. If I get outside on the morning after it comes then I may be able to see it. Not seeing the full moon puts me out of balance. (Blue Bird, 5 jan. 2020).

Blue Bird's words clarify that he readies himself—and in particular, his “creative spirit”—for the full moon prior to its arrival (Blue Bird, 5 jan. 2020). Although Blue Bird anticipates the full moon, which will “give energy and new life to all things,” renovations at the prison have precluded his view and “put him out of balance” (Blue Bird, 5 jan. 2020). Regardless of their demographic, many people enjoy viewing the sky, moon, and more-than-human animals. However, because human and more-than-human connections are central to Native epistemologies, it is possible that these restrictions disproportionately and detrimentally impact Indigenous wellbeing/survival in carceral contexts. (White Hat, 1999).

Conversely, contemporary construction on the prison has temporarily provided precious opportunities for the men who are incarcerated to be outside in the evenings and watch and connect with more-than-humans. Blue Bird wrote to me:

Yesterday I watched some high flying cranes and snow geese making their journey back to their southern camps for the winter. I hope I see more of them today. My connection to birds and all animals guides me to better times. Dogs are my favorite. We go outside for evening recreation because of the construction and it is truly an honor to see and communicate with

the night and the creatures. There is a star in the sky when I gaze towards Mexico and I like it all over. Friday will be our last day. I hope we can get more evenings out. Tonight the full moon will rise up over the eastern oceans and mountains and its colorful essence will give every living thing a new purpose to keep on being strong. . . . I wonder if birds dream? Honor yourself and go for a long walk. Haha! Haha! (Blue Bird, 1 oct. 2020).

This passage illustrates Blue Bird's keen observation of more-than-humans and his consideration of the cranes' paths, geographies beyond the penitentiary, and vital human and more-than-human connections, which in some cases give "every living thing a new purpose to keep on being strong" (Blue Bird, 1 oct. 2020). Blue Bird feels "hope" and "honor" at the possibility and realization of more-than-human sightings and "communications," which "guide [him] to better times," presumably prior to his imprisonment (Blue Bird, 1 oct. 2020). He mentions that dogs are his "favorite" more-than-human animal and has told me before in our conversations that he enjoys training dogs at the prison (Blue Bird, 1 oct. 2020). In September 2004 and in collaboration with the Sioux Falls Area Humane Society, the South Dakota State Penitentiary began a "Paroled Pups," program for people who are incarcerated in minimum security with the aim of "helping to teach basic obedience commands to shelter dogs" (South Dakota Department of Corrections 2020). This program evidences the prison has implemented programming that facilitates human and more-than-human interconnections and reciprocities. Like the construction on the prison, training a dog for the Paroled Pups program is temporary, and the more-than-human is returned to the Humane Society to be adopted by someone who is not incarcerated (South Dakota Department of Corrections 2020). Blue Bird concludes his message by "wondering if birds dream," and indeed they do (Margoliash, 2005). Although he cannot go for a long walk due to his imprisonment, he encourages me to do so.

In the sightings of more-than-humans that Blue Bird has shared with me, his descriptions are often vivid and joyful. He told me that although the pay is not as much as for some of the other jobs in the prison, he works as a groundskeeper, because he likes being outside. By performing work, which the prison deems an acceptable activity for people who are imprisoned, Blue Bird is able to secure more

time outside of his cell to observe the outdoors. In one story that Blue Bird shared with me, the challenge and ultimately the victory of viewing a more-than-human—in this case, the morning star—brought him tremendous gratitude, and he would have enacted reciprocity with the more-than-human if he had the means.

All this month I've been hunting for the morning star, right? I would just stop and look for it. And I happened to come back up here on the tier. I live like five stories up and there it was, right out of my window. There it was. It was like she was moving in the sky. There it was, the morning star. So, I said, "This is for my family, and this is for Tria and for all the people that support prisoners, and for all the banchees, and for all the kids, and all the old people." I really wish I could have had some tobacco to offer to the morning star. I said, "I really thank you." I've been watching the morning star ever since I was a young boy. [Lakota] people used to teach us, "You go out there and you greet that morning star". They said, "You say hello, and you tell it your problems and visit with it." Man, that was a powerful experience. And I came out this morning, right away, and it was just kind of barely visible in the sky, but I just said, "Hey there you are." I said, "I see you now." (Blue Bird, 31 aug. 2020).

When Blue Bird finally catches sight of the morning star, he responds in a Lakota manner, by praying for his relatives, supporters, and "banchees" (Blue Bird, 31 aug. 2020). While the term "banchee" arises from Irish culture, deeply mourning the death of a relative is also relevant to the overwhelming sense of loss that a person may feel when a family member or close friend is imprisoned (Blue Bird, 31 aug. 2020). Blue Bird also prays for children and elders whom Lakota epistemologies construct as simultaneously sacred and vulnerable (Blue Bird, 31 aug. 2020). He cannot offer tobacco - another more-than-human - to the morning star, which is also a Lakota practice that enacts reciprocity and demonstrates gratitude. People who are incarcerated at the South Dakota State Penitentiary have very limited access to tobacco despite the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, "which protects the rights of Native Americans [including those who are imprisoned] by ensuring . . . use and possession of sacred objects" (42 U.S.C. § 1996). Presumably to meet the legal requirement, the prison provides people who are incarcerated with a substitute mixture that includes some tobacco, but is primarily composed of red willow bark (Rosado, 2020). However, Native people who are imprisoned whom I have spoken with about this mixture do not consider

it tobacco. (Blue Bird, 31 aug. 2020).

Despite the repressive environment of the prison, there are times when Blue Bird is able to enact reciprocity in meaningful ways with more-than-humans.

In prison, right now I'm working with eight individual ant packs. I got four on the east wall that I work with, and these ones, they dig down there. They're black ants. They dig way down. The ones closest to the prison just wander. They live in the concrete and in the sand there. There's sick ants there. They quit eating all the food. Their favorite is cheese puffs, when I crush them. I take graham crackers and I smash them down. That's their favorite food here. They come up and they just start scoffing everything down. I took a lot of chocolate, a lot of crackers and a lot of popcorn. They go nuts over popcorn. I crush the popcorn up, and, right now, they quit eating. They come up and take all the food, and they take it back down. I watch ants all my life, but never prison ants. Some of the people that work here, they have to walk the yards and they come over and say, "What have you got, an ant farm?" I said, "No, no. I study them," I said. "I use the dirt they pull up for healing purposes." They say, "Really? Really?" I say, "Oh yeah. That's what old people used to do."

Refuting that he has an "ant farm," in which the more-than-humans are contained, Blue Bird carefully "studies" the ants in their natural environment (Blue Bird, 18 sept. 2020). He brings the ants a variety of different snacks and treats, which he crushes for them, presumably a considerate gesture that makes it easier for the ants to eat and transport the food (Blue Bird, 18 sept. 2020). By stating, "I watch ants all my life, but never prison ants," Blue Bird implies that perhaps some of his interactions with the ants are inspired by the conversations that he and I have had about human and more-than-human interconnections (Blue Bird, 18 sept. 2020). Although human and more-than-human interrelations was a research interest of mine prior to meeting Blue Bird, these conversations have also been influenced by the stories that he shared with me. Indeed, because he has asked me about more-than-humans where I live and other sights and experiences beyond the prison walls, I also find myself being more attuned to observations and occurrences, so I can provide details which I think he may find interesting.

While Blue Bird seems to appreciate what I tell him, he also frequently conjures interactions with humans and more-than-humans beyond the prison walls through what he terms "drifting":

I often think of the horses out there who roam free and wild as they live and survive from day to day. I wonder what it would be like to follow them and do a documentary about them with words and video cameras? I always make journeys out to them from my place here in prison to visit with their leaders and their herds. (Blue Bird, 11 jan. 2020).

Drifting

Through the decolonial performance of “drifting,” in which he imagines, travels to, and inhabits other realms, Blue Bird has learned to transcend the prison walls. Although all human actions are embodied, Blue Bird’s concept of “drifting” is an important contribution in that it theorizes the multi-spatiality of embodied practices. Blue Bird developed this survival tactic as a result of his imprisonment and his inability to dream since 1979 when he was badly beaten by several men on a street in Chicago. In Blue Bird’s words, he had to learn to “dream another way” (Blue Bird, 4 oct. 2020). He wrote:

I can drift real easy. Give me some words to get me going in the direction that you want me to go. Drifting is a technique that I use to be in the world here, out there, and everywhere. I can cross many flight patterns and time zones in a matter of minutes. Words transport what I am capable of into inscriptions that describe color and texture clear down to the bare bones of being creative. (Blue Bird, 3 oct. 2020).

Blue Bird articulates his proficiency: “I can drift real easy,” and “I can cross many flight patterns and time zones in a matter of minutes” (Blue Bird, 3 oct. 2020). Indeed, one denotation of “drifting” delineates a skill in which a person intentionally creates conditions that allow them to exercise control and mastery. As it pertains to motorsports, “drifting” describes a driver oversteering in order to lose traction while maintaining control of the vehicle (O’Reilly and Eckert, 2014). Through the practice of “drifting,” which implies a purposeful loss of control when Blue Bird is carried along by his dreams, he “relinquishes current conditions in order to move on his own terms and travel elsewhere” (Mattingly, 2020). Finding an alternative way to dream - despite the violence inflicted upon him which caused him to lose

this ability - is another layer of Blue Bird's expertise.

In Blue Bird's description, "drifting" also suggests the ways that this decolonial practice can occur in relation to humans: "Give me some words to get me going in the direction you want me to go" (Blue Bird, 3 oct. 2020). The term "drifting" further implies human and more-than-human interconnections and can be activated to strengthen those relationships. Another denotation of "drifting" is being compelled or carried along, usually by water, wind or air, all of which are more-than-humans, who influence the direction and movement of the being who is compelled or carried (Merriam-Webster 2020). In the human and more-than-human context then, "drifting" suggests the authority of nonhumans who may guide human movement, which challenges anthropocentrism. Blue Bird has articulated that "drifting" can occur through artistic processes. Although in the previous passage, Blue Bird specifically identifies "words," he is also a visual artist and has once described the experience of painting to me as "I'm really flying." (Blue Bird, 10 jul. 2020).

Blue Bird also enacts drifting through listening to music and dancing, and he frequently shares the titles of his favorite songs with me. In 2017, Global Tel Link, "a prison phone contractor," provided all people who were/are imprisoned in South Dakota's Department of Corrections with an electronic "tablet," which gives them paid access to "ebooks, games . . . streaming music . . . longer phone calls with family and easy access to prison documents" (Hult, 2017). By contracting with the prison, the company has profited off the violence of incarceration, and relatedly, vulnerable groups. Blue Bird expressed feeling internally conflicted about making purchases from the company, which are costly, particularly considering the salaries of people who are imprisoned. Yet, he recognizes that the company provides meaningful services for himself and other people who are incarcerated. He shared:

I'm finding music on the tablet. I'm going to Asia, Africa. I'm going to the Ocean Islands. I'm going to Japan. . . . The tablet is in our possessions about 95% of the time. And I really didn't want to, but I just said, okay, I'll take it because it costs like 20 dollars a month. . . . The only reason why I do this is so I can be in that dance mood by myself, all the time, every day, 24/7. I like listening to different speakers around the world. Different

activists and people who have fought for freedom in their lives.” (Blue Bird, 16 aug. 2020).

The tablet aids Blue Bird’s drifting, and its music inspires his “dance mood.” Although Blue Bird expresses that he enjoys his solitude in this state, he also seems to find similarities between himself and “[d]ifferent activists and people who have fought for freedom,” which illustrates the way that Blue Bird conceptualizes social movements as international. (Blue Bird, 16 aug. 2020).

Blue Bird’s framework of “drifting” further highlights the limits of carceral control and punitive policies. Another denotation of “drifting” is “to move or float smoothly and effortlessly,” which in the human context, can connote pleasure and relaxation - for example, as Blue Bird experiences by listening to music (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Prison officials cannot fully manage the mobilities of people who are imprisoned nor the enjoyment that they may miraculously experience within conditions of social death (Cacho, 2012, 7). The South Dakota State Penitentiary designates particular spaces and times -albeit often limited - for people who are incarcerated to engage in movements that might be deemed “smooth, effortless,” pleasurable, and relaxing - such as during recreation, ceremonies, and powwows (Merriam-Webster, 2020). However, such movement qualities and the enjoyable experiences that they may produce largely seem the anthesis of the ways that bodies and mobilities are restricted within the carceral context.

Through “drifting,” Blue Bird’s spirit attended “Carceral Liberation? A Native American Prison Art Show,” which I curated in early October 2019, around the time of Indigenous People’s Day. The exhibition occurred at a community studio on Tongva lands or what is often referred to as Los Angeles. The art show prominently featured six of Blue Bird’s drawings along with the artwork and words of Native people who are/were primarily imprisoned at the South Dakota State Penitentiary and the South Dakota Women’s Prison. Later that month, Blue Bird sent me a message—one of the first I received from him through the online system—titled, “Freedom’s Horses.”

Before the Art Show began I sent my warrior spirit to help wherever needed. I gave him strict orders to stay quiet and work without asking. He crossed all of the highways between here and Denver where he took I-70 west into the mountains and camped overnight. He could not believe how inviting this area is with the pine trees and the solid rock formations. He slept well.

Hitchhiking is still heavy in his life. I told him to communicate with all of the horses that he saw. He crossed over into the region north of San Francisco the next morning where he made homemade coffee boiled in a pot on a fire and prepared to actually walk across the Golden Gate Bridge for the first time in his life. From here he took the highway nearest to the ocean and arrived in your circle just as the sun was setting. Everybody kept looking at him because he had on a green army fatigue jacket and blue jeans. His hair was in a ponytail and his dark red headband signified his status as a senior ranking Oceti Sakowin warrior.

He burned lots of hante blaska (Flat Cedar) and sang a song to honor all of you. He greeted you personally and brought some stories about prison. You showed him all of the art, beadwork, writings, and creations of talent. He asked to look at the rock you keep in your purse. After visiting with everyone and shaking hands, he took his place in a chair to rest. He will stay until the Art Show is over. (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019).

Illustrating the multi-spatiality of “drifting,” and challenging the limits of carceral control, Blue Bird’s narrative discusses how he sends his “warrior spirit” to the art show, giving his spirit “strict orders to stay quiet and work without asking” (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019). Blue Bird represents himself as a sovereign and authoritative figure, thereby creating the circumstances that allow him the “ability to make choices, even choices that offer the illusion of control,” which according to Toch is a “fundamental human need” (Toch, 1998). In Native understandings, a “warrior” is a spiritually developed and disciplined person dedicated to protecting human and more-than-human relatives - and not necessarily one who engages in physical fighting (Peltier, 1999, 103; Denetdale, 2007, 51); accordingly, Blue Bird tells his spirit to “help wherever needed” (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019). Prior to his imprisonment, Blue Bird was an avid hitchhiker, and his spirit continues this tradition through “drifting.”

Overall, Blue Bird imagines an enjoyable journey in which his spirit sightsees and is in good relationship with a variety of more-than-humans and admired by humans. He is a mysterious figure, arriving “just as the sun was setting,” but also

identifiable as a “senior ranking Oceti Sakowin warrior,” wearing attire and a hairstyle that evokes American Indian Movement leaders in the 1960s and 1970s (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019). When he arrives at the exhibition, he engages in acts of generosity and reciprocity: burning hante blaska and singing the honor song evidence Lakota customs (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019). From his personal greeting and the rock that he asks to look at in my purse, it is clear that we are friends, and he has insider knowledge about me (Blue Bird, 31 oct. 2019). At the powwow that I attended at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in September 2019, Blue Bird gifted me thirty-five beautiful stones that he had previously collected from the prison yard, washed by hand, and taken into ceremony. The rock that he refers to in the story is perhaps the most spectacular; it is smooth, round, and the size and shape of an egg. I have told him that I carry it with me in my purse.

Not only does prison separate humans from more-than-humans, but it also severely limits human-to-human interactions, both of which Blue Bird’s practice of “drifting” can counter through imagination and storytelling. In another narrative about the exhibition, titled “The Return Back,” Blue Bird delves further into the sightseeing he would do, the conversations we would have while he is in Los Angeles, and his journey home.

I’d like for you to give me a lift to the Oregon border. On the way we would communicate about always having an attitude of gratitude. I’d answer all of your questions. You would laugh at my humor. In Seattle I’d hook on to I-90 and be in the Black Hills in about seventy hours depending on the traffic. Rapid City to Sioux Falls is easy. (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019).

Blue Bird’s “attitude of gratitude” despite enduring thirty-six years of imprisonment evidences to me his remarkable fortitude. (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019). I imagine at the Oregon border, we would part ways, and Blue Bird would find someone else to give him a ride (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019). He omits our goodbyes; there is no need for sadness or to consider what it might mean to cease our communications (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019). As many people who have served long-term sentences are aware, imprisonment can detrimentally impact relationships (Genty, 2002). In our conversations, Blue Bird has already asked me to be his friend

for decades to come, and I have accepted. Long-term commitments are central to Indigenous research methodologies. (Mithlo, 2012).

In the scene that Blue Bird portrays, I “would laugh at his humor” (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019), and indeed many scholars in Native and prison studies have identified levity as an important survival tactic (Deloria, 1969, p. 146-167; Terry, 1997). Blue Bird has also woven humor into some of the conversations that we have had. Once, to our shared amusement, he briefly brought me into his drifting. I answered the phone as I often do:

“Hey, George. How are you?”

Speaking quickly, he replied, “Pretty good. Pretty good. Guess where I am?”

“Where?” I asked.

He answered, “I’m in the mountains of Palestine. I’m helping my brothers fight the Israelis. I got shipped over here on a specialist order.”

I started, “Gosh, well it’s—”

He interrupted, “No. I wish. I wish.”

I said, “It sounds like dangerous work.”

He replied, “Well, I’m a dangerous man. How are you today? How are you?” (Blue Bird, 18 jun. 2020).

Blue Bird often speaks to me about Palestinians and considers them fellow Indigenous peoples, who are also grappling with ongoing colonization and its deleterious effects, including confinement. Blue Bird is again a high-ranking warrior, this time on a “specialist order” (Blue Bird, 18 jun. 2020). After Blue Bird states that he is “a dangerous man,” he quickly changes the subject and kindly shifts his attention to me (Blue Bird, 18 jun. 2020). Although at that point in the conversation Blue Bird was no longer drifting (Blue Bird, 18 jun. 2020), it is also possible that he switches topics given the enduring stereotypes surrounding not only people who are imprisoned, but also Native men as “dangerous.” (McKegney, 2014).

While “drifting,” exchanging messages, and enacting Indigenous research

methods can fortify human-to-human relationships, the prison highly monitors and regulates these interactions and can prohibit people from communicating with people who are incarcerated and coming into the prison at any time. Once I was part of a conversation in which a South Dakota State Penitentiary official and volunteer told me about people who are/were incarcerated who have exchanged messages with people who are not imprisoned to plan their escape. I was reminded that for Blue Bird and me to continue doing our work together, it is important that we interact in ways that prison officials perceive as professional and unthreatening.

At times, in the “drifting” that Blue Bird has shared with me, it seems as if he himself or aspects of his body transforms into a more-than-human. Shortly after I had attended a powwow at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, he sent me a series of messages, and along with each of them, horses. Blue Bird has a fondness for horses and once wrote to me that “Dreams of horses are the best ones to have.” In a message titled, “The Fourth Horse,” he wrote:

The fourth horse left out of the prison gates early this morning before the sun came up. He’s a pure bred Lakota charger from the Pine Ridge homelands who is wild and has never been ridden. His coat is a deep yellow and his mane and tail are both black with long hair. He has red and blue spots on both hips. Chargers have strong bodies and lower their heads to smell the earth for enemies and danger. He grew up without a name and never had a family.

He’ll make it to the northern end of California and meet up with two mares that were stolen from their families during the fires. He promised to take them back to Los Angeles and reunite them. He will give them a safe route alongside the ocean. Their hooves will cut a story of protection into the sands. He likes helping others. It’s in his blood. He’s a fine horse.

When he reaches you he’ll be tired and hungry. Burn some dry red cedar and rub him down with the smoke. The aroma is sweet and can immortalize anything. Let him sleep for a couple of days. “A Horse With No Name” by America is a song that lets him experience dreams he cannot have. It keeps him alive. The cedar is the kind with the little blue berries attached to its branches.

Show him your collection of boots. Let him be enchanted with your favorite ones. Talk to him. Invite him to stand with you on the night of the 10th when the full moon lights up the sky. (Blue Bird, 1 jan. 2020).

Like Blue Bird, the fourth horse is Lakota “from the Pine Ridge homelands” and cannot dream (Blue Bird, 1 jan. 2020). Also, like Blue Bird, the fourth horse “likes helping others.” (Blue Bird, 1 jan. 2020).

Activating Futurities and Freedom

Given the ways that the U.S. has often criminalized and prohibited Native practices - that is, infringed on Indigenous peoples’ freedom - enacting Native futurities is a decolonial act. Alongside nurturing connections with more-than-humans and drifting, Blue Bird also contributes to Native futurities and freedom through collective organizing, hard work and persistence, gift-giving, and artistic practices. At times, he does this work in his role as President of the Native American Council of Tribes, which directly builds upon the decolonial performances of other Lakota activists, many of who are/were incarcerated on Lakota lands in the 1970s (Blue Bird, 10 jul. 2020). In December 2019, Blue Bird arranged for Lakota people who are imprisoned to receive a tipi. He explained:

We lost our direction. We have a lot of rebuilding to do. I worked through our outside people and we now have a Lakota Tipi ready to come in. This will be the first in the history of South Dakota’s prisons. It will stand very honorably here inside. Some people here are saying it can’t come in. I say it can. Put some tobacco out for us. (Blue Bird, 3 nov. 2019).

Blue Bird expresses that “we” - presumably people who are incarcerated - have “lost our direction” and “have a lot of rebuilding to do” (Blue Bird, 3 nov. 2019). He also implies that participating in Lakota cultural practices - in this case, having access to a Lakota tipi - will provide an antidote to these problems (Blue Bird, 3 nov. 2019). Blue Bird seems excited that the tipi will be the first in the prison and imagines how it will look once inside (Blue Bird, 3 nov. 2019). The “some people” Blue Bird refers to are prison officials and perhaps volunteers, a couple of whom expressed to me their annoyance that Blue Bird often makes arrangements without first asking or proceeding through the proper channels. While I can

understand those frustrations, which would create obstacles to doing one's job, to me Blue Bird's actions also reflected his unyielding persistence and yet another tactic of survival he enacts. Instead of asking permission—likely knowing full well that the tipi violates prison regulations—Blue Bird created conditions that put additional pressure on prison authorities. Lakota people who were not incarcerated had already secured and brought the tipi and invited guests at the powwow were also aware of the situation. Blue Bird instructs me to “[p]ut some tobacco out” as an offering to aid him in achieving his aims (Blue Bird, 3 nov. 2019).

Blue Bird often requests for me to do work, which in many instances could also be conceptualized as contributing to the freedom and futurities of Blue Bird and other Native people who are/were incarcerated. I am happy to do what I can, because I respect and value Blue Bird, and he has given me so much - including the countless stories and Lakota cultural knowledge that he has shared with me. At the December 2019 powwow that I attended at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, he arranged for me to be given a Lakota name in ceremony, *Tasunke Olotapi Win* (Horses Borrow Her Woman). Over the course of the three years that I have been attending powwows at the prison, Blue Bird, along with other Native men who are/were incarcerated have honored me with multiple gifts, including two star quilts, four eagles feathers and plumes, stones, quillwork moccasins for one of my daughters, drawings, and several beaded items for myself and members of my family. In many cultural contexts, the recipient of the gift has responsibilities to the giver (Foster, 2019, 10). Indeed, Blue Bird often asks me to offer tobacco for Native people he knows who have passed away and to make calls to people who are not currently on his phone list - especially, to express condolences on behalf of Native men who are/were imprisoned. He also recently asked me to reach out to a radio station on one of the Lakota reservations to ask that they play a song in honor of a person who passed away. At the powwow I attended in September 2019, I was gifted, along with the star quilt, a beautiful card that featured one of Blue Bird's drawings. Signed by over sixty Native men who are/were incarcerated, the card states:

TRIA,
ALWAYS BE A FEARLESS DELEGATE
AND A SUPPORTER
OF OUR TRIBAL PEOPLE
IMPRISONED
EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

In this way, the gift itself communicates the responsibility.

Blue Bird is committed to gift-giving for Native futurities and freedom within and beyond the prison. While such generosity and gift-giving might be understood as “red” -again, communist - in Gilmore’s abolition framework (Gilmore, Estes, Haley, and Sepulveda, 2020), this is a key value and practice in Lakota culture (Whirlwind Soldier, 1996). Previous scholarship has emphasized that people who are sentenced to life in prison may find purpose in mentoring and helping others (Johnson and Dvorkin, 2005, p. 36), and Blue Bird’s performances and writings often illustrate this as well. During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South Dakota State Penitentiary has prohibited ceremonies, powwows, and volunteers and visitors from coming into the prison. Blue Bird and other Native people who are incarcerated whom I have spoken with have emphasized that the ceremonies and events held within the prison are critical to their wellbeing/survival. As Blue Bird wrote to me, “I keep looking and searching for ways to help our prisoners here. It looks like we could be locked down for a long time yet. The summer months are the toughest times for us because of the heat and the animosities which will be everywhere” (Blue Bird, 9 jun. 2020). Despite the challenges and limitations Blue Bird has faced and continues to endure because of his imprisonment, he nevertheless frequently considers how to help Native people beyond the prison. Prior to the December 2019 powwow that I attended, he wrote to me:

I am on a mean mission to find thirty backpacks to give to our children at our pow wow on December 7th and I’d like for you to help me. I want to use our 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. We have approval from our pow wow committee to do this. (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019).

Knowing that I would not be able to bring backpacks into the prison without

authorities' approval - I am not even allowed to bring my keys or wallet inside - I reached out to them for permission. They deterred me from securing the backpacks, telling me that there were nowhere near thirty children signed up for the powwow.

Although his visions are not always realized, Blue Bird continues to conjure vivid dreams for the future that enact Lakota gift-giving:

One of my warrior dreams is to put on a large feed and a giveaway for four days in Rapid City using the meat from four buffalo bulls. I want to do this for all tribal prisoners and all of their support systems who helped us get through the hard times here in the penitentiaries of Sioux Falls and wherever we did time. I'd like for a lot of horses to be there. After the sun goes down we could make many fires and tell stories. Our drummers would call out all the dancers. Chokecherry juice would be everywhere. (Blue Bird, 23 may 2020).

Blue Bird's "warrior dream" again draws on Lakota understandings of a warrior as someone who protects and uplifts the people (Blue Bird, 23 may 2020). He envisions a large gathering composed of humans and more-than-humans—where food and drink are plentiful—sharing stories, songs, and dance (Blue Bird, 23 may 2020). Blue Bird has also expressed awareness that although not all his dreams will come into fruition, there is still value in communicating those possibilities to others.

The mystical and ambitious thought that we could be lead singers and put a group of people together into a band and sing for people just to feel good and to add a piece of pure creativity into everything positive has my warrior attitude all full of heat and passion. This whole event will probably never happen yet it was good to convey it to you and the world out there. (Blue Bird, 14 jan. 2020).

Blue Bird describes the energetic effects that his dream has on his "warrior attitude" (Blue Bird, 14 jan. 2020). He notably composed this message prior to us collaborating on this paper. Although not all of Blue Bird's vision has been realized - at least not yet - his words and dreams indeed circulate in the world beyond the prison.

Prayer and relatedly, ceremonial sacrifice - are also forms of gift-giving -

which can help bring Native futurities into being. Blue Bird shared:

Winyan unkitawa kin maka ahomni iyuha waceunkciciyapi (We pray for our women all around the world). On this day all of the Oceti Sakowin prisoners in the main penitentiary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, made ties, burned red cedar and sage, talked, offered lots of water, sang, and prayed for all of our women. Many of them are alone raising families and struggling to buy food. Things are difficult. Bills and creditors are everywhere. Life is tough. Our Tunkan Tipi (Home of the Sacred Ones) was full of our warriors and men who sacrificed through the heat and finished each door with respect and courage. We remembered our women who have to work two jobs to make sure the needs of their families are taken care of in every way. Some of them don't have vehicles and must walk to do business. The pure love they have for their children gives them many reasons to never give up.

We commend our women for the work they do. Life can be unkind. People are in a rush to fulfill their personal needs without noticing our women who are at their breaking point because of the pressures that are constantly on them to buy clothes, cook, sew, and balance their affection to everyone who resides in their homes.

We had a good ceremony. (Blue Bird, 31 jan. 2020).

Blue Bird deeply considers the challenges that women endure world-wide. He, along with “all of the Oceti Sakowin prisoners” at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, honor women by performing Lakota ceremonial practices (Blue Bird, 31 jan. 2020). Blue Bird understands firsthand the power of people praying for him. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he shared:

Any way we can receive spiritual help and support from everywhere means that our burdens of being locked down away from our ceremonies and dances are tremendously eased. I feel the strength of the prayers and songs people make for us. They come right in through the walls and fences and approach our sacred places. I sense them almost all the time. Sometimes I hear old songs and I feel the presence of the spirits. (Blue Bird, 1 jul. 2020).

Blue Bird highlights how “spiritual help and support” from others helps to alleviate the violence of imprisonment and can come from the present and past.

Creativity and the arts are also central to Blue Bird's survival while imprisoned and can also function as a form of gift-giving. In a rare message expressing the

challenges that he has endured while imprisoned, he wrote:

I was really going to kind of just give up on the world out there. And I just said, “Hey, if I die, I die.” But then somehow or another, I came back to life. My artwork brought me back, my writing, you know what I mean? I really enjoy those things. I really enjoy those things. And so that’s kind of what I have now. I want to be able to get them off. So they’re coming your way. (Blue Bird, 10 jul. 2020).

Blue Bird expresses the vitality of the arts to his futurity (Blue Bird, 10 jul. 2020). Indeed, Blue Bird is not alone in feeling at times overwhelmed by the violence of imprisonment. After one prison powwow I attended, I waited in an empty cafeteria with a tribal liaison and volunteer while prison staff conducted a count of the people who are/were incarcerated. I observed several posters featuring statements, many with themes that might be considered simultaneously inspirational and condescending - for example, “Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try,” and “If you’re tired of starting over, stop giving up.” All of the posters notably lacked a structural analysis and instead focused on individual accountability. Evidencing the challenges of imprisonment one of the signs stated: “Speak up. Notify staff if someone is contemplating suicide. You can break the silence. You can make a difference. You can save a life.” The prominence of this sign suggests the hardships that people who are incarcerated experience and constructs those who report to authorities about someone who is considering suicide as heroes.

Within the immense challenges of the carceral context, Blue Bird views the arts as an opportunity to experience liberation - however fleeting. He wrote to me: “Freedom is made from art, music, dance, writing, speaking, staying active, and the collective energy of listening” (Blue Bird, 17 jan. 2020). The arts also aid Blue Bird in drifting (Blue Bird, 3 oct. 2020). Referring to writing on his tablet, Blue Bird says, “Texting is righteous. I can sit here and journey to other worlds real quick. We are limited with space. I can easily put out hundreds of pages” (Blue Bird, 1 nov. 2019). Blue Bird also articulates how drifting allows him “to be strategic and logical,” which challenges Eurocentric notions of the realm of imagination as being at odds

with intellect: “Whenever ‘Blue Collar Man (Long Nights)’ and ‘All Along The Watchtower’ comes into my range of listening I drift out of prison to places of freedom and I allow myself to be strategic and logical” (Blue Bird, 14 jan. 2020). Blue Bird’s statement also implies that prison - a place in which cruelty, punishment, and violence are “common sense” - is itself *illogical*.

According to Blue Bird, the arts also contribute to freedom and futurities because these practices have collective, transformative possibilities: “Words will take us far and leave thousands of positive stories for others to learn from and become better individuals” (Blue Bird, 29 may 2020). He also shared: “A lot of the writers could live their writing in their own way. So, that’s what I like to study a lot about is writing. But more so, how writing and what we do with our writing, and how that changes the world” (Blue Bird, 28 sept. 2020). For Blue Bird, these collective, transformative possibilities extend beyond humans, again combating Eurocentric, anthropocentric logics:

Writing is my second name. I know how to make things come alive in ways of color and timing. Horses motivate me. I see them in herds. The stallions and the dominant leaders compete for the right to make all of the decisions. I recognize their hierarchy. Horses are uniquely mystical and romantic. The ones who use high velocity speed are my best choices. Some are quiet and others are crazy. Horses are daring and take care of each other. They always know what to do. (Blue Bird, 4 jan. 2020).

Wakanjeja (Child or Sacred Gift)

When I first met Blue Bird in December 2017 at a powwow for Native men who are/were incarcerated and their relatives, I was seven months pregnant with my youngest child. At the powwow and with my permission, Blue Bird publicly prayed for my unborn child and me. In Lakota, “wakanjeja” meaning “child” is a compound word; “wakan” translates to “sacred” and “jeja” to “gift.” (Soto, Handboy, Supranovich and Weiss, 2019, 92).⁷ So, for the Lakota, a child is a sacred

⁷ A fluent speaker of the Lakota language, Blue Bird shared: “Wakanjeja means sacred (spiritual beings) ones.” (Blue Bird, 11 oct. 2020).

gift, and it seems to me that sacred gifts must also have sacred knowledge.

One summer evening about two months before I began writing this paper, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I went for a walk with my children, who at the time were ages three and two. During the pandemic, we have taken family walks nearly every evening as a part of our wellness routine. When my children and I stopped to rest, the youngest accidentally started playing on a red ant hill. The ants were biting her all over her feet, inside her shoes, and she was crying. I could already see the red welts forming as I quickly pulled off her shoes. After I had brushed the last ant off her foot and she was watching it scurry away, she said to it, “I love you.”

Not certain that I understood her correctly, I asked her, “You love the ant?”

She replied, “Yes.”

I said, “But it bit you.”

She reflected, “But I think it’s nice too.”

Drawing on the sacred knowledge of my sacred gift, I wonder, what it would mean to recognize and honor the sacredness of all beings—even when they have hurt us? What if this were the norm rather than the exception? What sort of society might we dream, rehearse, enact into being?

In her work on prison abolition, Gilmore also recognizes the vital and generative relationships among humans and more-than-humans (Kushner, 2019; Gilmore, Estes, Haley and Sepulveda, 2020). In the intertwined struggles for social justice and abolition, Gilmore has expressed that people must “become the mountains” (Gilmore, Estes, Haley and Sepulveda, 2020). Inspired by Blue Bird’s words, I would like to suggest that people must “become the mountains” not only as a means to secure social justice, but also to conjure the strength and sustenance to heal and persist (Gilmore, Estes, Haley and Sepulveda, 2020). I conclude this paper with a call to action from Blue Bird:

Awhile back I did a wicked full body dive playing softball and hurt myself pretty bad. I busted a couple of ribs and tore my left rotator cuff. Some days ago one of our guys steamed one into me on a guy stealing base. I

got him out and ripped up my right little finger.

I was told to see the people in the hospital. I can't. I am a self-healer.

I like using the dirt and the fine nutrients that the ants bring up from the earth where they have their homes. It is honorable to watch them come up by the thousands when I put something sweet down. They are meticulous in their abilities. They are full of creativity and wisdom. I learned the spiritual healing properties of the ants when I was a little guy from the older ones in my camp. I used to watch grandpa and grandma take the dirt and heal people.

[. . .] The healing that needs to be won't come all the way to me. I need your help. Send me the power of the ocean from the way you know it deep in your life.

This will bring me back. Healing will come across the mountains and reach me here in prison. (Blue Bird, 1 jul. 2020).

Like the 10.35 million people throughout the world who are currently incarcerated (Walmsley, 2016), Blue Bird “need[s] your help” and a growing international movement to dream, rehearse, and enact into being a world that cares for - not condemns - our most structurally vulnerable. When birds dream, we believe the caged ones dream of freedom.

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