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Theresa Klaver



Figure 1 - Genser's 'Adam' (2018) made from blue mussel shells

“And God blessed them, saying: ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.’” (Genesis 1:28, KJV).

Herein the English translation of the word ‘dominion’ has been criticized by scholars, but not before this and passages like it were used as the basis for such historical documents as the Doctrine of Discovery (Heath, 2017, p. 114). The belief in man’s right to dominion (control or ‘sovereignty’) over the natural resources of the world, and the construction of who counts as ‘man’ and therefore fully human, has underlain colonial expansion projects and exploitation of land, peoples and resources for centuries. This history continues to shape the ways that our governments relate to who has full citizenship and cultural respect within the nation state, the perception and narrative of our military industrial complexes, and who has the right to land and the resources therein (Heath, 2017, p. 113-114). This paper will look at the above quote as well as Gillian Genser’s art piece ‘Adam’ and the second portion of the Earth Charter in connection with global citizenship, colonization, and ecological justice. Through these works this essay intends to impute that understanding the role of ‘dominion’ and colonialism in relationship to military and police industrial complexes is a critical component of confronting global climate change.

In 1998 a Toronto based artist named Gillian Genser, who was known for using natural materials to create her sculptures, began working on her piece ‘Adam’ using ground

blue mussel shells bought from local fish markets (Genser, 2018). She began to experience the onset of heavy metal poisoning symptoms with which she would struggle, undiagnosed, for the next fifteen years (Genser, 2018). Mussels are filter feeders, processing and trapping toxins from their environment (Genser, 2018). The mussels she used had been filtering polluted Canadian waters, but neither Genser nor her doctors suspected them because they were 'natural materials' (Genser, 2018). Genser refers to 'Adam' as 'My Beautiful Death', as she will never recover from the effects of working with the shells (Genser, 2018).

Genser's sculpture and story are striking to me. In her attempt to create an image of the Biblical first man, his body became a representation of all the environmental degradation that threatens humans today. 'Adam', and the effects of working on him, encapsulate the ways that we have been poisoning creation, and how this in turn is poisoning us.

What does it mean to be given 'dominion' over 'the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move upon the earth'? Scholar Ellen Davis challenges the 'dominion' translation, arguing that a closer interpretation is that of 'to exercise skilled mastery over' (Davis, 2016). Even this suggests hierarchy. Of course, those who recorded what eventually became the bible could never have imagined the technologies, rapid industrialization, and socio-political climate which have led us to the precipice that is so aptly articulated in the Earth Charter as "...a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future" (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000).

Yet it is exactly the word and connotations of 'dominion' that have informed the history of North America's militaries and police, at significant cost. The U.S. and Canadian militaries and police services were originally spawned out of the need to violently suppress indigenous resistance to British colonial expansion projects rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery, which used passages within the bible as a part of the premise for these works (Heath, 2017, p. 114). Those who were not white, Christian, and willing to assimilate were necessarily constructed as non-human in order that settlers could interpret themselves as rightfully having 'dominion' over these inhabitants (Heath, 2017, p. 115). The core objectives of protection of property, capital, and exploitation of others' land and resources are deeply embedded within the fabric of our countries.

This poses a serious threat to the confrontation of global climate change. Recent research has explicated how the U.S. military is currently the single largest consumer of oil, and if the military's creation of CO₂ alone were compared to that of all the *countries* on earth, it would be the world's 47th largest polluter (Crawford, 2019). The industrial production of weapons (for the U.S. military and others'), objects that have no other purpose than to maim or kill, account for 10% of U.S. industrial output (Crawford, 2019). This is a significant consumption of fossil fuels and contribution to pollution.

Canada as a nation is also involved in the violent exploitation of natural resources. While indigenous peoples account for only 5% of the world's current population, recent studies have estimated that they support and protect 80% of global biodiversity (Sobrevila, 2008, p. 5). Yet the Canadian government for all of its formal apologies continues to use the military and mounted police to enforce the interests of corporations on indigenous lands, despite protests and resistance from indigenous peoples (Jang et al. 2019). This allows for the ongoing ecological devastation confronting all of us, poisoning lands and waterways, creating the kind of pollution that was the catalyst for Genser's health problems as she created 'Adam'.

The Earth Charter states its second tenet as "Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love," with sub-clauses "a. Accept that with the right to own,

manage, and use natural resources come the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people. b. Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good” (Earth Charter Initiative, 2000). In reflecting on this, I thought: perhaps this is the core difference between the interpretations of ‘dominion’ versus ‘skilled mastery’ – the belief that what is being acted upon must also be protected, that with power comes responsibility, both to each other and creation. Regardless of the interpretation of the *word* ‘dominion’, God also looked upon Their creation and saw that it was *good* (Genesis 1:31). Our history may cause us to associate dominion with a hierarchy that does not necessarily concern itself with the well-being of those ‘lower down’. However, ‘skilled mastery’ involving all that God saw as good suggests being given the tools and skills to live as a good thing amongst other good things – a complementary part of the ecosystem, rather than a separate entity that exploits it. In today’s world, we must necessarily recognize how our history informs our current societies, and the ways we exploit or seek to dominate both our fellow humans and the environment. Colonization is a continual project of our nation states, carried out through the military and police industrial complexes which are viewed culturally as protection from human threats, but which go unrecognized as significant contributors to climate change, the current greatest threat to humanity.

There is a necessity for the re-interpretation of ‘dominion’, as there is the necessity of radically changing our relationship with the land and the peoples who currently protect it. Without this recognition, we lose sight of the interconnected pieces of the socio-political climate that currently confront us in seeking climate justice. Like the body of Genser’s ‘Adam’, each toxic piece sits interlocking with the next. As he represents the first man, so might he represent the last.

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