A mirrored and bloated image of Chicago's industrialized southside (c. 1947) "taped" over a dimmed image of mountains.

REINTERPRETATION: MATT KEITH
IMAGES: PUBLIC DOMAIN / UNSPLASH

Possessed by the Land: An Interview with Deanna Zantingh and Willie James Jennings

DEANNA ZANTINGH is keeper of the learning circle at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre in Beausejour, Manitoba, Treaty 1.

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We live in a world that views land as something to be possessed, something that exists separately from our lives. For Deanna Zantingh and Willie James Jennings, such a view of land is theologically dangerous and impacts not only our relationship to the Creator, but all of creation, including other peoples. Coeditor Jeff Friesen spoke with the two of them to discuss this critical theological challenge and what it means for future engagements with Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.

JEFF: Both of you are attempting to actively name a "distorted social imagination" that Christianity presently inhabits, one that manifests itself in the separation of peoples from each other and the land. In the simplest of terms, can you say how we have arrived at this place?

DEANNA: For me, it begins with the emergence of capitalism as the dominant socio-political structure across the planet. It's this form of economic relations that fuels the view of land as a particular entity separate from our own being. It forces us to view it as a commodity. We no longer see land as something connected to what it means to be human. It's been commodified.

WILLIE: I agree. The way I try to begin is by speaking of greed and power. How did Christians react to what we imprecisely call the "age of discovery" where people came to a new land only to discover and acquire unanticipated power in those new places? Christianity has never done well when it comes into unanticipated power. We thrive as a persecuted minority. But we really struggle when we have power. The power and wealth the "New World" represented meant that Christians found themselves doing things with the creation that they had never done before. They saw the commodified potential of the land and capitalized on it. But this in turn absolutely destroyed their own understanding of themselves as creatures of that creation. I think that's really where it begins. When the church encountered the power and potential of this new land, the world, the *entire* world, was commodified.

DEANNA: This strips humanity of the knowledge of how to live in the land in a good way. What we learn through the biblical traditions is that land is a gift. But it's a gift that has conditions that necessitates care. We see a totally different view of land take root throughout the colonial project. With no acknowledgement of covenant, land and humanity both become unbounded.

WILLIE: That's exactly right. The tragedy arising through this is that we have developed a possessive understanding of land. This is one reason why it is so difficult for non-Indigenous people to understand Indigenous ways of living and connecting with land and animals. It's why this call to "respect Indigenous spirituality" from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is so important. We have a possessive vision of creation where we believe that the land has to belong to someone. That narrow way of understanding possession is at the root of the problem. And for us to then Christianize this vision is the deepest sadness. We Christianized

this vision by interpreting the land as a gift given to Euro-Christian Settlers by God; a gift to redeem the native and bring the land to developmental maturity. A more proper Christian vision of creation is to see that it's not what land we possess, it's what land we are possessed by. This is something we can relearn from our Indigenous friends. I think it's precisely that inability to see our connectedness to land that is the deepest sadness resulting from the legacy of this commodified vision of creation.

DEANNA: That's one of the things I've really appreciated about Willie's work – the understanding of how this vision of disconnection between land and body becomes Christianized. Whenever I explain it, I borrow Willie's story of Zurara, the record keeper of Prince Henry (1394–1460) charged with detailing the events of a slave auction occurring on Portuguese soil. Zurara's words capture the ritualized and Christian nature of the slave auction. Henry gave a tithe to the Church to give thanks for the wealth acquired, young slave boys were given to local churches, divine providence was invoked, and the claim was made that all was ultimately being done for the salvation of the "heathen." This separation of black bodies from their traditional lands not only marks a turn to commodification... it's a Christian commodification. And the same logics are at work today. The disconnection, distortion, and dehumanization enacted by the dominant almost always occurs alongside the understanding that it is in someone else's best interest. It's astounding. The Christian vision that should have objected loudly to this process comes to exist and work within it unquestioningly. Willie's right – it's not only poor vision, it's the deepest sadness.

JEFF: How is this sadness manifesting itself?

WILLIE: Two things. First, we are geographically adrift. What that means is that our moral sensibilities have no geographical anchor. We can have a church building a block away from intense suffering and we don't see our connection to whatever that is or whoever that is. Our imaginations have been trained to think only inside our borders and property lines, and this is affecting our ability to relate to others. We don't understand how important space is for us and our theological practices. Second, there is no awareness, no sense of the history or sorrow of this transformation of God's plan for creation, and this is further disconnecting us from the land we are possessed by. Animals and plants are becoming extinct every day, and we don't sense it, we don't feel it, we don't mourn it. Much of Christian thought is caught in this unprecedented social distortion that is affecting our capacity to come to grips with the transformation of the world.

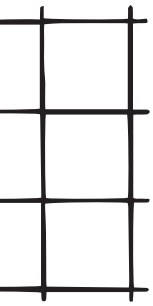
DEANNA: Lee Maracle, a Stó:lō poet, says "How you treat the earth is how you treat women." I think you can extend it far beyond that. In Canada we are undergoing an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, and we have calls out for inquests into youth suicides in reserve communities. When you look at mental health across Canada and the U.S., it's a crisis entangled with our rootlessness. It all comes back to this kind of deep disconnection.

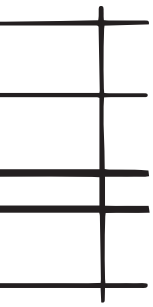
JEFF: So we find ourselves in this crisis of rootlessness, which has been normalized to a great extent. I like the way you put it, Willie, in your work *The Christian Imagination* (Yale, 2011) when you say, "One must look more deliberatively at the soil in which the modern theological imagination grew and where it continues to find its deeper social nutrients" when attempting to respond to these crises. Looking at our soil today, what are some of the theological possibilities beginning to sprout?

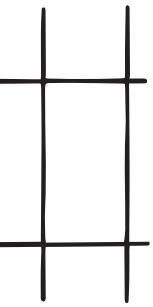
WILLIE: Regarding the soil that churches are possessed by, we ought to do three basic things. First, we must better understand the history of the land on which we stand. What was here before we arrived? Second, ask why are we here in this specific place – not just in economic terms, but in theological terms as well. What is God saying to us about what it means to be in this place? And third, ask how can we together spread our bodies in this place as if we are seed? How might we feel fully and materially touched by the earth in this place? Collaborating with Indigenous communities on these questions would prove helpful. We could have Indigenous elders lead us through these questions in good ways. There are tremendous benefits that are on tap for us when we try to do that kind of work together. I would love to see more churches decide to start asking some questions of where we live, why we live there, where we should live, and how to connect in the community. How do we actually come to see ourselves as connected and in kinship with the creatures that inhabit this place where we are?

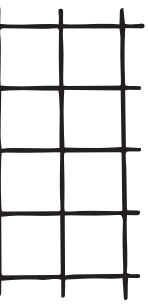
Grids in four American cities.

DATA: THEGREATAMERICANGRID.COM









DEANNA: One impact colonialism has had on Indigenous communities is that you either became Christian or you were counted as other. There was no acknowledgment of prior spiritual practices. No questions were asked about what kind of knowledge one had about God, or the world, or even what it means to be human. I think this is something that's catching up to us now, and it's not unrelated to these topics. It has disconnected ourselves from each other. You can say what you want about the challenges we face today in our society, about religion, or politics, or whatever. All I see are humans crying out for more embodied ways of coming together. That's also a legacy of this distorted social imagination that Christianity presently inhabits. Being separate from one another and separate from the earth is negatively affecting us in countless ways. For me, friendship with Indigenous people has named a journey of transformation that, at times, is very difficult and, at other times, rewarding. And as much work as friendships require of us, I think it's one of the only ways we can start to get to some of the roots of the various difficulties we currently face.

JEFF: One of my concerns with all this is that we start essentializing rural experience where the only way we can connect to the land is by leaving urban areas. Even looking at the metaphors that we are using, we're talking about soil, seed, and roots. We're not talking about concrete, or the streets – things that profoundly shape the soil on which many people today stand. What are some of the possible connections to land we may find in urban places?

WILLIE: It comes back to the three questions I talked about earlier. When churches are to look at the land on which they stand, the questions and people they encounter will change from place to place. I want to see all lands as sites for re-connectivity. For me that's the crucial matter as I talk about our interaction with real estate agents, land developers, and city planners as the church. I'm only now understanding and doing a lot more reading about the small decisions that go into the way that neighbourhoods are actually built – where houses are situated, the size of streets, lack of sidewalks, or the purpose of sidewalks. I'm realizing how important all those decisions are theologically. We spend so much time thinking about what a church building should show the community. There's not enough time spent thinking about a theology that builds the environment in which that building rests. Given the profoundly racially divided realities we find ourselves living in, you realize that even with the wonderful wishes and great desires among people of good will, if the geography has been shaped to create segregated corporate communities, re-connectivity will be hindered. Even with your best hopes and efforts, if the geography is working against you, over time it will wear you down. This is just as true in urban areas as it is in rural ones. We have to do a much better job at thinking theologically about land – something we see happening well among many Indigenous peoples.

DEANNA: A friend of mine, Harley Eagle (Dakota), has done a lot of antiracism work here in Winnipeg and now on the west coast. He told me once that the trauma that many Indigenous people deal with is the trauma that Settlers brought with them. It took me a long time to understand what that meant, and probably in a lot of ways I'm still learning to understand. But as Willie is talking about the reshaping of space as a commodity, I see how this sharing of trauma is geographically configured. We cut the land into blocks because then you can give those away to certain people as property rights in a clear and concise grid system. This simplified geography cuts us off from one another. I'm a beneficiary of that system. This has really pushed me to think more seriously about who really has the most healing to do. In Canada, I think there still is this prevalent attitude that Indigenous people need all these healing programs. And don't get me wrong, there is a lot of healing needed. But when I look at where these issues stem from, it's a massive need for healing across the board because our issues are not separate. We are so connected. So I guess I'm all for creating more spaces for our traditions, practices, and our histories to come into dialogue. But land must play a part in this. I think it's precisely the geographical separation, seen in things like the rural grid system, or the ways in which we structure our neighbourhoods, that prevents us from entering into the kind of relationship that helps us see the diseased social imagination we find ourselves in. I think Willie says it's a theological mistake so wide that it's expanded to cover the horizon of the journey – it's everywhere. But once you see it, you can't look away. And so we must work together to help one another catch this more compelling, life-giving, and healing vision of what it means to be human.