Fuck your Culture: Nudes in Four Landscapes

Adam Bobette

Can any mountains, any continent, withstand such waste?

—Charles Darwin, 19 March 1835, on the HMS Beagle

ONTARIO

I grew up in southern Ontario's vast deciduous forest. One side of my house faced down a hill into massive swampland, the other side a glacial ridge that had been turned into a ski resort. Everywhere in between were suburban housing tracts: clover leafs, four-way-stops, and cul-de-sacs with names like Forest Hills and Acorn Lanes. Most were built during the thirty-year slow leak away from urban cores, the same story as just about everywhere in rural North America: the deindustrialization of resource-based economies. Simultaneously there was the timid inching away from the countryside to urban peripheries as farming was industrialized and small operations evacuated. Many of the forests I knew intimately were created in this process; they were tree farms of conifers planted in grid patterns like Manhattan streets. Their repetitive form and vast scale expressed their industrial origins. The forest grids abutted cul-de-sacs, uncultivated bits, the state spaces of parks and reserves, patches that uneasily came together in an assemblage of memory.

As teenagers we were drawn to the older, wilder forests vast enough we could escape our obligations in them. By returning to them on weekends to camp and on weekday evenings until sunset drove us home we would slowly domesticate them by bringing their wildness into us. We went back to the same dead tree to dive our heels into its rotting flesh, to the same bank of a creek to pick its stones and toss them into the forest. We wanted the dense red sound of rock hitting wood. There was also the abandoned tree house made of a couple of moldy boards on which we would talk or lie down and hear the leaves. We familiarized ourselves with the contours of the forest by slowly venturing off our regular pathways, taking in new slices, driven by boredom or special occasions like showing off to new friends.



*Cover of *The Sun*, June 11, 2015*

This work of domestication was ongoing, sometimes through surprising strategies. Nick, a friend, lived a few miles down the road from me. Our houses were connected by the same train track so we would often walk along it to meet each other, which took about an hour. It was a corridor with one wall of forest, the other of concrete separating a suburb. We would talk while rhythmically stepping on every second or third railroad pile or trying to balance along the steel track. One afternoon my friend told me a story that happened a few days earlier. He was nervously confiding in me but also trying to boast. We could speak with a tentative honesty about fragile things, groping through the differences between shame, pride, and humor. A few days before, he told me, he had been wandering alone in the woods. As was customary, he was listening to very loud music, his mind barely in the landscape. Instead, he was daydreaming, thinking about school, about the comics he was drawing that involved lots of olives. Then his batteries died and his mind was back in the forest, its sounds of broken branches and rustled leaves. He was overcome by the sense of solitude and openness, or a strange sense of being in public while absolutely private. It was summer, bright and hot. He sunk into it. He undid his pants, still unsure of himself, worried that someone might appear. His hearing heightened to every crack and rustle. He grabbed himself, slowly oscillating between anonymity and the fear of reprisal, the intrusion of a stranger, until the forest disappeared again and he was alone in his pleasure. He came on the forest floor. Quickly the room of branches and patterned birdcalls returned. In the calm, and half naked, the busy life of the forest floor snapped into focus. The world of ants and mushrooms. The texture of bark on the hand. He scanned the background once more for onlookers, with a sense of guilt, and inseparable from that, exuberance. In the silence of the afternoon he pulled his pants up, exhaled, and slowly continued walking.

MT KINABALU

In June 2015, a group of Western tourists went hiking up Mt Kinabalu in Malaysian Borneo, Southeast Asia's highest peak. When they arrived at the summit they took their clothes off, then took a group photo. Their backs turned to the camera, their fronts facing the valley below. A few weeks later an earthquake struck the mountain. Guides and hikers were killed, but none of the tourists. During the relief efforts the photos of the Western tourists were leaked and it was speculated that there was a link between their nudity and the earthquake. The minister of tourism in Sabah, the region of Kinabalu, suggested their indiscretions had angered the gods of the mountain. People wanted vengeance, that they be tried in local courts. The Malaysian police caught the tourists as they were trying to flee the country.

They went to trial soon afterward amidst a media storm in Malaysia and abroad. The cover of the British tabloid The Sun read: "Your Boobs have Angered Mountain Gods." Ronny Cham, a British-trained Malaysian barrister, practicing in Sabah since the early 1980s, defended them. He pressed them to plead guilty or face a drawn-out trial of six months to two years and an extended stay in prison without bail. They were fined a little over $1000 USD each, spent a few nights in jail, then were deported. Cham is a born-again Christian and when I asked him about the links between nudity and the earthquake he said: "I can tell you what

the Bible says about earthquakes, but this is something nobody is interested in. However, could it have happened if it was not God who had moved the foundation of the earth and the heavens? Mount Kinabalu was shaken, shattered, bruised!"

In the middle of this, Emil Kaminski appeared on the scene. He is a wayward, international troll with pretensions as a cultural critic and 10,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel. His videos are of his buddies and him traveling around the world showcasing their irreverence. They move with the desultory air of nineteenth-century colonials cross-pollinated with Jackass machismo and faux-hawk rebellion. On his Facebook and YouTube pages he intervened in the unfolding of the accusations against the tourists by posting nude photos of himself on mountains he claimed were Kinabalu, though he was never there, as if he felt a duty to intervene. He made commentary videos insulting the "stupidity" of Malaysians, slashing their "superstitions" with the pride and self-righteousness of a Richard Dawkins. In one, he stated, "Fuck your culture!" claiming they did not know anything about plate tectonics, nor that gods no longer have agency in our world. It was a successful trolling campaign that attracted thousands of frustrated comments and threats of violence from Malaysians on his Facebook page. He had successfully amped his fame and by accident broadened the reach of the story of the nude photos in the press, which, for the most part, mistook that Kaminski was actually in the photos and part of the group that stripped.



Hikers stripping on Mt. Kinabalu for a photograph

Five days after the earthquake he posted a manipulated photo of himself on his Facebook page. He was shirtless with camouflage shorts and a gun in each hand. His arms were spread and he stood in front of a valley. Photoshopped flames erupted in the foreground while fighter jets crashed in the back and Godzilla peeked over the horizon.

In the early 1990s the French sociologist and anthropologist of science Bruno Latour published We Have Never Been Modern. Its central argument is that Western modernity was founded on the idea that there is a fundamental distinction in kind between nature and society. He called this the "modern Constitution." This Constitution was drafted in the halls and backrooms of states but also circulated through scientific

laboratories. So thoroughly did it operate, according to him, that, on the one hand, science saw itself as accessing the natural world and bringing back its results to the human world, while, on the other, politics concerned itself with the operations of human beings and the so-called social. The two were never to mix. This Constitution underpinned the very distinction we often hold between 'nature' and 'culture'. His contribution was to point out how false this distinction has been. That while the Constitution has been handed down over generations of sociologists, politicians, and scientists, that it is folded up in their wallets with their family photos, it never adequately described reality. Instead, science and politics have produced all sorts of hybrids of nature and culture, unholy mixtures, Frankensteins. That has been the real work of the modern Constitution, claiming the separation of the spheres, policing them, while at the same time producing hybrid mixtures of nature-cultures. It just cannot recognize them because it does not know how to look for them or talk about them.

Kaminski is one of the police of the modern Constitution, or, perhaps better, its rent-a-cop. Of course, he says, the causal chain between bared naked bodies, gods, and plate tectonics is an illusion. It just does not fit the modern Constitution. Nature is on one side, with its own peculiar laws and culture is on the other. Never shall they mix. He arrived to clear away all the bad mixtures, to correctly align causal chains, to separate earth systems from religion, from social acts. And it is no surprise this was a violent act. The enforcement of the modern Constitution is often an act of denudation, of exposure, of baring it all. This is a modern conception of truth, that truth is nudity and that once we expose nature for what it actually is, we will all agree because it will be in plain sight. There will be no basis for disagreement because truth as nudity is indisputable, unless, as Kaminski says, you are an idiot.

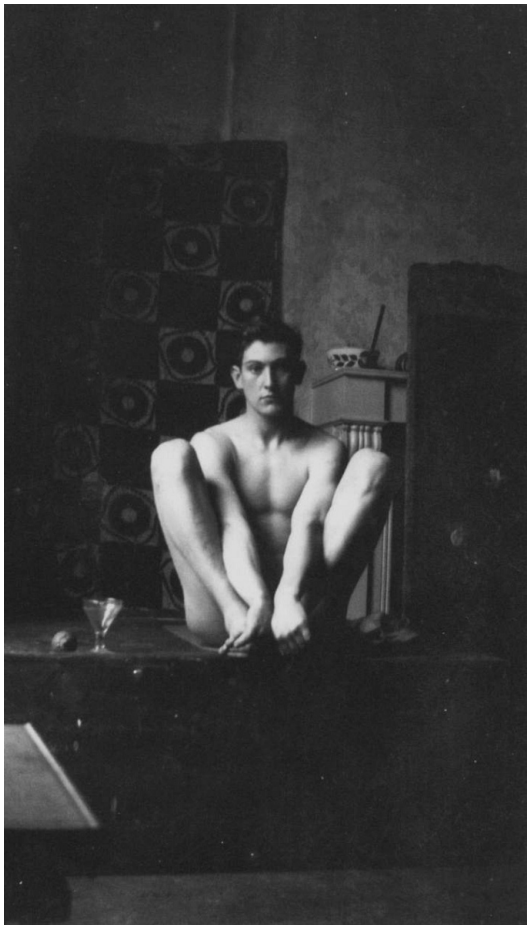
But the modern Constitution does not actually work like this. Instead, it creates more beguiling creatures of nature that refuse to be exposed, bared, nude. Nature forms deep alliances between unlike things. This is the queer Darwin. Darwin on the HMS Beagle, of The Origin of Species, Darwin with his worms late in life: a nature that is over productive of mixtures, not fixed forms. A nature of ever more complex agencies in which taxonomies are convenient fictions that soon become obsolete tales and begin to sound like fantasy.

To see in a way outside of the modern Constitution, I suggest we start thinking more like an earthquake. This will also nudge us understanding these four vignettes of nudity in nature.

Kinabalu is a granite pluton, a cooled magma mass pushed up through the crust. It is seismically active because of its position (as with all of Borneo) on the Sunda plate. A stressful plate to be. From the east, the Philippine plate is diving underneath Sunda, pushing it upward and to the west. From the south, the Molucca and Banda plates push it to the north. To the southwest, the massive Indo-Australian plate is also pushing it north. These are like vises on all sides of the Sunda plate, constantly cranking tighter. When it crosses a threshold of pressure, torsions and slippages shoot through the plate mass. Rocks are just really slow liquids. Shift your timescale and the whole crust of the planet is oceanic. Change your sensitivity to that of a seismograph and you will feel that the entire mass is heaving with waves. This is what an earthquake

is, rocks behaving as waves. And like the ocean, it is happening all the time but sometimes they get bigger. That is an earthquake, a big wave traveling along a grain of rock like it is wood. Kinabalu is one of these slow-motion waves that sometimes other waves crash into it and budge it along a little further.

The long colonial presence on Kinabalu has urbanized its flanks, cut in roads, camp sites, connected it to metropolises, sent a steady stream of observations and packages of its flora and fauna. Pre-colonial high-altitude excursions seem rare among indigenous and early Chinese settlers. The taste for high altitudes was a particularly nineteenth-century European invention. While mountains have long played a role in the imaginary of many traditions, it was not (with few exceptions) until the cosmological crisis of deep time and a waning Christianity that people began to climb mountains to see what was on top.[1] In line with this, the first recorded European expeditions to the summits of Kinabalu left in their wake a topographical nomenclature of officers, capitalists, and royalty: Low's Peak, King George Peak, Victoria Peak, St. John's Peak. Naturalist and colonial administrator Sir Hugh Low and consul in Brunei Sir Spencer St. John made several expeditions to the summit for the view and to collect plant and insect specimens. Between 1850 and 1950 there were at least fifty-three major, recorded expeditions by colonials from Britain, Holland, Japan, the United States, and Denmark. This does not count purely touristic or minor excursions, nor the hundreds of tourists every year in the later part of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fifty excursions is a drastic understatement.



George Mallory photographed by Duncan Grant

1
Robert Macfarlane, Mountains of the Mind: History of a Fascination (London: Granta Books, 2003).

Each expedition would bring back substantial specimen collections. For instance, in 1887 John Whitehead collected 300 birds. G.D. and H.A. Havilland in 1892, at least 197 plant species. C.M. Enriquez in 1925, 218 butterflies, 140 birds, 17 small mammals, uncounted mosses, insects, and spiders. In 1904 Goss and Dodge, at least 47 animal skins. Gibbs and Maxwell in 1910, collected 1000 plants. Clemens and Topping in 1915, at least 255 orchids and ferns. In 1933, Carr, 700 plants; Griswold 93 birds in 1937. And this total of 2967 specimens is a cursory and likewise substantially understated survey.[2] Each expedition carried off significant numbers of plants and animals, and sent them back to botanical gardens, museums, and university departments around the globe.

This cosmopolitanism of Kinabalu has reconfigured the ecology of the mountain itself. As tourists wore circulation paths into its slopes they created corridors for lowland wildlife to inhabit higher altitudes. For instance, rats have infiltrated the upper reaches. One 1969 expedition narrated by a Cambridge naturalist encountered this new cosmopolitanism:

> *Though cold, we slept well. I was disturbed in the early part of the night by a rat, investigating my head. It snuffled and walked over me for some time, before giving the back of my neck an exploratory nip; my sharp reaction frightened it off for good. This was the only one of its kind that we encountered during the whole trip, although previous visitors have been plagued by them.*[3]

Chickens have also long played roles in the tricky reversals of Kinabalu. Some people responded to the nude tourists by saying that local villages would have to sacrifice chickens to the mountain gods for forgiveness. Kaminski considered this proof of Sabah's backwardness. In the histories of expeditions it was often repeated that Europeans had to give chickens to their guides for payment to the mountain spirits. An academic excursion in the 1960s raised a collective eyebrow and considered the possibility they were being scammed. No one had seen any of these ritual slaughters. What if they were keeping them for subsistence? A payment to the gods is an excellent additional cost that Europeans respectful of 'ancient ways' would find hard to refuse.

The excursions and souvenirs of colonial visitors were broadly in the name of revealing the mechanisms of nature. As they exposed it they also reformatted the conditions for new and unexpected kinds of mixtures. The epistemological violence of Kaminski's nude body frantically waving the modern Constitution is one retrograde response to this. When the vices of plate tectonics squeeze they exacerbate these mixtures and encounters that no denudation can overcome. A rat follows on your heels, bites you on the neck, and eats your dinner. A chicken dupes you. Your nude body suddenly becomes responsible for an earthquake. It begins to make sense retroactively. The earthquake mangles the orderly, linear progression of time, it loops into the past and situates those nude bodies at its origin. And it duped Kaminski. The earthquake is smarter than he.

I wish Kaminski were charged. If only he were brought to court so Kinabalu could testify against him. I wish the tourists had to pay in chickens. Because they caused the earthquake. This is the genius of plate tectonics.

2
Margaret Datin Luping, Chin Wen, and E. Richard Dingley, Kinabalu, Summit of Borneo (Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Society, 1978), 51–53.

3
Jeremy Michael Bayliss Smith, "Cambridge Kinabalu Expedition," Sabah Society Journal V, no. 1 (October 1969): 41.

EVEREST

George Mallory's body was found in 1999, seventy-five years after his death. A team on their way to Everest's summit spotted it. He was face down, his skull buried in rock. His back was exposed, large and rounded, still fleshy, and shinning white. They said he looked and felt like marble. His clothes were shredded. The flesh on his legs gone, exposing only bones with fractures, splintered from his fall. Concealed and exposed by the mountain's erratic but incessant patterns of snow, sun, wind; his body was slowly eroding like the mountain itself. Mallory's nudity was a form of slow decay. He was redistributed and recirculated around the planet. According to the philosophy of erosion, the world is a recirculating material, entering into ever-new arrangements and combinations. Every object, even our own bodies, are utterances of global processes of material mixtures. While each and every object adds something new to the world and a novel condition for the production of even more new objects. Mallory's body is now Everest, as nude as the eroding mountain. Yet, it is eroding over the Himalayas into the Gobi. It is filling the dusty, particulate air of Beijing and the dust mask of a woman riding a scooter through its streets.

In a letter from much earlier in his life to his father, Mallory wrote: "My generation grew up with a disgust for the appearances of civilization so intense that it was an ever present spiritual discomfort, a sort of malaise that made us positively unhappy. It wasn't that we simply criticized evils as we saw them and supported movements of reform; we felt such an overwhelming sense of incalculable evil that we were helplessly unhappy."[4] Is the mountain anti-civilization? Maybe we can tell this story in a different way than "the mountain is retreat or escape" and put it right back in the heart of society while occupying a limit internal to it. A limit of organization and dissolution. The limit of erosion.

When he was young, Mallory wrote: "I am deeply interested in my nude self." In a photograph that Duncan Grant took of Mallory, just out of Cambridge, he is nude and climbing an imaginary surface. It is one of a series that Grant sent to John Maynard Keynes, his occasional lover. He also knew Keynes would be interested in the beautiful young nude climbing. His body the shape of the mountain in absentia. A flesh diagram. What is more, Grant transported Mallory's figure onto screens, those indoor partitions you change behind, often covered with landscapes, which interiorize the exterior, while you denude yourself, to change your clothes.

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

The films were destroyed, it is true, in a fire caused by an earthquake. Apparently, they were of Lillian and Charles Richter hiking naked in the valley. Long reels of walking. Rucksacks, no clothes. Scrub. They had spent a lot of time in the new nudist camps that had emerged in the valley in the 1930s, imports of the German Nacktkultur [nude culture]: vegetarianism and fresh air. Purity in the weather. Some early films were set in the camps, portraying the nudists cutting wood, riding bikes, cooking dinner. There is no sign of Richter, but he was often there.

He is better known for developing the standard scale (bearing his name)

4
Quoted in: Wade Davis, Into the Silence: the Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest (London: Bodley Head, 2011), 175.

that calculated the magnitude of an earthquake no matter its distance from the seismograph. Like most universal measures, it was a technique of translation: it made marks on the seismograph comparable and assigned them universal values in magnitudes. All earthquakes could be compared according to how they registered on the scale.

Before, an earthquake was understood by the way it was felt and the traces it left in broken buildings and landscapes. In Europe and the colonies, individuals would submit to newspapers their reports of earthquakes, how long they were, what they felt like, where they were. There was a whole vocabulary for sensations of trembling. These were collated by scientists and reconstructed into accounts of movements of the earth. The early seismic maps of Switzerland for instance, were compiled primarily from witness accounts drawn across the countryside by wandering scientists. Bodily experience began to wane from seismology under the dual pressures of expertise and accuracy. They reinforced each other in such a way that only experts could guarantee accuracy. The personal accounts of people were considered too singular, eccentric, and prone to error. Though we should keep in mind that our maps of planetary fault lines and plate boundaries are based on data drawn from this period before accuracy became the ruling ideology of science. What we now see as the objective space of a map of plate tectonics is a post-facto assemblage of dispersed bodily sensations.

Richter's scale was an additional stage in this long process toward universal standards of measurement that removed the sensate flesh from its contact with the ground. He brought the modern Constitution to the San Fernando Valley.

How could he build a tool that attacked the sensing body while insisting on his own nudist adventures, to bear it all for the valley while deeply distrusting the body as an organ of knowledge and experience? It is as if Richter's nudism was a way to trivialize the body, to free it of its labor. Or, to allow it a simple kind of nudity, one that is defined negatively, as unchained, unburdened with the necessity to sense. Or, nudism as purity in the sense of the Garden before the fall, the nude which is not actually nude in a landscape because there is no knowledge of nudity. It is nudity beyond all flesh, before flesh becomes endowed with the possibility of any 'exposure' or 'revealing'. This is nudity without world to intervene and mangle it.

Getting naked in a landscape occurs in this state between exposure as vulnerability and exposure as violence. Exposure as violence is driven by a desire for opening and revealing, to create a world where everything is there to be seen, its machinations and inner workings all laid out, as if the world could become transparent. Nested in this is a desire for communication, to break down the distance between us and the world, for knowledge to act as a form of unification that would bridge an essential loneliness. Knowledge as nudity is seeking a form of communion, a kind of togetherness, a touch or embrace with the world.

Author's Bio

Adam Bobbette is a geographer and research fellow in the New Earth Histories research program, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Organized by

THE FACTORY CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTRE

Co-funded by

SAM | Fund for Arts and Ecology

MAIIAM CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

Supported by

SELASAR SUNARYO art space

graycenter FOR ARTS AND INQUIRY