

How Sweet the Ground: The Metaphysical Vision of Michael Marker

Samuel D. Rocha
University of British Columbia
sam.rocha@ubc.ca

Abstract

Through this essay, Rocha seeks to describe and honour Michael Marker's signature notion of the "metaphysical demand" within his more well-known historical and anthropological work on the agentic notion of place. The essay begins by noting the difficulty of this essay due to the "unwritability" of Marker, in allusion to Melville's character, Bartleby, and Garcia Marquez's sense of Latin America's solitude. Then, after hermeneutic clarifications that resist reading this essay as a eulogy, the essay proceeds biographically reaching the intimate friendship between Rocha and Marker. These biographical confessions lead to Marker's ideas, rooted in (and progressing from) Vine Deloria Jr's critical understanding of the Indigenous philosophy of space, which proceed into a record of correspondence where Marker shares his idea of the metaphysical demand. The essay closes in a series of impressionistic anecdotes that contain key elements in Marker's approach to his life and thought. A key element is Marker's practice as a folk musician and his collaborative work with the author in the improvised composition of a track on claw-hammer and bluegrass banjo. From these memorial movements, Marker's notion of the metaphysical demand of place, a voice that speaks through a calcified and layered modern reality, is left unfinished, as he left it, to be heard and continued in work to follow.

"I am trying to use the word metaphysics as a kind of pry tool to open up some folds in notions of ontology and reality." (Michael Marker, personal correspondence, December 7, 2016)

In Herman Melville's classic short story, *Bartleby, The Scribner*, the narrator describes the protagonist, Bartleby, a refusing copyist, as an unwritable person. "While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life," the narrator confides, "of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done." "Bartleby," his former employer observes, "was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small."

The life and death of Bartleby challenge and even irritate the narrator and reader. These provocations are often projections, mirroring the petty faults of the observer, leaving Bartleby untouched and even alone. The tragic solitude of Melville's Bartleby is reminiscent of the cultural solitude of Latin America, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez described it in his 1982 Nobel Lecture, "The Solitude of Latin America":

Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.

The “unbridled reality” of Bartleby’s refusals—his refrain “I would prefer not to” is the anthem of this story—is simply unbelievable to the narrator and the reader often suffers from the same lack of faith. All the while, Bartlebys, like Marquez’ description of Latin America, suffer from this “lack of conventional means to render our lives believable.” This is the crime that exiles Bartleby into a prison cell where he expires into freedom. After all this has taken place, the narrator begins his retrospective story noting the sheer unwritability of Bartleby. His solitude defies biography and offers, in a Quixotic turn, everlasting life.

I have never met a person who so closely fit Melville’s iconic character as my friend Michael Marker. He is the most unwritable person I have known personally. As I approached writing this essay, I initially tried to bracket parts from the whole of his life, but the blessing of knowing him well enough to be able to pick things out gave me a deeper sense of responsibility to attempt the impossible and write about an unwritable person. Michael’s unwritability was not a one-dimensional literary triumph or conceit; it carried a burdensome sense of solitude created by a struggle to render his own life believable.

I should make it clear that Melville’s short story was not a eulogy. It was a lesson or perhaps a character study. Garcia Marquez’s message was not a lament but a declaration and proclamation. I cannot deny the sadness and pain that veils this writing—the tears that cloud my eyes—but I must also insist that this essay is not written to eulogize anyone. My aim here is neither therapeutic nor spiritual. What I wish to accomplish is modest in scope but distinct from the processes of my personal grief. I hope to offer the reader a glimpse of a particular vision that I believe Michael continues to illuminate and reveal through his life and work, a vision he shared with me with enough frequency and directness to feel confident in sharing it here as being true and real. Much of this vision was shared in ways and through shapes that could seem to be quite indirect. They were not literal nor were they symbolic in any overly mystical sense. But they were practical in the sense that they emerged in various convivial sites of intellectual and artistic work and they had a deep sense of reverence and mystery.

My method for this writing must be personal, then, for reasons that are quite different from the reasons of mourning. One reason Bartleby’s employer could not narrate his life was principally because he only knew him professionally, not personally. Bartleby in many ways withheld this from him, even as he made his home in the employer’s office, even as he could even be read as trying to share his life by refusing professionalization. Michael and I kept an initial professional distance as well. He knew that I knew he was an accomplished banjo player; and he knew I was a guitarist. Once, months after my arrival, whilst playing music for a department holiday party in my first year, he gave me a knowing smile.

My most clear memory came a bit earlier, at my first department meeting, where Michael shared a story of an elder who taught him something along the lines of “sometimes, you have to know when to die.” I believe Michael used a dying plant nearby in the room, outside of my field of vision, to make his point clear. I don’t recall the details as clearly as I wish I could, but the message stayed with me and it marked Michael to me as a serious person. I had introduced myself to the new department earlier, disclosing that I did not know where I should be buried, but it might be here, in Vancouver, and I recall Michael smiling at that. I took his lesson to

follow, at that same meeting, in that same spirit. His point was that it is not always hopeless for things to come to an end; there can be an honorable way in death as much as there is one in life. To recall these early encounters today, after his earthly passing, presents obstacles to our understanding, but, again, I beg my reader to focus on Michael's vision.

For years thereafter we played cat and mouse, sometimes with students relaying implied or invented messages between our ongoing classes. Michael eventually confided some of his reasons for this initial distance and I do not care to disclose them here. He had his reasons. When our department moved into a new building, there was a faculty retreat expressing concerns about the aesthetic condition of the new office spaces. Out of that discussion emerged the "Art Committee." I believe this committee was initially composed of Michael and myself, along with Pierre Walter and Jude Walker, but I could be mistaken. We held our first meeting at Koerner's Pub and Michael and I soon disclosed our primary motivations for joining the committee: to prevent the department from disgracing art as an exercise in decoration and adornment. The purpose of the committee was to do nothing.

The Art Committee held a few meetings, as I recall, and soon our purpose became entirely social. By that point, Michael and I had gingerly begun putting our cards on the table and we found striking and remarkable points of overlap, with some generational differences. All of this was mostly loose friendly banter until one summer afternoon when we agreed to meet at the St. John's College quad with our guitars. I brought my Martin 000-17sm and Michael had an off-brand steel-string acoustic in an open tuning. I do not recall if he brought his banjo on that day. We bounced cover tunes off one another, spirituals and protests songs, before he shared with me one of his own compositions. I was not totally surprised at his facility on the guitar; it is common for banjo and mandolin players to be fine guitar pickers. When I shared my song, "Samuel's Psalm," our mood changed and time stood still. Michael's accompaniment was one of the finest and most sensitive musical experiences of my life. Every part of it exuded a kind of intelligence and knowing born of pure intuition. The final notes lingered in the sun-kissed air, mixing with bird song, and tears lightly-moistened the edges of our eyes. We smiled and laughed and shook our heads. It was then and there that I finally grasped the depth of his soul and we became spiritual brothers.

From that point forward we were in almost constant contact, often through email correspondence and throughout our courses. He made several visits to my classes and we often spoke of one another directly to our students. There was a lot of catching up to do for me and Michael helped me with piles of stories and photos and more.

Michael had serious bona fides as a folk musician and banjoist, with residencies across the USA and the United Kingdom, most notably with Pete Seeger. He was a fine lyricist and poet. He was able to play the traditional claw-hammer technique as readily as the more refined bluegrass style. He also spoke fluent Spanish and had a vast knowledge and affection for Latin American folklore and culture, especially South America and the country of Bolivia. He was also an experienced adventurer and outdoorsman who could pilot or fix a bush plane as readily as any bicycle. Michael had training in Lutheran theology and a deep and critical appreciation for

Christianity, not unlike his inspiration, Vine Deloria Jr. He was a photographer as well and, of course, an anthropologist and historian of education.

At the heart of his unwritability, however, was his sense of his own Indigeneity. He was Arapaho, from his mother. He possessed what seemed to be a complete understanding of American continental history, North to South, from pre-Columbian to Conquest to Colonization, with specialized knowledge in the history of the American Plains Indians. His entry into education was through Indigenous tribal education in Alaska and Washington. This is what brought him to UBC to seek a PhD in the department where he would eventually become faculty. Much of his work in the field took place amidst the Lummi people, and his knowledge of Coast Salish languages and traditions inspired many, including Metis, Squamish, and Sto:lo students who survive and mourn him.

He often expressed to me a sense of frustration at provincialized accounts of Indigenous identity while marveling at the humanistic vision of Indigeneity he found in the work of Deloria. It was Deloria's argument for the priority of place in Indigenous consciousness that served as Michael's major premise. However, unlike Deloria's legal and religious emphases, Michael wanted to find something deeper. His basic idea was that it was not the Land itself, in some empirical sense of location, but the *placeness* of the land that gave it special significance. Here, Michael detached place from Deloria's spaciality and insisted that this placeness of the Land has been laminated and calcified by Modernity. To be clear, Michael accepted Deloria's sense that time was the Western emphasis in the space-time continuum which required an Indigenous sense of space to dialectically reorient reality. However, for Michael, "space" lacked a sense of temporality that his notion of "place" possessed. In other words, the harm of Modernity, on Michael's account, has been the burial and masking of place which includes the literal loss of Indigenous burial sites and the peoples themselves, in lost and unmarked graves. But this social damage goes further than the moral or political loss of sites and places; for Michael it was the loss of a sense of the nature of place—a metaphysical wound born of forgetting—that constituted the most radical harm to Indigenous people. As he argued in 2018, through his direct title, "There is no place of nature; there is only the nature of place."

Further still, Michael believed that the voice of the Land could be muted but could never be lost. For Michael, the voice of the Land was not a mendicant voice of supplication, but instead a voice of demand and command. In his earlier writing, he would sometimes use the concept of animacy to describe this, but his sense was not strictly animistic but, ultimately, metaphysical. For Michael, the Great Spirit speaks in the voice of the Land and those who mute it do so to escape and hide from its authority. This is what Michael often called the "metaphysical demand" of place. He spoke of it as a conclusion to his argument for and of place in the syllogistic sense but also as a later stage in a historical and spiritual battle for the soul. I often objected to this wording because the word 'metaphysical' carries so much philosophical baggage. I suggested the substitution of the word 'ontological.'¹ To my suggestion, Michael replied:

¹ The subject line of this email correspondence was "Metaphysical demand." In the message that initiated the correspondence, I shared a draft of a talk I had given where "the first time in public I tried to describe the metaphysical demand we found together at Koerners." In that same email I expressed my reservations at this metaphysical framing and suggested: "perhaps what I mean is better expression as the 'ontological demand' with a *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 2023, 18(2), pp. 106-111.

I think I am resorting to using the word metaphysical rather than ontological because I think our language has certain limits on our thoughts. So, when we think about ontology, we look for the boundaries around what is real. I am trying to use the word metaphysics as a kind of pry tool to open up some folds in notions of ontology and reality. This is the best I can offer from my foggy mind at the moment.

For Michael, the modern situation was one in which the loss of place through lamination and calcification obstructed the layered—or “folded” as he so often called it—structure of reality and being to be found within placeness, where the voice that calls speak in a register of metaphysical demands; these demands are teachings, laws, and prophesies. They are picks and hammers that do not enclose a site of reality but, rather, break it open to speak in a voice of order and righteousness. They instruct with authority. Michael’s project, then, was to try to break through modern layers of calcification and metaphysical degradation with Indigenous notions of reality to pry open a manifold and unbounded voice whose absence is felt by all.

Michael also had a deep respect for languages, including Indigenous languages and for his own use of the English language, but he was careful to place serious literary limits on the capacity of words to conjure thought. This care often looked like play, and he loved the play of words, orally and in prose. I will submit one example, to follow.

On June 4, 2020, in the teeth of COVID-19, I had been a few days behind in replying to an email. Michael wrote an email addressed to my partner that went as follows:

Dear Mrs. Rocha,

The long period of silence from this e-mail account can only mean one thing; our beloved colleague and your loving husband has succumbed and is now with Jesus. I am certain that you must be checking all his e-mails at this very unhappy time. I just want you to know that I would like to offer to do a song at Dr. Rocha’s funeral or memorial service. I am attaching a file that I recorded for you to give you an idea of what I might sing to make an appropriate contribution to such a celebration of the great man’s life.

Sincerely, and with the deepest condolences,

Dr. Michael Marker

Attached to that email was a recording of Michael on banjo and vocals, titled “Rocha’s memorial song,” playing the folk song “Can I Have All Your Stuff When You’re Dead?” In many ways, this interaction depicts the “folded” nature of reality he sought to describe and narrate in his work. Here we have a nudge of a friend to reply to a letter in the joking form of a letter to his widow, accompanied by a very fine work of art that increases the humor and, with the passage of

very particular reason for why ontological in this case grasps better the offering’s showing.” It was to this substitution that Michael replied with his insistence on the term “metaphysical,” after poking at my term in discussing a recent flu he has undergone and its ontology.

Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education, 2023, 18(2), pp. 106-111.

110

(c) Author(s), Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0) license.

<https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/jcie/index.php/jcie>

time, the pain of it all. It is tragicomic and very real, and requires more work and heavier tools than we have presently at our disposal. Another, closing example follows instead.

On a summer afternoon in 2019, Michael came over to my apartment to record a session for my album *Anamnesis* while my family was away visiting relatives. He brought along a twelve-stringed guitar and his banjo. We recorded several tracks, including one that lasted over 15 minutes which I thereafter titled “[How Sweet the Ground.](#)” In this track, we freely exchanged a series of improvisations of the classic hymn “Amazing Grace.” He played his banjo with virtuosity, blending from leads to accompaniment, using both hammer-claw and modern bluegrass styles, at one moment quoting “All Creatures of Our God and King” and then “Lord of the Dance.” His roaring laughter closes the track.

Lest the reader be misled, neither the title nor the melody nor the time nor anything else was planned or discussed before we started to play. On another track, Michael pulled out a 12-stringed guitar and began to play a sorrowful, dirge-like progression. I pressed record on the recorder and grabbed a microphone Michael was lending me and a poem I had written—“Martha, María, and Diotima”—and sang to it. As he heard my response, he varied the melody and we followed each other until it was done. Again, nothing was planned or prepared and whatever plans we did make were often broken by chance or late arrivals. I titled the track “How Sweet the Ground” based on the literal fact that the duet was a series of variations on the melody of “Amazing Grace” that lyrically begins with “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.” I chose to feature and substitute the lyric “how sweet the *sound*” with “how sweet the *ground*” as an ode to Michael’s notion of place, but also as my own corrective to it. The metaphysical demand requires sweetness, I think. Perhaps this adds one more layer to Michael’s notion of place and the metaphysical demand: it speaks in a voice of grounded sweetness. And Michael was, perhaps above all else, a sweet and tender man.

The fall of that same year, at a rehearsal for an upcoming show at my apartment, Michael had grown weary of my arrangements and marching orders and vanished. I assumed he had gone to use the washroom. Soon I heard a softer, sweeter version of his voice and could hear his banjo ringing from the back of our apartment. He had abandoned our rehearsal for an impromptu children’s music concert, playing classic folk tunes and lullabies for my kids. I saw there something I had only caught glimpses of before and that I struggle to find proper words for now. It was nothing short of a kind of love that manifested itself in a delight that perhaps only children could understand.

Michael left behind his own family whom he loved totally and spoke of constantly, and a wide net of relations across his many lives lived and shared. He also left a metaphysical vision that deserves to be remembered through memorial remembrance but also by putting the pieces together and carrying the ideas forward. This essay is but a laying a few pieces on the table and a reminder to do the work. Above all, I hope it is a testament to the singularity of Michael’s unwritable life and the cosmic scope and sweetness of his metaphysical vision.