

A reflection on indigeneity

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What follows is a personal and broadly philosophical reflection on indigeneity: a path, if you like. I do not aspire to an impossibly comprehensive and objective overview, which is just as well; a fairly recent article (Singh, 2023) shows just how complex and contested the concept is. But that author's starting-point is entirely bounded by anthropocentric concerns, whereas mine is relationships and their consequences between humans and nonhumans.

Some attention has been paid to that topic. Paul Shepard (1996) has gone into the evolutionary effects on humans of long defining other animals as the Other. More concretely, this is perhaps what Loren Eiseley (1978: 16) meant when he wrote that "One does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human". And David Abram (1996: 22) points out that "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human".

What has gone less remarked is that in the moment of encounter between a human and a non-human, there can be a simultaneous recognition, both of difference – the gap between human and nonhuman – and of commonality: the fact of being a being as such, which crosses that gap. Such a moment is therefore potentially one of profound wonder, accompanied by the kind of revelation that wonder can bring and flag up. In this case, it is the opportunity to learn a double truth: both that we are *human* beings, and that *non-human* beings are beings – that weird amalgam of both subjectivity/agency and objectivity/thingness – just as we are.

I suspect that the experience I have just described is at the heart of the idea and value both of kinship, which figures so large in many indigenous cultures, and of what, shorn of its earlier colonialist contempt, has come to be called animism. Kinship signifies neither absolute identity or unity nor absolute difference or otherness, but a relationship in which both those extremes mingle and are modified (cf. van Dooren and Chrulow, 2022; Curry, 2010). And as Graham Harvey (2006: xi) puts it, "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others". But this mode often has a place of honour in indigenous cultures that is signally missing in globalized 'Western' culture.

What of ‘indigenous’ itself, and its close cognate, ‘native’? Of course, there is a history of colonialist and imperialist usages to acknowledge and reckon with. But we need not – indeed, must not – abandon these terms altogether. We need terms that signify being from a particular place and, to at least a significant degree, having been formed and informed by its natural-cultural character. They should capture being of a place in ways that are not reducible to one’s original provenance but are inseparable from it (*cf.* Malpas, 2019; Casey, 2009). This move to a relatively inclusive sense of indigeneity then opens out into ways to become indigenous, as explored by Gary Snyder (1990) and Freya Mathews (2005, especially ch. 3).

In a fundamental sense, every being on Earth – including, obviously, every human being – is indigenous and a native. No matter how alienated, they are alienated *from* somewhere particular and its corresponding provenance, and estrangement is not itself a place you can be from or inhabit, but derivative: a pathology of place.

The remedy is implied in the disease. As a Crow elder told Gary Snyder (1990: 42), with remarkable generosity, considering the history: “You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough – even white people – the spirits will begin to speak to them. It’s the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren’t lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them”. It is in this pan-human sense that Seamus Heaney (1995) urged us to place our “love and trust in the good of the indigenous”.

To imagine that any being can actually be rootless as a primary condition is to succumb to, and collaborate with, an old and destructive delusion: that it is possible, for members of a tiny elite, to be a self-creating, self-supporting spiritual being, anthropocentric and virtually always androcentric, who has transcended this world and risen into a pure heaven of light for eternity. This is, of course, the toxic fantasy current in Silicon Valley (Curry, 2020). As Sean Kane (1998: 255) says, “all the work that various peoples have done – all the work that peoples must do – to live with the Earth on the Earth’s terms is pre-empted by the dream of transcendence”.

In that work, “the notion of the sanctity of place is vital. [...] Once the power of the place is lost to memory, myth is uprooted; knowledge of the earth’s processes becomes a different kind of knowledge, manipulated and applied by man” (Kane, 1990: 50). Place in this mythic sense – which is to say, insofar as modernity is a quest for rational mastery, non-modern – is essentially entwined with story. Place is storied, and story is emplaced (Basso, 1996; Curry, 2024). And this process is, we might say, naturally ecocentric. The storied voices cannot, without violence, be restricted to humans alone. Without violence, that is, to ourselves as well, as we start to forget, through loss of contact and conviviality with nonhuman others, both what it means to be a specifically human being, *and* only one being among a multitude of others.

Place is thus integral to the stories about ourselves and others – partly discovered and partly created – which we tell ourselves and others. And once again, this practice seems to be foregrounded in cultures which are more fully

or consciously indigenous, such as the Apache storytellers with whom Keith Basso studied. But in line with the Crow elder's advice, even white folk can learn from place and story and elders.

That doesn't necessarily entail any 'appropriation', the fear of which now exceeds the frequency and severity with which it actually occurs. A few years ago, a white Canadian university lecturer told me that if he publicly even discussed indigeneity, regardless of any conclusions he might have arrived at, he could well lose his job. Such a poisonous atmosphere does neither humans, nonhumans nor the land any favours. The 'solution' – censorship – is worse than the condition. And it is certainly possible to respect indigenous cultures without foreclosing the possibility of imaginative and empathic understandings which stretch across individual and collective boundaries. That relational and specifically animist dynamic – an encounter across gaps, attended by wonder – is essential not only for art but for the most important political virtue: not unity, but solidarity. Indeed, as I suggested above, it is at the heart of indigenous values and virtues; so suppressing it would be a vicious irony.

The fact is, we are decidedly not gods but Earthlings, and most of us urgently need to get better at it. As part of that process we need to open up the conversation from *being* indigenous, treating it as a property or attribute which emphasizes ownership/dispossession and inclusion/exclusion, to the possibilities for *becoming* indigenous. Here, most of us have a great deal to learn, and one of our primary teachers is surely the indigenous land guardianship and traditional ecological knowledge resulting from centuries of living in place, and with place, and the practices that nourish it (Unuigbe 2023).

Of course, indigenous or native people are as fallible, even corruptible, as the rest of us. The carrot-and-stick of capitalism – both temptations and fear – is pervasive. We also know, or should, that even practices of low-impact sustainable and regenerative agroecology are not a panacea; they cannot support eight billion people at anything like current levels of consumption, if at all. Nor can even the most solicitous human habitation obviate the need for some portion of the Earth to remain, or become again, wild refuges – that is, completely uninstrumentalized, even for purposes of recreation or spiritual welfare. (Our mere presence, no matter how discreet, can disturb and degrade the normal behaviour of other species: see Hambler and Canney [2013].)

But there are no single remedies to ecological overshoot, so it would be absurd to dismiss any that can help. For this reason, as we work our way towards (or back to) "fewer and less", in the words of Robert Jensen (2024), let us appreciate and celebrate indigenous peoples' long experience of sustainability, both natural and cultural, as a great gift to all of humanity, and thence to all the other natural beings who are at our mercy.

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