

Article

# More than Stories, More than Myths: Animal/Human/Nature(s) in Traditional Ecological Worldviews

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**Abstract:** Reason and rationality, upon which modern, westernized, societies have been founded, have powerfully characterized the nature of human relations with other species and with the natural world. However, countless indigenous and traditional worldviews tell of a very different reality in which humans, conceived of as instinctual and intuitive, are a part of a complex web of ecological relationships. Other species, elements of the natural world, and people are active participants in relations overflowing with communications, interactions sometimes recorded in ethnographies, or as ‘myths’ and ‘stories’. The present article draws upon a range of traditions to explore the biases which shape how indigenous and traditional life-ways are represented in westernized contexts; the phenomenon of receiving direct insight or intuitive knowing from more-than-human worlds; and the numerous valuable understandings regarding the nature of the human being, other species, and how to live well, that are offered by a deeper comprehension of different worldviews. I also argue that the various capacities for instinctual and intuitive knowledge which accompanies these life-ways are endemic to the human species yet overlooked, the correction of which might work to usefully recalibrate our ethical relations with each other, and with other life on earth.

**Keywords:** earth; worldviews; indigenous wisdom traditions; relationality; ecology; language; human-animal studies; more-than-human geography; multispecies ethnography; ecopsychology; anthropology; environmental philosophy; decolonization; intuition; instinct; myth; non-verbal communication; IK; TEK

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## 1. Introduction

The Yolŋu peoples, in Bawaka Country, Australia, are oriented to patterns, place, relationships with other beings, and the language of those beings (or *dhäruk*), which holds its own messages and contains what they term its own ‘Law’ (Bawaka Country et al. 2013, 2015, 2016). The Yolŋu way of being in the world is about paying attention to, speaking with, and understanding animals as a part of regular life; and, as with all traditional and indigenous peoples who hold such an ethic, this is more regular for some members of a community than it is for others. The experience of language as something that is shared with all beings, not solely amongst humans, is a near universal assertion across communities, historical and contemporary, who recognize ecological sentience and live with/in more-than-human worlds. Consider the following account from Laklak Burarrwanga:

The sea there, it has its own *wänga*, its own system and patterns of behaviour. The *guya* (fish), the *maranydjalk* (stingray), and the *miyapunu* (turtle), have each got their own language. That’s why male and female turtles, when they meet, they know each other, they can talk [ . . . ] All the different animals, they have their own groups. Seagulls, crows, they live by themselves, they have their own rules, style of talking and living with one another,

their own language. The birds and animals know where to sleep, where to put their babies, where to build their nests. The same for trees, bushes. The land knows what their language is (Bawaka Country et al. 2013, para. 11.35).

In this paper I engage with the topic of animal narratology through examining such accounts of human-animal relations as factual or ‘real’ exchanges between humans and animals. This is about taking seriously, as *true*, the accounts of interspecies communication that have been documented for at least the last hundred years, by ethnographers, and by indigenous and traditionally living peoples themselves, both inside and outside of the academies. The continued repression of indigenous voices with respect to these issues is an extension of the global colonial project.

The examples are drawn primarily from ethnographic accounts of human-animal relations within indigenous and traditional contexts, with a specific focus on how the received wisdom from animals (and other more-than-human entities) is understood or explained. These accounts break with a number of conventions that are well established to the point of appearing normative within a westernized worldview: conventions to which the first half of this paper is specifically attentive. In the latter sections, using examples such as the one above, I interrogate particular biases which can act to obscure the comprehension of radically non-Western worldviews and I question the idea that accounts of life such as are found in Bawaka Country (among others), and the practices therein, are ‘impossible’ or superstitious ‘relics’ of mythic or religious behaviors among so-called ‘primitive’ peoples.<sup>1</sup>

At the centre of this project is the necessity of querying the scholarly norms, simplistic divides and cosmological assumptions that have provided impetus for the establishment, and continuance, of westernization over several thousand years.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this inquiry is to contribute constructively to the re-ignition, or recovery, of our *awareness* of the fundamental human relationships that we have with the broader ecologies within which we are embedded.<sup>3</sup> I argue that indigenous and traditional life-ways around the world present numerous valuable understandings regarding the nature of the human being, other species, the planet we share, and how to live together; all of which appear vastly superior to westernized interpretations of responsibility for socio-ecological wellbeing across species, most especially in a time of planetary-level, cascading socio-ecological crises. This is not suggested as some romantic or utopian ideal, but as a direct response to the indigenous and ecological thinkers (and their allies) who have called for the decolonization of *all* people as a response to earth crises. Their call is based on the wholesale rejection of ways of thinking and being that lead to destruction and domination, and the socialization practices which continue to perpetuate these elements within westernized societies.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of historical accounts of traditional, indigenous, and non-European collectives have hinged on the idea of that these peoples are ‘living fossils’, or examples of how western ‘civilized’ people were in prehistory. Tropes such as the ‘noble savage’, the romanticized or exotic ‘other’, the idea of a primitive society entirely ‘cut off’ from the modern world, were the products of imperialistic 20th century anthropology. These notions were rightly rejected in the 1970s and 1980s, however, this rejection also halted any substantive cross-cultural indigenous comparison (used by indigenous scholars, but rejected by social scientists as ‘pan-indigenous’), and the related interest in identifying any somewhat unified set of precepts across worldviews which was based in a concept of common humanity. Scholarly focus subsequently became very specialized, concentrating upon indigenous livelihoods within western-dominant contexts, and post-colonial social and political movements. Whilst these foci are critically important for undoing colonial damages and establishing recognition of indigenous sovereignty and rights, any equivalencies between traditional life-ways and pre-westernized human wisdom are still only tentatively made by western scholars (see Abram 2010, p. 267). In the rush for scholars to revere ‘differences’, indigenous voices and opinions on these very issues have been muted.

<sup>2</sup> For an extension of this argument see Harvard economist and philosopher Rajani Kanth (2017), in particular, the observation that there is a near-absence of any real anthropological inquiry (that takes evidence into full account), official, or social discourse around these issues.

<sup>3</sup> Many scholars cited in this paper (including myself as author) use ‘us’, ‘our’, and ‘we’ to express a sense of collective human kinship, parallel perhaps with the *planetaryity* of post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (2003, pp. 71–102). This terminology also signals that the critical shift from an ‘I-hermeneutic’ to a ‘We-hermeneutic’—over and above the separatist identity and diversity claims that are expressed in ‘I’ language—is a necessary and core expression of indigenous sovereignty and a key foundation for expressing the cohesiveness of community, as forwarded by Jace Weaver (1998, pp. 1–25). Where there is a specially situated use of these terms ‘us’, ‘our’, or ‘we’, the appropriate context has been included.

The templates for how to live well together on the planet, based on reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and relationship, are very evident in traditional and indigenous life ways, and deference to these values and practices has been sought by indigenous elders, across the globe, for over forty years.<sup>4</sup> Canim Lake Band Tsq'escen scholar Julian Brave [NoiseCat \(2017\)](#) asks that we “heed the diverse indigenous voices displaced and drowned out by imperialism [ . . . ] indigenous people today stand on the frontlines of global movements fighting for a more just relationship between humanity and the land”.

In addition, I argue with indigenous and traditional peoples, for the recognition of an enduring continuity of human experience across time, geographies, cultures, and traditions. As put forward by Irish-Cherokee scholar Four Arrows (who also carries the name Don Trent Jacobs), despite the vast geographical differences between peoples through time and history, worldviews across diverse cultures share common features (just as landscapes may be recognized as “landscapes” through common features such as trees, rivers, mountains, or grassy fields).

Indigenous Australian (Arabana) scholar Veronica [Arbon \(2008, p. 19\)](#) also writes on pan-indigenous thinking, stating that as opposed to suggesting a new hegemony, in which the diversity of indigenous cultures are collapsed into a new universal, there is the need to acknowledge the similarities between different indigenous groups of the world. She goes beyond the level of political solidarity across indigenous communities (or, interests in common), to demonstrate cosmo-ontological continuity between many indigenous communities in her work (as did the late [Deloria Jr. 1973, 1978, 2004, 2006; Deloria Jr. et al. 1999](#)). This shift to indigeneity as a set of core concepts that are set against ‘westernized’ metaphysics has the effect of altering its function to include indigenous-human solidarity. This is significant.

If cultural diversity is honored, recognizing a common worldview can bring solidarity and support it. The fact that common features of many Indigenous nations contrast with those among diverse ‘non-Indian’ cultures is potentially useful for everyone’s decolonizing efforts ([Arrows 2016, p. 3](#)).

## 2. Truth and Primitivism

The idea of cultural evolution has rendered the folk story, or myth, as a quaintly accepted pre-modern error made by early or ‘primitive’ humans. As such, the art of listening to (or hearing) the speech of the animals has been kept alive (if barely) in folklore. In the mythologies of the world, comprehension of the language of the birds was revered as a divine boon: the Norse god, Odin, presided over the world with the help of two wise ravens; in tales from Wales, Greece, India, and

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<sup>4</sup> This is critical for creating the conditions whereby non-indigenous people can move beyond the ‘charity model’ of allyship and engage a personal, conscious, educated, and emplaced sense of responsibility for socio-ecological partnership, thus, creating an *effective*, decolonized perspective for collective global change. This does not mean that the non-indigenous are to ‘become indigenous’ in political terms (which is a simplistic reading of the call for change), nor that the idea of ‘we are all indigenous’ be substituted for strong on-going support for, and responsibility towards, securing post-colonial indigenous rights. This shift requires the interrogation of unconscious, westernized dependencies so that *all colonized people* might become more consciously human, as defined *through* comprehension and participation in ways of being that are directed by fundamentally different values. Some of the more recent proponents of this view include John Mohawk, Gregory Cajete, Four Arrows, Robin Kimmerer, Jeannette Armstrong, Winona LaDuke, Jon Young, George Price, Bayo Akomolafe, Lisa Minno Bloom, Berkley Carnine, Rajani Kanth, Syed Hussan, Zainab Amadahy, George Sefa Dei, Dylan Miner, Chris and Jaki Daniels, Darcia Narvaez, Walter Mignolo, Paul Shepard, Derrick Jensen, Joanna Macy, Bill Plotkin, Paul Hawken, Daniel Christian Wahl, David Abram, and the collective *Bioneers* as represented as their yearly conferences, among many others. Part of the redefinition of the term indigenous, in this view, is to dislocate it from ethnic and racial afflictions by returning to its root definition of ‘people springing from/in the land as mother’, and to establish it as a foundational paradigm for living according to particular values. Peace scholar Rick [Wallace \(2013\)](#) has called this conception of trust-based allyship “a mutual reworking of colonial relations of power” (p. 172). Based on fieldwork and case-studies, Wallace identifies constructive non-indigenous ally practices as follows: material and strategic support for indigenous communities, respect for indigenous leadership and processes of decision making, and establishing trust as dependent upon shared sincerity, commitment, values and beliefs, truth-speaking, and respect for the mutual obligations of honoring the land and each other as key for rebuilding right relations (ibid, pp. 176–77).

greater Russia, an unlikely hero is granted the gift of hearing the prophesy of birds by magic; in Sweden, by the taste of dragons blood. King Solomon's wisdom, like that of Odin, was attributed to the birds, as were the stories of Aesop. For modern urban humans, these are generally thought of as folk tales and stories for children. Conversely, as cultural ecologist David Abram (2010) writes:

[The] sacred language regularly attributed by tribal peoples to their most powerful shamans is often referred to as 'the language of the birds.' A keen attunement to the vocal discourse of the feathered folk has been a necessary survival skill for almost every indigenous community—especially for the active hunters within the group, and for the intermediaries (the magicians or medicine persons) who tend the porous boundary between the human and more-than-human worlds (p. 196).

The value complex that underpins this division into truth and fiction has a long and convoluted history, and is based upon a combination of religious, philosophical, and scientific thought that has been incubated over at least two thousand years. Such questions, and the legitimacy of narrative as 'fact' or as 'useful knowledge', can be rendered very differently within indigenous, as compared with secular westernized contexts. As noted by the late Vine Deloria Jr. et al. (1999):

In most tribal traditions, no data are discarded as unimportant or irrelevant. Indians consider their own individual experiences, the accumulated wisdom of the community that has been gathered by previous generations, their dreams, visions, and prophecies, and any information received from birds, animals and plants as data that must be arranged, evaluated, and understood as a unified body of knowledge. This mixture of data from sources that the Western scientific world regards as highly unreliable and suspect produces a consistent perspective on the natural world (pp. 66–67).

Conversely, westernized frameworks categorize much of this content as religion or culture, myth, folktale or epic, and fable, or as genres that are studied within the areas of literature, folklore, religious studies, and anthropology. The study of narratology within the field of folklore, for instance, was initially focused upon forms, functions, and stylistic analysis (see Levi-Strauss 1963, 1966, 1968; Propp 1968; Propp and Liberman 1984). Early narratologists (such as Vladimir Propp) attempted to isolate aspects of narrative and develop typologies which were, in turn, used to extrapolate meanings or, in the case of Levi-Strauss, symbolic structures. In more contemporary times, narrative has come to be reimagined more broadly, as an active cultural force that "enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world" (Bal 2002, p. 10).

Traditional and indigenous ways of making 'story' can, however, be thought to challenge certain received wisdoms regarding the structure or form of narrative, especially regarding authorship, character, coherence, sequence and spatiality. In the specific area of *animal* narratology, indigenous narratives involve shifting concepts of personhood and identity as applicable to the 'characters' (who are often non-human), and a markedly different distinction between the fictional and non-fictional. This is not to suggest indigenous stories or literatures do not employ or recognize fiction, but that it is not set aside in quite the same manner as within 'westernized' categories of writing and thought. In traditional Native American contexts, for example, a distinction between ceremonial and popular genres makes more sense, or the sacred as juxtaposed with the pedagogical or humorous, soothing or entertaining (see Allen 1986).

Myth, in particular, has attracted a range of different uses across the disciplines. In folklore and religious studies, myth is used only to refer to a certain kind of narrative, or to quote Wendy Doniger (2011): "a story that [is] good to believe in but unverifiable in the real world [ . . . or] a story that a group of people believe for a long time despite massive evidence that it is not actually true" (p. ix). This meaning derives directly from the shift, in ancient Greece, from *mythos* (truth) to *logos* (lies and dissimulation), and eventually morphed into *fabula* in the Latin, or 'a persistent lie' (Kane 1998, p. 34). Bruce Lincoln (1996), a religious historian, speculates that the original shift in

meaning (as concretized by the Romans) arose in ancient Greece with the rise of Platonic reason and the resultant unstable power relations between various ‘regimes of truth’. This moment, preserved in etymological history, reveals a kind of colonization of thought and word in action; specifically, the overturning of traditional beliefs within an urban and ‘progressive’ political and economic context, in which a belief complex was eradicated and ultimately overthrown by a newer philosophy. The origin point for what now counts as ‘true’ and ‘false’ knowledge has to be set somewhere around the time of this transfer. One consequence of this was the creation of a distinct fictitious genre (myth and fable) into which non-Christian, pre-Christian, and other beliefs could be relocated.

Semiotician Roland Barthes (1984) defined myth as a type of speech, or a system of communication in which “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (p. 109). These ways of thinking about myth—suggesting a radical divorce from historicity and how myths might be viewed within diverse cultural contexts—have significantly impacted upon the use of the term within the social sciences. Myth and discourse are often conflated whenever there is an emphasis on the ‘truth’ value of a claim, or a lack thereof. Myth can be broadly used to refer to anything that has persisted as ‘true’ and yet, can be shown to be only ‘popularly true’, for example, the ‘myth of biological race’ or the ‘myth of the Communist threat’. In short, it is a term that often stands in for ‘error’ or ‘fallacy’, and it is *this* designation, when transposed onto the understanding of narratives of indigenous origin, that indigenous scholars have taken issue with.

Native American Laguna scholar, Paula Gunn Allen (1986, pp. 102–3), writes that myth has been polluted by popular misuse to the point of being synonymous with ‘lie’. Allen aligns the scholarly employment of ‘myth’ with other derogatory terms that imply backwardness, foolishness, and the general derision of native life-ways, arguing that the manner in which it has been used always points towards ‘questionable accuracy’. As such, myth stands opposed to truth whenever it is considered as a part of a fiction-fact binary, and this is a problem which many social scientists (anthropologists, in particular) tend to recoil from resolving in concrete terms. Learning from animals, for example, or affording personhood and wisdom to non-humans beings in general, can present enormous cosmological instability for those trained in westernized traditions. Modern humans are encouraged to speak *about* animals as part of a category called ‘nature’, or in the words of Abram (2010): “Language is a human property, suitable for communication with other persons. We talk to people; we do not talk to the ground underfoot” (p. 174). Reading Abram, it’s clear he is referring (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) to the conservative social norm which upholds the division between sentience and non-sentience, however the norm has a powerful hold on ethnographic scholarship. This is precisely how ethnographies of indigenous and traditional peoples become ‘stories’ and ‘accounts’ that are not assessed as ‘true’ or ‘false’, but truth claims that are ‘true for them’ or ‘true enough’. As I have argued elsewhere, many ethnographers have gone to great lengths to suggest that it does not matter whether these stories are ‘true’ or not, but only that they are accurate representations of ‘what people believe’ (Sepie 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Anthropologist Paul Nadasdy (2007) describes the contradiction as follows:

What to the Athapaskan or Cree hunter is a perfectly explainable—if not quite everyday—event becomes for the biologist (or anthropologist) an anomaly. Faced with stories of this sort, those of us wedded to a Euro-American view of human-animal relations have one of two choices: we can choose to disbelieve the account, or we can shrug it off as a bizarre coincidence. Either way, we avoid any attempt at explanation (p. 36).

This avoidance presents serious problems for recognition of indigenous and traditional life-ways. Truth must matter if the dominant worldview is to be properly queried in areas where it is hegemonic: in areas where ascriptions of cultural relativism simply cannot compete with the abiding authority of the dominant worldview. Paul Rabinow [1983] (2011) writes that inscribed relations between truth and power are concealed by devices which ‘bracket truth’, thus taking no culture at its word: “The anthropologist thus succeeds in studying what is serious and truthful to Others without it being serious and truthful to him” (p. 31). Claims as to the subjectivity of truth have served academics well, as these can be extended from religion and culture into the designated supernatural realm, to reduce

and marginalize, as 'false', any realities which directly oppose the dominant norms. Truth *matters* in westernized contexts, especially academic realms, and to suggest it does not matter, or that truth is 'relative' within an indigenous context appears structurally racist. Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) argues that these (and other) 'silences' which do not take metaphysical differences in worldview into account simply reproduce imperialism.

Numerous other issues relating to literary conventions also obtain here, for instance, re-telling, or allowing stories to be remade across individuals, time, and traditions. Re-telling is common practice within a range of indigenous storytelling traditions, and does not yield to the notion that stories have a 'fixed' or static form. This is a practice considered as antagonistic to the goal of early ethnographers and folklorists who have sought to 'collect' these stories or codify them in textual form. As folklorist Alan Dundes notes, the type of framing usually employed to comment on this is pejorative:

Just as ethnographers carefully sifted through unavoidable details obviously only recently added through acculturative contact in an attempt to discover the pure unadulterated original native culture, so practitioners of the Finnish historic-geographic method sought to work backwards through the unfortunate changes (or, in Thompson's terms, the mistakes and errors) in order to find the pure unadulterated original ur-form. The difficulties of searching for the ur-form, too often presumed to be hopelessly hidden by the destructive, deteriorative effects of oral transmission were considerable, but not always insurmountable (in Dundes and Bronner 2007, p. 169).

Translation into English has also had its difficulties, given that many languages do not possess the subject-object rules necessary for a direct transfer of meaning and, further, there many are concepts implied within traditional worldviews that do not have any equivalents in a 'western' conceptual lexicon. Determining what is 'nature' and what is 'culture', for example, cannot be ascertained when people do not subscribe to these categories. The ideas involved are hard to think, and hard to write, especially other languages. In ethnography and folklore, you can almost feel the struggle of generations of scholars trying to relay, in comprehensive terms, concepts that simply no longer appear in the repertoire that has been constructed in two or more thousand years of instituting the modern way of life. Worldview content that cannot be easily classified presents another level of difficulty.

Consider the adoption, within western medical establishments, of acupuncture from China. The use of acupuncture in westernized contexts occurs alongside the absolute denial of the existence of *qi* (air-breath, life-being, energy-force), upon which the entire practice is based. To suggest that *qi* exists is to 'break' with the cosmological consensus of the dominant culture, fostered (as it has been) through the complexities of Judeo-Christian religious changes and Greco-Roman cultural matrices, up to the Enlightenment, and into the present day. The mandate, even if it may only be tacit, is that rational thinking must preside in westernized societies, and any claim on the contrary is a private, cultural, or religious belief and, thus, *a priori* illegitimate in any scientifically valid sense. This mandate orients our institutions and power structures, our concepts of health and education, and influences significantly the degree of seriousness afforded to collectives who publically uphold an 'illegitimate' worldview, especially one that has been historically viewed as pagan or primitive. Whilst any discernible scientific elements of cultural practices might be extracted under the headings of IK and TK (Indigenous Knowledge and/or Traditional Knowledge) and integrated into environmental studies and related disciplinary fields, cultural practices that co-opt what might be called supernatural elements are routinely disregarded or relegated to religious studies as matters of belief.

The bias against anything that might be deemed as supernatural has been strengthened through the rise of scientific modes of explanation. The idea of speaking with animals, or seeing spiritual aspects within nature, breaks a number of 'rules'; however, the supernatural aspect is far more difficult to accept, study, articulate, and theorize, than issues that may arise from worldview content that is rendered as 'cultural difference'. The natural sciences have no room for concepts of spirit in the world, and Christianity does not have a cosmological precedent for allowing spirits (or souls) in 'nature',

limiting the ownership of ‘souls’ to human beings.<sup>5</sup> Consider the way that early Christianity was moved through the world: step one, exorcise local gods and spirits by insisting that demons and angels are the only possible supernatural beings. Step two, replace local systems of belief with the fear of, and obedience toward, an Old Testament God, and the attached cosmology (three-tiered universe), which finishes the process of exorcism. Step two may, or may not, be attached to violent punishment for causing trouble regarding step one. This process not only creates profound disconnection from place and tradition, but also considerable fear attached to breaking with the newly established norms, at least publicly. Animate or sentient aspects of nature, including weather, features of the landscape, and the concept of other creatures as speaking, acting, or as spiritually endowed beings, remained possible only in the provinces of myth and fiction. As argued by Sean Kane (1998), in his extraordinary book, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*:

Myth is felt by history to be untrue because it articulates a reality that exists outside [ . . . ] more provable worlds [ . . . it] implies a shift from the authority of plants and animals, each the spirit-children of supernatural progenitors, to the authority of man (p. 34).

Sorting processes such as these violate the holism of traditional and indigenous worldviews by requiring that they conform to westernized categories in order to be useful and comprehensible. Traditional and indigenous ways of being in the world, wedded as they are to radically different cosmological ideas, can be therefore be thought of as incurring the effects of significant biases at the most fundamental levels of scholarly comprehension.

### 3. Colonization and the Rise of ‘Western Culture’

In his preface to *The New Ecological Order* (1995), the French philosopher, Luc Ferry, narrates an extraordinary tale of legal proceedings, in the year 1545, against a colony of weevils. The villagers of Saint-Julien, in France, sought ‘appropriate measures’ to demand the expulsion of the beasts from their vineyards, but it was argued that, as ‘creatures of God’, the animals possessed the same rights to consume plant life as the residents. The villagers (who lost their case) were required to sincerely repent, through prayer, tithes, and processions around the vineyards, followed by further devotions and penitence. All of this was designed to put right their error in the eyes of God. The weevils vacated and the matter ended, only to be brought again to the courts some forty-two years later; however, it appears that the villagers lost, once again. Not only did the judge order the vicar to re-apply the ordonnance (penalty) of 1546, but a compromise was suggested in which the weevils were to be leased ‘a location of sufficient pasture, outside of the disputed vineyards of Saint-Julien’ (Ferry 1995, pp. ix–xi).

Ferry does not give a final conclusion to this matter, but he discusses similar cases involving larvae (who won), leeches (who were ultimately cursed to evacuate by the bishop of Lausanne), dolphins (excommunicated from Marseille, for clogging the port), rats (who also triumphed), and beetles (case dismissed, due to their young age and the diminutiveness of their bodies) (ibid, pp. ix–xiv). What is fascinating about these cases is how Ferry captures a transitional moment in history that is rarely presented so clearly. His preface is a reminder that, for a certain period in European history, there was the possibility to think of other species in a manner which afforded them agency and equated their rights with those of human beings. Now, as Ferry laments, only humans are ‘worthy of a trial’ and

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<sup>5</sup> Note that in referring to ‘Christianity’ I am not intending to present it as a monolith. There are a number of Christianities which have diverged significantly from the central structures and dogma throughout the centuries, and in various cultural contexts. What I refer to here is a core set of precepts that are *generally* considered as central to Christianity and have been reproduced, with relative faithfulness, in historical and modern conservative interpretations and churches. It is this specific form of Christianity that has been informative in orienting the dominant scientific leanings of secular modern westernized societies in ways that affect the biases discussed herein (see Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gillespie 2008; Lindberg 1983, 1992; Panikkar and Eastham 1993).

nature is a ‘dead letter’. “Literally: it no longer speaks to us for we have long ceased—at least since Descartes—to attribute a soul to it or to believe it inhabited by occult forces” (ibid, p. xvi).<sup>6</sup>

This transitional moment, like the shift from *mythos* to *logos*, is but one among many. What is interesting is that these transitions, when considered together, can be shown to have created the very particular sorts of cultural complexes we term ‘westernized’ (and the socio-ecological pathologies which accompany them). The Haudenosaunee, speaking to the United Nations in 1977 (Mohawk 1978), called this ‘West’ a culture with a ‘sickness’ that had emerged from certain civilizing processes over time, cutting the western people off from their ancient roots. They called for an urgent critical historical analysis of these processes and offered remedy as if an ‘elder looking into the affairs of a young child’ (ibid, p. 83). The Haudenosaunee identified continuity between the experiences of those afflicted by colonialism, and those who were colonized earlier, through essentially the same processes, but with a more serious and destructive result. “It is the people of the West, ultimately, who are the most oppressed and exploited. They are burdened by the weight of centuries of racism, sexism, and ignorance which has rendered their people insensitive to the true nature of their lives” (ibid, p. 91).<sup>7</sup> The evidence for these critical transitions, also listed by the Haudenosaunee as signaling a move away from nature, can be found in ancient histories.

In *Mythtellers*, Kane (1998, pp. 21–23) determines that a significant break from nature occurred with the near-Eastern Neolithic shift to agriculture, progressively establishing the conditions for a class system and rules of property ownership. Feminist scholar Riane Eisler (1987) calls this the shift from a ‘partnership’ to a dominator model, and she dates it at 5000 BCE.

Abram (1996), in his lyrical text *The Spell of the Sensuous*, points to another, hidden, transition he identifies in the shift from the *aleph*-bet to a Greek alphabet. He specifically notes that what he calls the final ‘removal of the air’ from oral traditions (that is, the adding of scripted vowels), silences the power of the voice in a manner which disengages us from the natural world (pp. 93–135). In this, he echoes the insistence made in many traditional contexts that words are powerful, the spoken word in particular (see Burke 2011; King 2005; LaDuke 2005).

Religious influence is a particularly important mechanism for transition. Early organized political powers, such as those found in ancient city-states of specifically Persian political influence, mandated religious conversions in numerous empires, with resistance punishable by death. These regimes also progressively instituted, often by force, the dislocation of people from place. Such moves eradicated the layered ecological understandings peoples had acquired through long occupation of a site, and the ritual and practical maintenance of close, cohesive groups that were embedded in their relations with their local habitats.<sup>8</sup> Local forces, energies, or gods, as residing with tribes or kin-groups, and the territories they were linked to, were deliberately unsettled in order to take command of a group of people: in fact, capturing, stealing, or destroying a portable ‘idol’ (or a representation of a sacred being) often constituted a victory over a people. Strong prohibitions against making portable idols or visual representations of gods (carried through within Judaic and Islamic traditions, for example) are inherently linked to these practices. In ancient ‘civilized’ worlds, as with the more recent practices of colonialism and missionary work, the elimination of a people was most effective if it was instituted *in*

<sup>6</sup> The legal personhood of places and animals has very recently been revived following notable cases in India, the US, and New Zealand (see Coehlo 2013; Grimm 2013; Hutchison 2014; Kennedy 2012).

<sup>7</sup> This position regarding the efficacy of indigenous ways of being as remedy and restoration for the pathologies of westernized cultural dominance has been suppressed, and obscured, by mechanisms that are both scholarly and social (Mander 1991). There are discussions and corrections regarding these issue in a number of recent publications by indigenous scholars, as well as clearly outlined differences between cultural appropriation and the call for westernized peoples to be led by those who possess the traditional wisdom which repairs ‘culture’ and a sense of connection with nature, i.e., to follow an indigenous ‘lead’ (Arrows 2016; Cajete 2015; Cordova 2007; Kimmerer 2013).

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to say to what degree this occurred prior to Christianity, and whether there were similar practices in ancient pan-Indian, Egyptian, or other advanced cultural complexes, precisely because it is normative to call these very ancient histories, myth. I can, however, note parallels with Egyptian regimes and shifting kingships, and find evidence (following the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1998, 2005)) for early monotheism and religious conquest.

*the name of religion* against what were called *other religions* (that is, against foreign, pagan, tribal, and local or place-specific beliefs). Whilst altering the spiritual or religious orientation of any community to align with the interests of the state is a powerful tool in maintaining social control, religious obligations that are set against political interests can be a motivator for extreme violence, as modern history attests to.

When a smaller tribal or kin group voluntarily aligned with a city state, the new cultural identity gradually absorbed and eroded the old, and this process was somewhat common. In China, for example, as Philip Nicholson (1999) writes: “The invaders and occasional conquerors of China, the Mongols of the thirteenth century and the Manchus of the seventeenth, were absorbed by the Chinese culture and became as ardently Chinese as the Chinese they overran” (p. 17). Similarly, it is difficult to find the traces and histories of the many peoples that became Egyptian, or Greek, or Roman, due to the absorption of their personal and localized histories into meta-narratives of identity during what were lengthy processes of assimilation. Economist and philosopher Rajani Kanth (2017, p. 242) notes that whilst cultural complexes can take millennia to evolve, they can be erased in just *two* generations.

Across the ancient empires, however, it was generally not by choice, but by military and political conquest, indebtedness, poverty, and starvation that people fell under the control of others (Nicholson 1999). Where locally-based beliefs and customs persisted, they often did so under duress, most especially after the advent of Christianity (following its adoption as a state-religion in Rome). This duress has continued into the present through the mechanisms of colonialism.

Whilst we cannot go back and alter these historical events, it is necessary to recognize the degree to which such transitions have progressively detached modern, westernized humans from our intimate sense of place.<sup>9</sup> As Kanth (2017) argues, functional and emplaced societies have become replaced with flat, monotonic, uniform, homogenous, atomized, fragmented and alienated with residents who are privatized, individualized and isolated with “a gamut of ever multiplying gadgets as companions” (p. 242). Equally, notions of shared identity, as linked to an in-group sense of place and community (originally, *ethnos*), have become overly signified in urban environments where religion, ethnic or racial, political, economic and class affiliations keep diverse and separate groups in a competitive tension for rights and resources.

In the words of Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (2015), our present crises come from a “narrow view of who we are, what the earth is, and what it is to educate our children so that they may live and think as human beings” (p. 20). The recovery of a community based on relationships with one another, including the Lakota concept of *Mitakuye Oyasin* (that we are all related), is central to his work. Similarly, Kanth (2017, p. 267) makes the powerful observation that whilst the westernized (he calls this Anglo-Norman) peoples are micro-oriented and reductionist in extremis, they are at a loss when it comes to putting the pieces back together: a good metaphor for what has been done to both planet, and peoples.

These transitions are directly culpable in obscuring an insight that is considered common across numerous indigenous and traditional life-ways: that the various capacities for instinctual and intuitive knowledge which accompanies these life-ways are not, in fact, primitive ‘magic’ or superstition, but are *endemic* to the human species. This is not to argue that certain groups of people are more, or less, instinctual and intuitive than others, nor is it a revival of the ‘noble savage’ argument, which elevates a mythic ‘primitive nobility’ of indigenous peoples in ways that are essentially racist. Conversely, this position, which is shared by a number of indigenous and non-indigenous thinkers (and is exemplified

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<sup>9</sup> There are many other examples that could be given here, extending right up to the present day. For example, in greater Europe many millions perished in the papal efforts to retain political and spiritual supremacy during the Middle Ages. This was followed by the workings of the Inquisition, progressive industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of modern scientific medicine (which eradicated all practices that were deemed to be superstitious, such as those practices labeled ‘witchcraft’). As was observed over a hundred years ago: “The noon of the papacy was the midnight of the world” (Wylie 1874, p. 18).

in the collective work of the Bioneers),<sup>10</sup> is that we have forgotten what it is to be human, and how to live well on our shared planet. This *includes* many who have been affected by colonialism; that is, many contemporary communities of indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Eurocentric ideologies also emphasize ‘universal truths’ which conceal not only the pre-colonial histories and life ways of indigenous and traditionally living peoples, but the histories of Eurocentrism itself. Metis scholar Howard Adams (1995) writes, with sentiments that could be extended to encompass all peoples affected by the global colonial project of domination:

The establishment requires documented ‘proof’ that corroborates its prejudices and upholds the dominant Euro-American ruling-class perspective. Academics discredit Aboriginals’ historical perspectives as ‘myth’ or ‘advocacy,’ and thus denigrate the works of Indian and Metis historians. White historians are obviously unaware of their rampant biases and subjectivity [ . . . ] Eurocentric interpretations create a false consciousness among the colonists and the colonized. Eurocentrism does not allow for alternatives and thereby deceives Aboriginal peoples into believing that their history can be acquired only through the colonizer’s institutions. Rather than critically attacking their oppressor’s dogma, indigenous elites have accepted historical distortions to an alarming extent. Many Aboriginal academics are intellectual captives and have become part of the colonizer’s regime [ . . . writing] Indian and Metis history from a strictly Eurocentric and racist interpretation (pp. 31–33).

Adams makes one further, critical, point, which is especially relevant given that he is one of the very few indigenous academic voices writing about this subject in the 1990s, or perhaps (more accurately), being *published* in this time. He writes that an authentic Aboriginal consciousness “is an intrinsic or inner essence that lies somewhere between instinct and intuition, and it evolves from the humanness and spirituality of our collective, Aboriginal community. Without an indigenous consciousness, Indians, Metis, and Inuit people only claim to Aboriginality is race and heritage. That is not enough to achieve true liberation” (ibid, p. 45).

I argue with these scholars, and Cree philosopher and educator, Dwayne Donald (2010) in his statement that colonization is “an extended process of denying relationships. Everybody has been colonized. It doesn’t matter what color your skin is, or where you’re from . . . Decolonization can only occur when we face each other across these historical divides.” That is to say that we have all been collectively colonized, over a very long time, out of this integrated and intuitive relationship with other humans, other species, and the world around us.

This concept of decolonization is categorically separate from physical de-colonial processes (such as colonial withdrawal from colonized nations) and the various concepts of post-colonial intervention which also come under this heading. Whilst, as decolonization scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has argued, colonialism is a *remembered* phenomenon, experienced since the Age of Exploration (and one that has made minorities of the indigenous people who were once sovereign in their lands), I posit that the colonization of the mind and body goes back further, into ancient ancestral places long abandoned by those who have since stretched across the world.

<sup>10</sup> The *Bioneers* is a global organisation that is committed to increasing socio-ecological literacy through combining scientific and indigenous knowledge. Speakers at their yearly conference are recorded and the proceedings are publically available on YouTube.

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Corntassel writes about this issue, quoting the words of Mohawk representatives Kanen’tokon Hemlock, Tyler Hemlock and Kahnawiiio Dione: “we’re doing our best in a lot of areas, but as a community we really have to ask ourselves that question of what are we doing? When we look at our community and seeing so much land being clear-cut; so many of the swamp and marshlands being land-filled; so many dump-sites. There’s all these things within our own little community and we’re supposed to be the Indigenous examples of living healthy and sustainably with the environment” (Corntassel 2012, p. 87). Corntassel goes on to add: “Being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one’s relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization. Whether through ceremony or through other ways that Indigenous peoples (re)connect to the natural world, processes of resurgence are often contentious and reflect the spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political scope of the struggle” (ibid, p. 88).

Traditional and indigenous peoples possess a *living* memory of their colonization, a generally violent transition with tragic consequences, made even more potent by the thoroughness with which traditional ways of living were destroyed. These violences have been historically justified by values that derive from Christian cosmological ideas, such as exceptionalism, progress (teleology), proselytizing, piety, salvation by works, and fear of God. This way of absorbing and eventually eliminating local ways of life progressively achieves absolute dislocation from cultural traditions and place over an extended period of time. Kanth (2017) calls it an ‘export template’, characterized primarily by its capacity for destruction. Colonialism and globalization are the most recent incarnations of focused colonization processes, with the goal of ‘westernizing’ through instilling replacement institutions (both social and economic), whilst displacing people from place in systematic ways.

Modern examples of colonialism in action are illustrative of how this works: note the focus on breaking the bonds of tradition, with place, and between elders and the younger generation. Families and communities are often physically displaced from their homes (to reserves, reservations, ghettos, or urban sectors), severing their kinship with place. A sector of the community can be employed in (or bound to) work away from home, compelling labor from husbands, fathers, and sons for mining, logging, and other industrial labor forces. Finally, child removal policies (such as in the Americas, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Greenland, and elsewhere), directly impact the ability of communities to pass on traditions through child rearing and education, with profound intergenerational effects. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and does not include assimilation by choice, or assimilation as a result of forced economic adaptation or acquiescence to political regimes.

None of this replacement process happens under the heading of ‘a culture’, and yet what we refer to as ‘western’ is very much a culture: albeit, a broken culture in dire need of refashioning and repair. Westernization is the process of adopting a particular culture with a very specific history in which certain ‘modern’ ideas are conceived of as valuable. *How* this happens is through extended colonization. Kanth (2017) defines it in a way that simply could not be put more clearly, as:

a misguided *mélange* of diverse elements involving: a specious, quantitative view of ‘progress,’ a related materialist calculus of happiness, a misplaced, suicidal stress on asocial individuation as a societal ideal, a stark reduction of human roles solely to their part in the accumulation process (producer, consumer, etc.), a reductionist scientism that is also privileged as a theology that must be obeyed, a philosophical flaunt of elevating the human as ‘above’ nature, with the latter seen as no more than a manipulable, disposable tool, and a ruthless proclivity to use force, ironically, to ‘free’ us all of any vestiges of any ‘culture’ than disdains its vulgar visions (p. 268).

This constructed culture lacks the cohesiveness which arises from a long-established culture that is emplaced. As Kanth reiterates repeatedly in his work, this construction has no ‘moral core’ as it is not based on the affective bonds between people that, traditionally, hold a “functional culture” together (and is not limited to either its capitalist or communist variations) (ibid, pp. 248–49). Although the older histories of colonization are more difficult to weave together, it becomes obvious that at some point in their ancestral lineages, every human has been displaced by these very mechanisms. These same processes that we associate with colonial violence—the assimilation techniques, introduction of oppressive infrastructures, indices of ‘progress’ linked to power, ascension of hegemonic forces, encouragement of urban work practices, and conformity in the name of betterment—have all been used before. The colonials (themselves, colonized in this way) were following in an already long-established tradition.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> To be very clear on this point, there are very obvious examples of the continuance of colonialism across the ‘post-colonial’ world that have been perpetuated by successive governments, institutions, and communities in ways which show absolutely no respect for indigenous peoples, nor aid their recovery from colonial violences. I am in no way adopting an apologist

Colonization now continues through the global distribution of secularized westernized institutions and power structures which undermine and ultimately, replace, the cosmological foundations of non-western cultural complexes with a post-Christian, techno-capitalist, scientifically-privileged, and isolationist culture which has the proven capacity to re-orient both axiology and praxis over a number of generations. I argue that the core socio-ecological issues we face, as a species, are a by-product of this very long and complex process of colonizing people the world over with an anti-ecological, myopic, and dislocating philosophy, resulting in an artificial and unsustainable worldview that, nonetheless, appears coherent and familiar. As philosopher Régis Debray (2000, p. 15) has written, “optimal transmission is transmission forgotten”; and indeed, we have forgotten. The radical step I am suggesting is to recognize that the type of interspecies and ecological awareness that is evident within traditional and indigenous life-ways was normal before the rise of the west, and a functional and reverent way of living respectfully in place. If all of our ancestors were linked to places and traditions similar in kind, perhaps it is to those who can remember being colonized who we should turn to for answers? The late John Mohawk outlined this same notion in 1997:

We’ve been living through this very, very terrible period of conquest [...] there’s a possibility now of gathering consciousness among many hundreds of millions of people about how this is not only necessary but is a very good thing, a positive thing [...] I think that when we talk about re-indigenization, we need a much larger, bigger umbrella to understand it. It is not necessarily about the Indigenous Peoples of a specific place; it’s about re-indigenizing the peoples of the planet [...] We have to reach ordinary, everyday people. Ordinary, everyday people have to have their sense of moral injustice ignited. It has to be raised a bit. They have to come to understand that they are called upon to care about what happens to the peoples and living things of this world. That’s a huge job, but that’s the called-upon spiritual call of the re-indigenization of the world (in Cajete et al. 2008, pp. 254–60).

#### 4. Steps to Decolonization

In an online essay, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2016), tracks the lineage and legacy of ‘the west’ all the way back to Herodotus (circa 5BCE), and concludes that western civilization, and western culture, are ideas that justify racism and, more recently, Islamophobia. Beset with difficulties, he outlines this concept of western culture as the expression of an ‘essence’ linked to an identity that survives through time and space:

[From] the late middle ages until now, people have thought of the best in the culture of Greece and Rome as a civilisational inheritance, passed on like a precious golden nugget, dug out of the earth by the Greeks, transferred, when the Roman empire conquered them, to Rome. Partitioned between the Flemish and Florentine courts and the Venetian Republic in the Renaissance, its fragments passed through cities such as Avignon, Paris, Amsterdam, Weimar, Edinburgh and London, and were finally reunited—pieced together like the broken shards of a Grecian urn—in the academies of Europe and the United States [ . . . ] How have we managed to tell ourselves that we are rightful inheritors of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant, when the stuff of our existence is more Beyoncé and Burger King?

Appiah is calling out the great illusion that this western idea has some cohesiveness to it, when what actually went into the construction of ‘the west’ is anything but glamorous. Appropriations of science, technology and philosophy (at least, the coherent parts) are largely stolen goods added to the ‘corpus’ of the late great Western culture over centuries of pillage from China, India, Near Eastern cultural complexes, and even the Iroquois Confederacy, from which America ‘borrowed’ and then

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position here, rather, I am emphasizing that the unacceptable behaviors of those who continue the colonial project in contemporary times have a history that needs to be considered in terms that go beyond settler-colonial discourses.

mutated the principles of dynamic governance. For the US, as flagship for all that is western, this doesn't even leave Beyoncé, Burger King, Coca Cola, McDonald's and Disneyland, as none of these, not even the silver screens of Hollywood, are an entirely local (that is, Native) initiative.

If the idea of the west is fundamentally broken, as Appiah argues (and I agree with), then we need new and novel ways of thinking about our place in the world, and to bring into alignment the complex contradictions required for maintaining our shared and diverse communities. Postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (2003, p. 77) offers similar thoughts, and suggests that we consider ourselves as planetary beings who might embrace our differences, rather than exhaust them through the combination of colonization, globalization and consumerism. The planet, as she reminds us, is ecological—we cannot be separate from it, and even more obviously, from each other, except by way of our reified concepts of alterity.

According to the biologist, Edward O. Wilson (2012, para. 13), the struggle of 'us versus me' will direct people towards self-interest if they feel they are under threat. Empathy, altruism, and cooperation are key survival traits for our species (evidenced by acts of self-sacrifice, which are honored with great ceremony), however, these are difficult to maintain in societies characterized by alienation and perpetual struggles for rights and resources. Buddhist biologist John Stanley, with Buddhist author David Loy expand on Wilson's idea: "By glorifying self-concern as never before, consumerism generates a mental environment of endless competition. It undermines empathy, altruism and cooperation" (Stanley and Loy 2013, p. 42).

Fear of difference, or being ousted by the perceived majority, is also a very real component of the modern societal condition with a reasonable basis for its perception as a threat. Whilst fear is natural for the survival of all animals and has its good uses (Tuan 1980), it is a vulnerability that can be exploited by others. Any animal, including humans, will defer to an authority figure far more readily when it is under threat than when it is calm, which means obedience (and social control) can prove relatively easy to secure under the sort of conditions commonly experienced by people living in modern, urban, westernized societies. Furthermore, the wider concern for the survival of our species seems to falter if it involves breaking with the group, as for any individual or small group to go against a dominant majority has been historically quite dangerous, often resulting in violence and death.

Sociologist Frank Furedi (2006, p. 176) has argued that modern fear has the appearance of being quite independent: we use the precautionary principle (be careful or else), and unspecific and diffuse terms like 'stress', 'risk', 'trauma', and 'vulnerability' which work to verify the existence of fear in its own right, rather than a fear of some named threat. The absence of clear sources of authority and the rise of the individual over and above cohesive communities heightens anxiety, which is by definition, a fear of unknown danger.

This 'societal condition', if that is an appropriate term for it, is a part of what deep ecologist Joanna Macy (and other systems thinkers, such as Fritjof Capra) call a *crisis of perception*, or a crisis which is, at root, created by human consciousness. Macy (2013) writes that this crisis is compounded by a dysfunctional view of ourselves as individualized and disconnected from others, and the greater environment.

It is the delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries; that it is so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and consume; and that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or a species, we can be immune to what we do to other beings (pp. 149–50).

In contemplating a way out of this state, Macy aligns herself with ways of relational thinking common in traditional and indigenous life-ways by proposing (Naess 1988) the concept of the *ecological self*. The premise is simple: instead of self-identifying only with the 'skin-encapsulated ego', an expanded sense of self *includes* the tree, the wolf, and the spider. Neither virtues, nor moral exhortation, are required: "Sermons seldom hinder us from following our self interest as we conceive it" (ibid, p. 155). And as Naess (1988) himself wrote: "We need environmental ethics, but when people feel they

unselfishly give up, even sacrifice, their interest in order to show love for nature, this is probably in the long run a treacherous basis for ecology. Through broader identification, they may come to see their own interest served by environmental protection, through genuine self-love, love of a widened and deepened self" (p. 24).

From this perspective, as I would not cut off my leg (being part of my body), the idea of poisoning a river or destroying the Amazon becomes ridiculous. As Macy says, the trees are our external lungs. Drawing upon the work of fellow systems thinker, Gregory Bateson, Macy writes that the total self-corrective unit that processes information ('us,' or the self) is an open, self-organizing *system*, the boundaries of which do not at all coincide with the boundaries of the body. Breathing, thinking, and acting all occur *interactively* as currents of matter, energy, and information move through our bodies (Macy 2013, pp. 150–51).

This crisis of perception is founded in an outmoded worldview in which it was also promoted that humans are elevated as the masters of the world and, thus, are in possession of a license to exploit it (Boulot and Sungaila 2012; Kofman and Senge 1993). The 'encirclement' of the autonomous human by the environs (literally, meaning to surround) further encodes this separation in language. Environment is fragmented into urban and wild, garden and forest, built, suburban, lifestyle, and so on, with degrees of encroachment by other species permitted, or not, according to further classificatory rubrics. The late eco-philosopher Val Plumwood (2009) called this the delusion that we are *ecologically invulnerable* and outside nature, leading to "the failure to understand our ecological identities and dependencies on nature" (p. 117). This is both a peculiar, and an eminently modern dilemma. Perhaps we no longer know *what* we are?

Abram (1996), who appears to have devoted every word he has written to trying to *remind* us of these connections, puts it this way:

For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings [ . . . ] And from all these relationships our collective sensibilities were nourished (p. ix).

There is plenty of conjecture as to the proper manner in which to categorize human instinct (which appears to be Abrams' focus) and intuition, most of which is forced into a cognitive, scientific, or religious mode of comprehension, and all of which grazes being deemed supernatural, or impossible. In different ways, both Macy and Abram point to, the idea that 'the human' may *not* be as we have typically conceived of it in westernized terms: instincts are considered to be residual capacities that stem from our animal origins, and intuition is considered an oddity; you cannot interpret 'nature in the active voice', as Plumwood (2009) refers to it, with continued reference to the old, established, westernized cosmology. We need new origin stories. It is, as Zen teacher Susan Murphy (2013) writes,

possible to live straight on to our reality instead of hiding out from it in ten thousand different ways. To do so, first we have to see through the way our sense of the world has been framed by stories that form the bedrock of our civilization, stories that pose nature as a dubious force to be mastered and utilized, or put more bluntly, raped and pillaged for profit (p. 121).

Decolonizing our westernized selves, or seeing through these stories (as Murphy phrases it), becomes central to "engaging with the new reality breaking upon our heads" (ibid). If we, as a species, are to collectively overcome our shared sense of impending socio-ecological crises, then we have recover an understanding of what 'the human' really is, or at least begin to open up to the possibilities of what might be underneath the delusions we have about what clever tool-makers we are. Yes, humans *are* remarkable—but the inventory of what is considered remarkable in westernized contexts differs profoundly from what countless traditional and indigenous communities consider as

such. Four Arrows' observation here is salient. "Most people assume that we must use the 'civilized' wisdom of the past several thousand years as a baseline to establish future goals for solving problems . . . [however,] research shows that when we operated under our Indigenous worldview we fared much better. Deeply acknowledging these facts might enable us to aim much higher" (Arrows 2016, pp. 9–11).

Many of the strengths found within traditional place-based communities are derived from very different cosmological arrangements to those found in predominantly westernized societies. This is not to suggest that there is always some kind of romantic or mythic harmony between humans and their environments, but that even in non conservation-oriented communities, there is an awareness of how to sustain basic reliance practices, as necessary. This is similar to Macy's concept of the ecological self. It *matters* how certain resources are regarded, because it directly impacts upon the continuance and health of the community. In Kanth's terms, this is *not* a utopia to be achieved, but an already-achieved, long-standing, way of 'being in place', strengthened by the affective bonds of community, which has been observed well before the onset of destructive modernist ideas (pp. 82–83).

Consider an example from Warlpiri Country, in Australia. As anthropologist, Miles Holmes, and Warlpiri elder and scholar, Wanta Jampijinpa (W.P.), write, no Warlpiri person would distinguish ecology from any other dimensions of their lives: "*Look at it this way. This ngurra-kurlu [worldview] is palka [body, substance, presence]: he's got his own heart, he's got his own kidneys, he's got his own liver. If you take one of them away, his whole body will drop . . .*" (Holmes and Jampijinpa 2013, n.p.).

From a Warlpiri perspective, the *ngurra-kurlu* worldview is a body of relations, or dependencies. It is the connections, rather than the individual elements, that are of primary relevance. Ecological and systems scholars (Gregory Bateson and Arne Naess are both exceptional examples) have been trying to teach these ideas for a very long time, however, scholarly and social comprehension of what it *really means* to be immersed in the constant motion of relations with nature has been slow to catch on. Sustainability discourses seem mired in confusion as to what it is we are trying to sustain, whereas the addition of ecological systems thinking in the spirit of traditional and indigenous conceptions of a 'continuance' between humans and 'nature' have the capacity to re-orient these. In his ground-breaking work *Designing Regenerative Cultures*, Daniel Christian Wahl (2016) writes that "what we are actually trying to sustain is the underlying pattern of health, resilience and adaptability that maintain the planet in a condition where life as a whole can flourish. Design for sustainability is, ultimately, design for human and planetary health (p. 43).

This is a very good, utilitarian reason for paying closer attention to how traditional peoples have lived and what they consider useful to know. Whatever shape it appears in, however, cosmologies (or origin stories) remain *inherently linked* to the pragmatic aspects of sustaining a human community, which means that interrogating cosmological matters becomes central to comprehending how a worldview actually works. The idea of reverence (the indigenous or eco-spiritual consideration for nature, or self-as-nature) and utilitarian principles are *not* mutually exclusive, but mutually *dependent* upon one another to be successful.

Another very good reason for considering traditional practices is already proven by history, as noted by the ethnoecologist Gene Anderson (2014):

[If] people of traditional and local cultures and societies have solved these problems, or even done a little better than modern humanity has done, we can learn from those other cultures. Indeed many other societies have managed the world a great deal less destructively [ . . . supporting] large populations over long time periods without destroying their environments (p. 15).

The suggestion I am making here is that, if our shared global socio-ecological circumstances are *also* inherently linked to the relationship between cosmology and practice, and one model has become dominant, then traditional and indigenous communities may have better models. The issue is that the coherence of these models has been obscured by the very crisis of perception, or worldview, that

is under critique here, which sets different markers of value or usefulness for types and levels of knowledge, along with different criteria for what is, and is not, possible.

What appears to be emerging from these debates (and others) is that the westernized way of organizing spiritual, scientific, and cultural knowledge offers us no suitable frameworks for dealing with rapid ecological or even urban change. As [Wilson \(2012, para. 7.4\)](#) says, we have a Stars Wars civilization with Stone Age emotions, and our conquest of the earth has happened so fast that the biosphere has not had time to adjust. Luckily, heresy on this side of the river may not be so on the other side.

## 5. Being ‘Told’ on Your Mind

Countless indigenous nations have employed traditional ecological management strategies that have comprised of an awareness of, and responsibility for, human dependence upon the natural world. These are reckoned in holistic and multi-layered models which vary from place to place, and yet are largely comparable in their ethic of respect, reciprocity, relationship, reverence, and the maintenance of protocols, both ritual, and practical. Such protocols secure the continuance of traditional community life in ecologically sustainable ways. Oren Lyons Jr. (of the Onondaga Nation, Haudenosaunee) has said: “There’s no habeas corpus in natural law. You either do, or you don’t. If you don’t, you pay [ . . . ] The first peace comes with your mother, Mother Earth” ([Lyons Jr. 2013, pp. 9–11](#)).

Law is also fundamental to an indigenous Australian worldview, and is a word that denotes a code of living and associated values based on traditions established by living and spiritual ancestors, both human and more-than-human, which encompasses the entirety of the Australian history, Country (or, landscape), and the life that inhabits it. Law, Country, and Dreaming, when considered together, convey a worldview that has, at its heart, an ethic of *how to be* in the world. Aboriginal philosopher, Mary [Graham \(1999, p. 105\)](#) identifies two basic precepts central to how this worldview is organized: firstly, The Land (often called Country) is the Law, and, secondly, *you are not alone in the world*. By way of elucidation regarding the first:

The land is a sacred entity, not property or real estate; it is the great mother of all humanity. The Dreaming is a combination of meaning (about life and all reality), and an action guide to living. The two most important kinds of relationship in life are, firstly, those between land and people and, secondly, those amongst people themselves, the second being always contingent upon the first [ . . . ] all meaning comes from land (*ibid*, p. 106).

Graham’s second precept hinges on two related aspects of indigenous Australian ways of being, kinship and Law.<sup>13</sup> The kinship system employed extends into the land, and is organized into clans, each of which has their own Dreaming, which is a cosmological explanation of existence within place.<sup>14</sup> Each person has a number of relationships to other beings: ancestral, mythic, and land-based, although these are not distinctly separate categories. Unlike westernized concepts of animate/inanimate, there is no simplistic distinction between the living and non-living, as such, but a contrast drawn between presence (i.e., a full water hole) and absence (an empty water hole), which is different to the concept of ‘death’ or inanimacy. As a parallel, consider the example given by anthropologist, Colin [Scott \(2006\)](#), who has lived and worked primarily with James Bay Cree. He observed that, in a Cree worldview, there

<sup>13</sup> Graham’s description of Aboriginal understandings of human motivations echo E.O. Wilson’s almost exactly. She writes: “The Aboriginal understanding posits that the tendency to possess is more deeply embedded in the human psyche than is the tendency to share [ . . . ] possessiveness precedes altruism and it therefore takes a higher order of abilities to maintain ‘sharing’ behavior than it takes to demonstrate possessive behavior [ . . . ] When the Aboriginal child learns to share, he or she is given food and then invited to give it back; social obligations are pointed out and possessiveness gently discouraged” ([Graham 1999, p. 112](#)).

<sup>14</sup> The English word Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is rejected by some Aboriginal communities as it presumes reference to a past and another place, rather than a Creation Time that is ongoing and happening now, with people, place and the ancestors converging in a co-creative non-linear present.

is no inanimate opposite to their most inclusive category for the living: *iyiyuu*. Seeking a comparative, he writes:

I more recently asked an eastern Torres Strait Islander, a man with a local reputation for philosophical insight, to give me the most inclusive term in the Miriam language for 'life' or 'living things.' He responded without hesitation, *idid lu*. But when I asked him for a term for non-living things, he was stumped. He remarked, 'we have a word for things which have died [ . . . ] but in our way of thinking, everything, animals, winds, stars are *idid lu*.' So living things pass through some process of disintegration, but this passage is not a transition to inanimacy (p. 61).

Similarly, indigenous Australian ways of being do not conform (and have never conformed) to the idea of animism, existing as it does in relation with a presumed inanimate opposite. The world is saturated with life, and death is not conceived of as 'separation'. Graham (1999, p. 111) grounds her description of the sacred web of connections in what she calls a 'psychic level' of behavior common among natural entities, as grounded in common relation to the land. Language has various 'levels' in this conception, as I will explore: from instinctual 'knowing', to the communication that comes through 'paying attention', to opening to intuitive relationships and being 'told' things of use, or value, by the various interlocutors who are a part of a more-than-human world. Language (which is a broader category than simple verbal exchange, although it *includes* this) is operative amongst and between all entities in this way of being. Humans are not alone because they are connected and made by way of relations with a range of beings with whom they maintain relationships. Notice that it is the relation that makes the person, not the other way around. Graham writes:

To behave as if you are a discrete entity or a conscious isolate is to limit yourself to being an observer in an observed world [ . . . the sacred] resides in the relationship between the human spirit and the natural life force. When there is a breach between the two, or rather, when the link between the two is weakened, then a human being becomes a totally individuated self [ . . . ] loneliness and alienation envelops the individual [ . . . ] the discrete individual then has to arm itself not just literally against other discrete individuals, but against its environment [ . . . ] (ibid, pp. 105–10).

Reflecting on how this worldview works, Graham points to collective responsibility for land and others, a communal sense of identity, and a deep appreciation of what it means to be human:

Aboriginal Law is natural law, in that if it was legislated at all, this was done not by humans, but by the spiritual ancestors of the Dreaming, so that Aboriginal Law is incapable of being added to, amended or repealed by any human agency [ . . . ] this Law was/is always an attempt to understand what it is that makes us human [ . . . ] Aboriginal Law could be said to be both an action guide to living and a guide to understanding reality itself, especially in relation to land as the basis for all meaning (ibid, pp. 115–16).

Warlpiri aboriginal elders, in the Tanami Desert region of central Australia, have a worldview described in terms aligned with what Graham is referring to. The current term they employ for this is *ngurra-kurlu*, which is interpreted as 'from country' or 'country within [people]' and it embodies the fundamental Warlpiri ethic of reciprocity between people and land (Holmes and Jampijinpa 2013). Holmes and Jampijinpa have stressed that each entity in a relation supports the healthy functioning of the other. *Ngurra-kurlu* was formulated inside and outside of community, and is based upon five elements: law (guiding principles), skin (responsibilities to people/country), ceremony (education and unity), language (communication between the elements), and country (home and identity). In Warlpiri worldview, the relation between Dreaming and Law is described in this way:

For Warlpiri, *kuruwarri* [law] is the highest reference for direction about how to live in the world. It is a strict but adaptable code that can be conceived of at multiple levels of

abstraction. In its most expansive sense, *kuruwarri* is the period widely known as ‘the dreaming’ [...] During the dreaming, ancestral beings traveled over the landscape and, through actions such as singing, hunting, copulating, and performing ceremonies, created all the features of the physical and social world. The dreaming ancestors are simultaneously both human beings and either nonhuman species or phenomena such as weather events. The dreaming period continues in the present day in that ancestral beings are manifest throughout Warlpiri country as landforms, elements, and organisms and can interact with Warlpiri through their cultural practices. The law is based in the narratives describing the dreaming ancestors’ journeys [ . . . ]

*“See that tree. It is shedding its bark. No, we didn’t tell it to do that. That is just its purpose, the kuruwarri [law] for that thing [...] If a plant is edible that is its kuruwarri. But it might also be there to teach yapa [aboriginal people] something. Like the seasons; they tell you what to do . . . ”* (ibid).

Note that he says ‘they tell you’—this description recurs again and again in indigenous accounts of how knowing happens when it is not limited by mental considerations or assumptions regarding the nature of the universe (Deloria Jr. 1978). The same connection between following Law, and being ‘told’ also figures in Lyons’ account of a Six Nations worldview.

The spiritual side of the natural world is absolute. Our instructions—and I’m talking about for all human beings—our instructions are to get along. Understand what these laws are. Get along with laws, and support them and work with them. We were told a long time ago that if you do that, life is endless. It just continues on and on in great cycles of regeneration (Lyons Jr. 2013, p. 9).

In a worldview that is shared in concept (if not strictly in detail) across indigenous worldviews, humans are not the only ones who are acting on/in the world, nor the only one’s ‘telling’ (Rose 2013). Abram is almost offhand about the obviousness of this idea. He says our own ‘chatter’ is a response to the world, so it follows that myriad things are also listening, or attending, to what we are doing. In fact, in our quest to represent, he writes, we have forgotten our etiquette, talking about entities behind their backs, as if they were not participants in our lives (Abram 2010, pp. 172–75). Plumwood (2009) offers similar observations in her work, as do others such as anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1992, 2004, 2011, 2013), who goes to great lengths to try and detail how active intelligences operate in the more-than-human world, as described from indigenous Australian perspectives.

Being ‘told’ is only possible outside of an anthropocentric worldview (unless the inner voice is attributed to divinities, such as Jesus and others considered able to ‘speak’ to the heart or mind). Being told may occur as you are, for example, sitting at a particular place, in which case the communicator is both the place and the ‘person’ with whom you are in relation. As Rose (2013) writes: “To live in a world of sentience is to be surrounded by others who are sentient” (p. 100). Being told appears in living, origin, and ‘good conduct’ or (ethical stories) as detailing *how to be* in the world, generally by an emissary (human or otherwise) who details the tenets of natural law and correct behavior (which can be general, or specific to the place being occupied at the time). This is part of the accepted context of many traditional and indigenous knowledge transmission systems and considered pedagogical, or a part of educational knowledge-yielding training systems. The trace of this can also be found in the traditional fable, or proverb, which conveys some kind of wisdom that is designed to be instructional.

In addition, the integrity of a person relaying the wisdom of such an event back to the community is not queried in the same manner it might be within atomized, rather than close-knit, communities. To follow two notable Native scholars, Vine Deloria Jr. (1978) and Viola Cordova (2007), the reality of these types of experience is accepted and confronted, rather than rejected as invalid. There is no reason to assume the ‘incorrectness’ of another person’s experience, simply because it does not coincide with one’s own. Suspicion (be it of motive, or content) is weighed differently when there are long-established kin relations. Consensus is quantifiable, interpretation can be shared with others,

and the content is weighed in utilitarian terms, in that what is good to know is *useful* in some way. Philosopher Adam Arola (2011), of the Ojibwe Anishinaabe, writes:

[There is a] shared tendency in the pragmatic tradition and the indigenous philosophical traditions of North America to have a conception of truth that is both universally applicable but also eminently revisable; for any account of truth *qua* function can be communicated as the *best* thing to believe, the best way to accomplish a task, that we know so far. But openness to the possibility that experience may show us superior ways to accomplish a task indicates that this conception of truth is always understood to be flexible and at the mercy of what is shown in experience (p. 558).

The idea here is to pay attention so as to be always open to the 'tell'; to make time for whatever or whoever is delivering the message. The trouble is how to explain what is called 'language', and yet, is something more. Abram (2010), in trying to articulate his own more encompassing view, writes that:

When we speak of 'language', we speak of an ability to communicate, a power to convey information across a thickness of space and time, a means whereby beings at some distance from one another nonetheless manage to apprise each other of their current feelings or thoughts. As humans, we rely upon a complex web of mostly discrete, spoken sounds to accomplish our communication, and so it's natural that we associate language with such verbal intercourse. Unfortunately, this association has led many to assume that language is an exclusive attribute of our species . . . It is an exceedingly self-serving assumption (pp. 166–67).

Whilst Abram is trained on instinct as his primary means of describing human animal kinship and communication, the other aspect of communication is more intuitive. Whilst instinct is immediate (and somehow primal) in terms of *how* things are articulated, intuitive knowing through being told is different, although, according to indigenous peoples, both modes of being are equally shared across species . . . and mountain (people), river (people), weather (people), and so forth.

How this kind of 'telling' happens can vary. The message could be in 'Indian' or a local dialect, as anthropologists Paul Nadasdy and Richard Nelson detail. In a Koyukon (Alaskan) worldview, the animals understand human speech. "Each animal knows way more than you do. We always heard that from the old people when they told us never to bother anything unless we really needed it" (Nelson 1983, p. 227). Or, regarding the Kluane First Nations worldview: "I was told explicitly more than once that although animals in Kluane country probably cannot speak English, they most definitely can speak Indian" (Nadasdy 2007, p. 34).

Knowledge can also be directly received, described as 'spoken in your head'. In Australia, one of Deborah Rose's Aboriginal teachers, Old Jimmy Manngaiyarri, explains how he knows which way to go. He says the earth 'tells' him. When Rose asks, "How does it tell you?" Old Jimmy answers:

on your mind. Earth got to tell you all thing. Might be say: 'Ah, you leave me. What for you go away? You go over there you get hurt.' You got to go only what this earth tell you to. Where you going to go, you going to go right way. That's the way you got to follow this earth. Tell you everything right way [ . . . ] That's nobody been tell you and me to do that? This earth tell you! In your memory. Well that's the way. You and me can't miss. Do it properly, looking after ourselves. Do the right thing. This earth understand EVERYthing. Think on your memory now! You got that word from this earth (in Rose 2013, p. 105).

Rose is left frustrated by this description, asking: "How do we learn the attention that would enable us to admit earth 'words' into our lives?" (ibid). The suggestion I want to make to her by way of response has been outlined already: recovering our instinct, our intuitions, and remembering *what we are* through displacing the veil of artificiality that has resulted from these lengthy processes of westernization. A particular kind of intimacy with habitat and knowledge of how the human animal

'works', is modeled beautifully within these traditional and indigenous ways of being if we choose to pay attention to the instructions given in countless ethnographic accounts.

In his wonderful account of life in Arctic worlds, Barry Lopez (2001) writes that "something eerie ties us to the world of animals. Sometimes the animals pull you backward into it. You share hunger and fear with them like salt in blood [ . . . ] Few things provoke like the presence of wild animals. They pull at us like tidal currents with questions of volition; of ethical involvement, of ancestry" (para. 9.6). If we allow ourselves to be considered animals then these instinctual feelings should be of interest.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Learning to be Human (again)

What are permitted as legitimate topics of inquiry in an academic context can be heavily restricted, with the exception of those modes of scholarship which engage a degree of political correctness with regards to 'cultural otherness'. Gillian Bennett (1987), a folklorist who studies afterlife beliefs, writes that: "No-one will tackle the subject because it is disreputable, and it remains disreputable because no one will tackle it" (p. 13). I have elsewhere called this racist, as the 'magical gloss of cultural difference' allows for just about any phenomenon in non-westernized contexts, whilst simultaneously banning the serious investigation of intuitive faculties 'closer to home', aligning these with religion, or even madness (Sepie 2016a).

Intuition, like the religious 'miracle', is generally considered an oddity or anomaly. We do have some words for it, such as second sight (or, 'the sight'), the sixth sense, clairvoyance, clairaudience, and others, however, these are considered as 'spiritual beliefs' and studied by scholars of religion. They are not necessarily considered to be *real*, but 'true for those who believe'. Interestingly, (as I have quietly tested for over twenty years), when there is little to no chance of such experiences being documented or publicly exposed, many westernized individuals will readily recall at least a few anecdotal accounts of foresight, sixth sense, direct insight, or verified intuition.

There are also countless ethnographic examples the world over that document in great detail case studies such as the one Rose explores, and plenty of Old Jimmy Mangaiyarri's who will explain clearly and directly how the 'tell' works. Jeremy Narby, in his work alongside Ashaninka communities in the Peruvian Amazon, was regularly confronted with the statement that local ecological knowledge came from the *ayahuasqueros*, or shamans, who said that their knowledge of plants came from the plants themselves. In his discussion of ayahuasca (the primary visionary botanical brew used by the *ayahuasqueros* in their role as healers and mediators with the spirit world), he notes that the very combination of the elements required for the brew is beyond 'rationality', as the westernized mind may conceive of it:

So here are people without electron microscopes who choose, among some 80,000 Amazonian plant species, the leaves of a bush containing a hallucinogenic brain hormone, which they combine with a vine containing substances that inactivate an enzyme of the digestive tract, which would otherwise block the hallucinogenic effect [ . . . ] and when one asks them how they know these things, they say their knowledge comes directly from the hallucinogenic plants (Narby 1999, p. 11).

Although the botanical knowledge of indigenous Amazonians astonishes scientists, there is no acceptable explanation beyond the assertion that their extensive knowledge must be acquired through 'trial and error'. The related claim, that *ayahuasqueros* acquire communications directly from the ayahuasca brew, detailing the rest of their extensive medicinal repertoire (equally as impressive), is just beyond the explanatory faculties of scientists. The discussion as to how their knowledge is acquired,

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<sup>15</sup> Authors such as the brilliant polymath, Lyall Watson, biologist Rupert Sheldrake, Stanley Krippner and others, have been detailing what might be thought of as extraordinary animal behaviors for some years now, whilst human equivalents are generally subsumed under the headings of 'culture' (non-Western), 'religion' (specifically non-Christian) or 'parapsychology' (not legitimate). (See Sheldrake 1991, 2011; Watson 1973, 1986, 1987; Webb 2013).

and how their medicine works, has been put aside in favor of the greater objective of appropriating ‘shaman pharmaceuticals’ for western doctors. Much of what is happening in these accounts comes down to understanding relationship, but not in the manner assumed by Narby’s scientists.

Consider the explanation of Arola, who conveys a Native American, yet philosophical, position on ‘knowing’. He writes that the only way to know what a bird *is* (for example), comes via understanding the web of relations in which it participates. It is in a *particular* place, at a *particular* time, and it plays a part in a structure of relations that is larger than the bird itself. ‘Knowing’ the bird is therefore dependent upon knowing its relation to the whole and yet, realizing that the relationship is fluid and thus, ever changing. In Arola’s work:

An indigenous comportment . . . must perpetually attend to the fact that the manner in which what is shows itself will be multifarious and unpredictable. Any attempt to fully conceptualize how things will appear to us prior to our experience of them will place undue limits on the presenting of things (Arola 2011, p. 557).

In other words, any *predetermined* concept that an animal, a stone, or a storm cannot speak (or exhibit other features that do not ‘match’ their designation), can silence their ‘tell’. In plain terms, you cannot learn from anyone or anything if you are not open to the possibility that it has the ability teach you.

A. Irving Hallowell [1960] (2002), an anthropologist who made the very first attempt to explain this in scholarship, was noted for using an Ojibwe example regarding an old man’s account of the ‘aliveness’ of a stone, and his openness to regarding the stone as a potential teacher (for a contextual discussion of this, see Bird-David 1999). Arola writes that there is simply no distinction in a Native American worldview between natural and supernatural, animate and not. Hallowell’s account did not necessarily mean the old man *had* spoken to a stone, just that he would not close off the possibility that such an interaction might teach him something. “If we approach the stone as an inanimate object in advance, assuming that it is nothing but a mute object that sits in front of us [ . . . ] we will never encounter a stone as anything more than such a mute object” (Arola 2011, p. 557). In this way of being, the same is true of mountains, rivers, and weather.

In the documentary film, *The Grammar of Happiness*, there is an extremely brief moment when the Pirahã men (in the Amazonia region) are hunting and listening to the monkeys, and one man asks another if he heard what they said (Everett 2008; O’Neill and Wood 2012). This was by no means a ‘mystical’ moment, but one scene in a documentary that had nothing to do with hearing and understanding the monkeys. For the Pirahã, this was an ordinary event, and it remains ordinary, provided we do not (as Arola warns) close down ontological possibility, which is the prerequisite for what can, and cannot, ‘be’ or exist.

Indigenous cosmologies (also called origin stories, or charter myths) generally leave room for considerably more ontological possibility than the dominant cosmological frameworks which continue to inform the processes of westernization. Cosmology sets the ‘order’ of things, quite literally, in predetermining the set of objects, events, and so forth, that are the terms of reference in the ontological, epistemological (knowledge), and axiological (value) schema of any cultural complex.

This may sound rather complex, but it is actually quite simple—if the creation story sets up certain conditions of possibility (consider God, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or the Big Bang onset of a material universe), then values and beliefs about what is possible and what can exist (atoms, genes, talking birds) flow on from this. In the Big Bang version of events, and the cascading narratives of earth’s beginning that fill in the time between then, and now, at no point does an animal, nor a stone, talk. In a fundamentalist view of the Christian Bible, however, this happened, but only in a ‘special place’ (the Garden) and the animal was evil. Nor can you find an ancestral spirit speaking to you in a dream in either of these origin stories. So ontology, or what is possible/what can exist, is fixed by these stories.

In the complex we refer to as ‘western’, these stories are a mixture of scientific beliefs and Abrahamic religious ideas (with a very healthy substratum of pagan-Christian dogma regarding

the necessity of controlling errant spirits). These cosmological narratives ultimately inform what is 'allowed', and what is 'good' or 'useful' to believe or do. This worldview excludes everything being discussed herein, as it denies other species (and the more-than-human world) all potential for conscious interactions, personhood, and agency. The contrasts that can be drawn are stark.

All of these 'tells' are based, fundamentally, upon a core understanding of origin-in-the-sentient-land (earth as mother), on active attention to the kin relations for which we are responsible, and the other life forms with which we share a connection. Although they might be place-specific, origin in the land and kinship with a particular 'place' are not quite the same thing, in that land is the mother of connection to the *specific* places in which humans make home.

Rose (2013, pp. 102–3) notes a number of 'tells' that all depend upon paying attention—those that are visually or habitually cued (such as the march flies 'telling' that the crocodiles are laying their eggs), and those that rely on an internal sort of communication. Intuitive knowing, good listening, and familiarity with the landscape are all integral to 'figuring out the tell' that comes from a combination of connection, observation, and communications with other species. Usually this is called 'seeing', and 'hearing', rather than 'knowing', as such. Holmes and Jampijinpa (2013, n.p.) note *the land can talk to Warlpiri people*. This includes the nonverbal body language of Country.

Anthropologist Nurit Bird-David (1999), who has studied with the Nayaka peoples (of South India), describes their concept of kin, or relatives, as 'anyone whom we share with'. 'Sharing with' makes kin into persons. She also describes the Nayaka explanation of "talking with" other persons (in her example, trees) as something akin to 'attentiveness' to the variances (and invariance's) in the behavior, and responses, of those with whom the Nayaka are in relation. Seeing, hearing, talking, knowing, and other divisions, are collapsed in Nayaka ways of being, or perhaps not delineated in these discrete ways. Nayaka, indigenous Australian, First Nations and Native American descriptions all concur that intimate and useful knowledge comes from these sorts of relations.

There are also, importantly, reminders from indigenous scholars not to reify (or concretize) such experiences to appear as magical or purposeless mysticism. Cordova, for example, who was trained in the western philosophical tradition and 'studied white people' (as she put it), warned against divorcing pragmatism from the popular trope of the Native American who speaks to trees and birds and receives all knowledge from a spirit guide. She writes "If the American aboriginal peoples were truly of such a nature, they would never have survived. Embedded in the mythology, legends, and traditions, is a pragmatic core . . . based on acute observation" (Cordova 2007, p. 213). In this defense against stereotyping Native Americans as 'mystics', Cordova might be misconstrued as suggesting a purely utilitarian connection with the more-than-human world, when in fact she eschews any such binary between myth and utility. Her perspective is inherently relational. Relationality, equally, collapses and disrupts privileged western categories of nature/culture and human/animal however this embedded ecological awareness is accompanied by responsibility, and what Cordova calls, *reverence*. Westernized people (beautifully phrased by Cordova as 'ghostly beings residing in decadent bodies on inanimate and alien ground) can, however, learn to be 'human' again (ibid).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> None of these scholars are advocating for a 'seeker' culture in which westernized peoples descend upon indigenous communities for guidance (or appropriate ceremony etc.), and nor are they proposing that there is something 'more intuitive' about indigenous peoples in general. Many of the traditional ways of being discussed in this paper are endangered and have been for some time, in other instances they have been almost entirely eradicated from a people or region, as have the languages that help sustain them. It is not the responsibility of indigenous elders, scholars, or communities to 'save' the westernized peoples of the world; rather, pedagogical responsibility for un-learning has been occurring through networks of transmission which venerate these life ways without reduction, or through appropriations which have not been gifted. It is the responsibility of each individual within one's own community to help one another 'get right' with the world, and to understand/teach how to have 'right relations'. Gifting is nonetheless a part of what the Haudenosaunee, and others, see as part of the remedy for decolonizing the westernized. For instance, David Mowaljarlai, senior Lawman of the Ngarinyin peoples of the west Kimberley, has said: "We are really sorry for you people. We cry for you because you haven't got meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift [ . . . ] And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself [ . . . ] What we see is, all the white people that were born in this country and they are missing

Robert Wolff (2001), a psychologist and educator who has worked and lived in Indonesia and the Pacific Islands, writes of his experiences as follows:

For many years my work took me to many parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. I recorded and collected what I could of methods of healing and herbal medicines . . . It seemed that all such knowledge was being erased by our intolerance of other-ness. I was deeply saddened by what I believed was an irreparable loss. In our rush to create man-made chemicals, we rejected age-old knowledge of the riches of the earth that are freely available all around us. We invented machines, but ignored talents and abilities we must have in our very genes (p. 5).

Wolff recounts a story from time spent in Sumatra (in an aptly titled chapter called *Learning to Be Human Again*) about a walk he takes with a man called Ahmeed, when they came upon a snake in some bamboo (ibid, pp. 144–70). Ahmeed stops and motions, be silent—*no talking, stay still, quiet*. A large snake crawling along the ground crosses their path, maybe fourteen or more feet in length, uncommon in size and on the ground instead of a tree. Wolff, curious as to how Ahmeed knew the snake was there, questions him at length. All he would respond with, given the absolute lack of any signal from the snake prior to the encounter, was that he knew. He had neither seen, nor heard it, but he knew. The remainder of the chapter details how Wolff himself comes to learn how to pay attention, to find water, to hear the tell of a tiger (in Malay *'rimau*) and to recognize himself as a human in-relation to the knowledge and voices of the larger ecological unit in which he comes to recognize his connection to the whole. Once Ahmeed realizes the transformation that has taken place, he asks Wolff:

“Do you turn off the seeing?” Yes, I told him, I had to [ . . . ] “Good,” he said [ . . . ] “You are alone [ . . . ] It will be difficult for you to see because you do not have the village around you.” He used the word *kampong*, suggesting not only a settlement, but especially the extended social relationships of a village, or a Sng’oi settlement (ibid, pp. 166–67).

This example highlights one of the biggest obstacles to actualizing some of the wisdom and praxis described here. To embody Macy’s concept of the ecological self would be a necessary first step towards feeling less isolated, and heal the ‘breach’ that Graham mentioned in her description of an indigenous Australian worldview.<sup>17</sup> A necessary second step would be for westernized peoples to adopt a systems view of what is referred to as ‘consciousness,’ in conceiving of the spaces-between-people as being *full* of communications and relationships, and our human selves as potential receivers to those communications.<sup>18</sup>

I, like many others, was not taught how to be in-relation-with the ‘pattern that connects’—as Gregory Bateson (1991) famously phrased it—with the world around me, with other humans, and with other species. I was born *already colonized*. I descend from a variety of variously hued migrants without a clear blood memory or place to which I might *whakapapa*—to use a genealogical word borrowed

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the things that came from us mob, and we want to try and share it. And the people were born in this country, in the law country, from all these sacred places in the earth. And they were born on top of that. And that, we call *wungud*—very precious. That is where their spirit come from. That’s why we can’t divide one another, we want to share our gift, that everybody is belonging, we want to share together in the future for other generations to live on. You know? That’s why it’s very important” (ABC Radio 1995).

<sup>17</sup> There are a number of initiatives in this area (called nature-connection modeling) which have emerged in the last fifteen years. In addition to the long-term work of Joanna Macy (Macy 2007, 2013; Macy and Brown 1998; Macy and Johnstone 2012) it is instructive to look at the work of Jon Young (Young 2016; Young and Gardoqui 2012) as supported through his work with Native American and San communities in Botswana, and by Richard Louv (2005, 2011) and Darcia Narváez (2014, 2016a, 2016b).

<sup>18</sup> This perspective is sustained by philosophy of consciousness researchers who pursue non-local ideas of consciousness, as supported by quantum physicists such as Amit Goswami (Goswami 2000, 2008, 2011; Goswami et al. 1993), David Bohm (Bohm 1994, 2002; Bohm and Edwards 1991; Bohm and Hiley 1993; Bohm and Peat 2000), F. David Peat (Briggs and Peat 1984, 1999; Buckley and Peat 1996; Peat 1994, 2000), and others. Unlike the old scientific view of consciousness as localized to individual minds, this view is consistent with the inherent principle of non-locality within indigenous and traditional cosmologies in numerous communities, throughout the world.

from the indigenous nations of my country.<sup>19</sup> I have no such word that can mean anything close to the same thing and the English language is all I know. The processes of colonization have converted and distorted all histories that might have aided me in knowing to whom, and to where, I belong. I know only that I lack any ancestral memory of a relationship with place, and have no knowledge of how to find, nor kill, nor be respectful toward, my own food.

I can attest, however, to the idea that it is possible for us to become aware of what we are being ‘told,’ and that we can learn, despite familial, social, or geographical disadvantages, to do this in modest ways. There is a *difference* between the chattering of my mind (in Abram’s opinion, enhanced by literary culture), and the arrival of intuitive knowings or intuitive experiences with more-than-human nature as a component of waking consciousness. This confirms (to me) that we can begin from where we are, learn to pay attention to the conscious web of relations, and trust those intuitive moments that happen when we recognize what it really means to be a human, born on the earth, who is *also*, animal. We are not (as dictated by the fantasy of human exceptionalism) somehow *more* human according to the degree we move away from nature, but *less* human by way of this presumption.

## 7. Conclusions

Somewhat prophetically, Luc Ferry (1995) wrote that either ecology or barbarism would be the ‘slogan of this century’. A barbarian, according to the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Greeks, is a term of reference for *those who did not know the language* (Nicholson 1999). Perhaps he was not referring directly to the language of the earth (or Rose’s ‘earth’ words), and yet it would seem that this is precisely where we are ‘at’. If we do not know the language personally, then we should be open to learning from those who do.

Trans-species psychologist, Gay Bradshaw (2013), in a memorable essay on ecological relations, wrote that the greatest myth is that we are all disconnected from the natural world: we are not and have *never been* disconnected, despite the sometimes overwhelming feeling that we are. She states that to imagine so is artificial, and it is a distortion that minds *can* be separate from nature:

[The] present planetary state that we wish to heal has been achieved by *denying connection*. Western society’s false sense of separation has led to ethical distancing and legitimized an existence of psychological dissociation, normal [ . . . ] Now when learning of Harp seal mothers who have no ice on which to give birth and garbage islands the size of states floating in the Pacific Ocean, we understand that their plight is intimately connected to the hand that tosses away the plastic bag (p. 134).

I could add to this the insight that if we are (and have always been) connected, then it must follow that the character of our societies are a reflection of the *quality* of those connections, or lack thereof. If Bradshaw, Macy, Abram, and others are right, then we must become *aware of biospheric sentience* to mitigate the precariousness of our current situation, “given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape” (Abram 1996, p. ix). I concur with these ecologically-oriented thinkers, and a multitude of global indigenous voices, in their assessments of our current global socio-ecological problems, and I agree with their conclusions that the continuance of our species and others relied upon immediate correctives to these errors in worldview.

It is possible, as suggested by the novelist, Amitav Ghosh (2016, para. 8.8), that ‘the urgent proximity of non-human presences’ in the Anthropocene are *forcing* a kind of recognition upon us. He asks:

<sup>19</sup> *Whakapapa* is a Māori term that is used to refer to kinship ties, as both a noun (my whakapapa, or family tree) and a verb or process (as in, I whakapapa to that river). In Aotearoa New Zealand (unlike many other countries) indigenous words and concepts are used cross-culturally, with respect, as recognition of indigenous sovereign status despite on-going Crown ownership, and as recognition of *tangata whenua*, which refers to Māori ancestral and contemporary traditional guardianship of the land. Furthermore, the use of Te Reo Māori is a national language, and is encouraged and taught in schools. The adoption of appropriate words, such as the use of Māori greetings, is not considered to be cultural appropriation.

Can the timing of this recognition be mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity and indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought? And if that were so, could it not be *also* said that the earth has itself intervened to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being? (ibid, para. 14.8).

Perhaps, if we might set aside our ‘enchantment with how clever we think we are’<sup>20</sup> and how far we have supposedly come as a species, there may yet be a chance in what is being called the era of the ‘sixth extinction’. Hope is as important as action. Presently, myths, including those upon which contemporary religious lives are founded, are often conceptualized as important only in fictional, or developmentally immature terms (meaning what we believe in before we ‘grow up’ to accept the material realities of a naturalistic world). As such, appeals to intuition or nonlocal ways of knowing, and the possibility of sentience and intelligence in more-than-human beings (such as animals) are far outside the parameters of what is generally considered as possible. Yet my own beloved tomes of myths, legends, and fables now reside adjacent to rich ethnographies with which they have an extraordinary amount in common. Both afford glimpses into worlds in which animals have a ‘voice’ (as even Aristotle claimed), in which what we may be encouraged to deride as ‘magical thinking’ simply indexes a different way of living in the world; one in which animals are people and humans are just another kind of animal. These modern ethnographies are literally crawling with more-than-human life. Microbial ecologies—on us, in us, all around us—and the numerous plant and animal agencies that were once unfathomable except within the realms of storytelling or myth, are being gradually ‘awakened’ to. Do these life-forms *also* have ‘tells’? Presumably, they do.

Decolonization, as a mode of engagement, involves far more than just ethnographic exploration. As a method, to decolonize is to interrogate all cultural, religious, and scientific content that is a part of westernization and assess these elements in terms of their contemporary utility. In other words, what is their *usefulness*? What is good and useful to know, and what is not? Determining utility can be differently rendered in relation to different ethical objectives, so what ethical objectives do we *now* wish to pursue? These are questions that are still being negotiated, and are a necessary precursor to determining the most efficient and effective actions in response to the socio-ecological demands of the present time.

The objective of decolonization, as a global project, is to reassess our collective, diverse, cosmological assumptions with respect to all our relationships, in a manner that allows for the reconfiguring of the dominant perceptions of humanity, and recalibrates human relations with otherness of all kinds. If decolonization is ultimately oriented towards improved human-to-human and human-to-earth relations as the initial goal (if decolonization is thought of as *relational* and *processual*), an increased awareness of connection with the wider multispecies environments within which we are all embedded must involve caring for it. Conservation follows connection (see [Young 2016](#); [Young and Gardoqui 2012](#)).

If westernized peoples remain afraid and isolated, perceiving of other humans as a threat, then altruistic communal behaviors (following Wilson) are likely to remain idealistic goals. Rebuilding communities, by any means possible, is therefore of critical importance (see [Cajete 2015](#); [Wahl 2016](#)). [Cordova \(2007, p. 213\)](#) wrote that it was ‘unrealistic’ to expect people to give up their time-honored view of human superiority, trapped (as they are) in ‘mundane’ bodies in a ‘hostile’ environment. Conversely, I think decolonization offers a way out of this chronic state of alienated insecurity. Decolonization may be a way to find a crossing into another way of being in the world, and perhaps one which still exists under the convincing artificiality of westernized cities, structures, families, and selves.

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<sup>20</sup> This is paraphrased from a song lyric from *Saltwater* (1991) by Julian Lennon: “We light the deepest ocean, Send photographs of Mars, We’re so enchanted by how clever we are . . . ” ([Lennon 1991](#)).

The Yu'pik (real people) of south-central Alaska say that the separation of the 'outsiders' (or the westernized peoples) from nature is 'too complete'; that the colonizers are 'the people who change nature' (Lopez 2001, para. 9.67). Through this on-going colonization, the world has been turned upside down, and those who 'take the fat' (an Alaskan First Nations term) have nearly destroyed entire collectives of people who have kept the wisdom of how to live on earth, *safe*. We cannot change this history, but responsible, respectful, and restorative practices may be able to reverse some of the damages to people and their communities, to other species, and to the planet we share.

The oft-cited idea of the 'seventh generation' ethic, a gloss from popular representations of Native American thinking, has at its centre a revelation as to where we might find a beginning. The worldview of many indigenous and traditionally living peoples the world over *includes* westernized people in conceiving of a collective human future. Very recently, in the media coverage of the Standing Rock Sioux occupation for water protection, the people gathered stated outright that they are also protecting the future of the children and grandchildren of the police, the army personnel, and the population of the US in general. This type of statement surfaced several times.

In light of this, I suggest that the world's populations defer to the indigenous, traditional, and ecologically-centered visions of leadership and suggestions for change which already exist, and have done for some time.<sup>21</sup> Some of these suggestions are grounded in technology, engineering, and the wider sciences, repurposed to ecological goals, such as many of the solutions emerging from the *Bioneers*. Some are much older, and are literally grounded in place, tradition, and history. Both paths are needed, however, as directed by those who are *already* including the river, the wolves, the food, fire, and future generations in their sense of 'self'. As this paper has argued, there is wisdom there if only we might learn to hear it.

In closing, it is perhaps good to think with a concept from Bawaka Country and apply it to what lies ahead. In Yolŋu mathematics (the word Yolŋu have chosen to represent their technical systems of reckoning),<sup>22</sup> there is a concept of *Gänma*, which is where the salt water and the fresh water meet.

As the fresh water comes off and out of the land and sky, it meets the salt water of the sea. There is a mixing, a meeting and mingling, that brings difference together without erasing it. *Gänma* thus means new life and new ideas. It evokes knowledges coming together. There is power and knowledge with two waters mixing . . . *gänma* has to be actually be two ways. Western knowledges too need to learn . . . people are not separated from nature. The earth is not separated from the sky. Songs and stories are not separated from people and objects. All these things exist as part of one another and come into being together . . . [as Lalak Burarrwanga explains] . . . you have to start from the place—whoever, whatever clan you are you start from your own land. And then you sing what's there in the land (Lloyd et al. 2016, n.p.).

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<sup>21</sup> As many indigenous elders, scholars, activists, and communities have strongly advocated for indigenous leadership, especially regarding ecological issues, and will readily draw parallels between their own traditions and other indigenous traditions around the world, I offer this paper with due respect and support for this initiative.

<sup>22</sup> "Yolŋu mathematics, like Western mathematics, is the science of patterns, groups, relationships, rhythms and space [ . . . ] it has to be linked to place" (Lloyd et al. 2016, n.p.).

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