Enacting Indigenous Ontologies

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Abstract

This essay argues that motivations behind the “ontological turn” in environmental anthropology and the environmental humanities will only be satisfied through the rematriation of Indigenous ancestral homelands. The argument follows from the simple intuition that it is one thing to read about, or even become *knowledgeable about* human-land relations, and it is quite another thing to live it. The article asks several challenging questions for the literature on Indigenous ontologies before concluding that the best way to enact these ontologies on the land is to return it.

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Recovering a damaged planet critically depends on changing human-land relations from one of domination to one of care and stewardship.[1] This intuition energizes the rising tide of interest in new ontologies, materialisms, and animisms that seek to redistribute agency and restore dignity to nature, places, and other non-human beings. “Indigenous ontologies,” closely linked to strains of post-humanist discourse, are distinguishable in that Indigenous ways of being and relating to the land are not “new.” Rather, they are time-tested practices that have sustained people on the land for countless generations (as compared to the short span of time since the industrial revolution it has taken settler cultures to devastate the planet). Where colonial legacies of land expropriation and genocidal violence have disrupted Indigenous relations to the land (Madley 2016), the recovery of Indigenous ontologies promises to reverse the course of environmental desecration.

This essay argues that the motivations behind the “ontological turn” in environmental anthropology and the environmental humanities will only be satisfied through the rematriation of Indigenous ancestral homelands. There is a powerful moral argument to be made here (see, for example, Treuer 2021), but my own focus will be on the very practical question of how ontology is *enacted* on the land. The argument follows from my simple intuition that it is one thing to read about, or even become *knowledgeable about* or *understand* human-land relations, and it is quite another thing to live it. How exactly does the study of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) or Indigenous lifeways translate to alternative ways of relating

to the land and alternative structures that facilitate those relations? It seems to me that an answer to this question should take priority over the proliferation of academic studies and descriptions of ontology.

Since Fikret Berkes popularized TEK in his 1999 publication *Sacred Ecology*, now in its fourth edition, the literature on Indigenous lifeways, cosmopolitics, and land-based spiritualities has grown in volume and sophistication. One striking feature of this literature is that it seems to be written by and for non-Native scholars (Nadasday 1999). With the conspicuous exception of Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), this literature mostly depends on the usual methods whereby non-Native anthropologists approach a community to observe its ways, write about it, and disseminate these findings to the rarefied group of interested colleagues, students, and intellectual environmental publics. The absence of Indigenous and Native scholars who use this approach starts to look more like a refusal (Simpson 2007) than a shortage of demographic representation in the academy. It is curious that Native scholars seem uninterested in publishing on their cultural lifeways, especially if Indigenous ontologies promote intercultural understanding and planetary healing.

We have noticed who writes Indigenous ontologies. Now, who is this literature for? The answer, plainly enough, is: settlers who wish to join with Indigenous struggle in solidarity and allyship, the first step of which is to reflect on their own settler-colonial inheritance and change their ways. This, at least, is Candace Fujikane's response who, in *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future* (2021), calls for a "profound epistemological shift" toward Indigenous ways of knowing that attribute to the land "an ontology–a life, a will, a desire, and an agency–of their own" that can "help us grow a decolonial love for lands, seas, and skies…" (p.3-4). *Mapping Abundance* documents the courageous efforts of Indigenous land and water protectors and their allies in colonial Hawai'i, while an infusion of Kānaka Maoli words and stories serves to advance the epistemic project for us, the readers, who are inducted into an alternative way of seeing.

One could question the dissemination strategy at work. I have noticed that it is a rarefied group of readers who are interested in Indigenous ontologies and who express their interest by imbibing books. But perhaps if enough teachers in enough schools impress this work upon their students, it would expose enough people to enough Indigenous ontologies to start an epistemic shift.

Yet this leads to a second question: an epistemic shift to what? Since the literature on Indigenous ontologies comes from many different ontologies from all over the world, why should readers expect to arrive at a set of understandings relevant to their local context? As Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) observes about the literature on TEK: "The process [of research] requires the knowledge to be 'decontextualized,' meaning that the approach and methods are geared to extracting knowledge from the holder and the holder's context, and applying it elsewhere" (2005, 104). The question, then, is what good studying Kānaka Maoli (Indigenous Hawaiian) land relations does me from where I currently write in xučyun (Berkeley, California)? Adding to my practical focus on how to enact alternative ontologies, McGregor notes that TEK "must be *lived*. It cannot be passed on through simple studying or memorizing facts as per the Western scientific system" (2005, 104). Textual civilizations, such as the one from which the environmental humanities derive, believe we can alter behaviors by altering worldviews, which are ultimately a function of belief. Only in this context does it make sense to advocate for an epistemic shift by studying Indigenous ontologies. The new epistemic order will be predicated on

knowledge of the land, but the main vehicle for this knowledge acquisition will not be living on the land but *learning about* living on the land.

This leads me to a third question: how exactly does reading texts about Indigenous ways of seeing and relating to the land translate to a new set of behaviors in the world? I can't answer this question, because I don't see how it is possible. But I do know that a language that travels easily from one context to the next is a language without land – one that does not need specific land relations to survive. Indigenous languages are not like this. Indigenous knowledges cannot be transferred from one context to another in the way Western scientific knowledge can (Basso 1996; Deloria 2003). As Peter Nelson (Coast Miwok) told me, in reference to a teaching of his elders, "Knowledge is in the land" (pers. comm.). This knowledge is not established principally by reading books, and it is doubtful that settler readers can reproduce it in this way.

But perhaps the literature on Indigenous ontologies is not that bad. If less effective than its proponents think, at least it calls attention to Indigenous land relations, helping to document and valorize those practices. In "Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor," Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Yang call out the way "decolonization" has become an "empty signifier" for any liberatory struggle and almost any strategy seeking justice. This metaphorical conflation of experiences of oppression not only erodes what makes Indigenous struggles distinct, but participates in *settler moves to innocence*, which "problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (2012, p.3). Settler moves to innocence (such as "settler nativism," which is the settler practice of locating an ancestral bloodline that "proves" originary claims to the land) exonerate settler cultures from responsibility without having to forfeit privilege and power.

While not one of the examples given, the literature on Indigenous ontologies seems to fit the description of a settler move to innocence. This literature calls settlers to enact an epistemic shift by reading about Indigenous lifeways. Settlers are thereby included in a purported process of decolonization without any material sacrifice. Change is cognitive, not structural.[2] Indigenous ontologies can be read about and embraced without any redistribution of power and resources.

To be sure, new concepts are intended to lead the reader to new perspectives, and from there to new worldviews, behaviors, and political commitments. Finally, the new ontology, once it is firmly established in the reader, is supposed to lead to structural change. In practice, however, the "shift" probably ends the moment that the reader puts the book or phone down. Maybe some concepts have a certain staying power, but soon, no doubt, the insistent nag of carbon-intensive daily life encroaches on consciousness again.

Tuck and Yang state unequivocally what decolonization, when we get down to it, means: the rematriation of Native lands. My own hunch leads to the same conclusion. Restoring Native practices on the land without untangling the knot of settler-colonialism and state is not possible. These structural features of the world will continue to shape both settler and Indigenous futures, leading to the same patterns of political violence and environmental despoliation. Of course, it is tempting to try to solve planetary problems through mere intellectual assent to a set of concepts and commitments. It just isn't realistic. There is, however, one sure-fire way to enact Indigenous ontologies, and that is to give the land back.

Footnotes

[1] This is not an uncontroversial view. Fantasies of capital and carbon-intensive futures are preserved in transhumanist thought (cite), ecomodernist reveries of “decoupling” technology from earth’s systems (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015), and celebrity-billionaires’ efforts to colonize Mars (Rubenstein 2022). But the need to shrink back from human hubris and re-integrate humans with earth’s systems is a guiding intuition for work in much of the environmental humanities.

[2] This is not to say that there is no self-reflexive labor in the work of decolonization. The NDN Collective writes that decolonization “begins with a thorough historical and political analysis” as well as “deep inner work” (2021, p.57). But this work requires looking at one’s own ontology, rather than Indigenous ones.

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