

## Critique of Indigeneity Today

Over the course of three weeks, a group of us gathered in the Morning Room of the Elmhirst Center to explore, in our own way, the topic of indigeneity. The following is a brief accounting of my own experience of these three weeks and how I found them to fit quite accurately into the larger popular discourse on indigeneity. The intention behind this critique is not to speak of rights or wrongs, but rather to harvest from the experience a deeper understanding of common patterns that play out when groups gather to explore the concept of indigeneity. Prior to my thoughts, it feels pertinent to name the personal gift that it was to participate in these three weeks, and would like to make explicit that this reflection is just as much a commentary on my own involvement there as much as it is that of the group. Through the stepping back required of writing about the experience, I do not in any way intend or think it possible to separate myself from the collective experience of the group. Just as well, there are undoubtedly present many more elements that remain in my own blind spots, and so I offer this as an incomplete construction of thoughts and opinions based on my own personal life experience, biases, sensitivities, and framework through which I perceive of the world and the dynamics that animate it.

Indigeneity is perhaps one of the most challenging topics to speak about in the context of a university. Arvind Sharma describes in *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination*, that any time we attempt to analyse Indigenous culture or religion, we are committing to a work of translation, which will therefore inevitably be riddled with holes and inefficiencies (2005). This translation happens on many levels, and in our case was perhaps made most explicit when one of our teachers, Colin Campbell, worked to translate phrases and meanings from traditional languages of Southern Africa into English. By rendering these ancient, visceral, and living expressions into the gridwork of English, it was as if we were

examining a picture of the word rather than the word itself. The true meaning remains, perhaps as it is meant to, in the land where it comes from thousands of miles away. Made immediately present in these ancient words was the quality of a world filled with soul, drawing us forward, much in the way one longs for a true story. Anytime Colin spoke a word in its proper tongue, I could hear the faint echo of other students and teachers in the room trying to secretly pronounce it under their breath; the room would fill with little assorted clicks and pops as Colin goes on speaking, kind enough not to acknowledge how far off everyone was from articulating the actual sounds.

More than that though, by endeavoring to understand traditional South African traditions on an analytical basis, we will only get as far as synthesizing a cosmology on the very terms that destroyed it. That is, on the terms of the colonizer, in the sense that we can only use language and cognitive processes that the cosmology itself does not belong to. Scholar of religious studies, Mary MacDonald, describes the constraints of this process as “. . . taking indigenous ideas and experiences and rendering them in vocabulary which has traditionally been employed in the philosophy of religion . . . There may be partial overlap, but how do we deal with the radically different?” (2011). We understand this however, and so our task becomes one of creating compatibility between our own way of understanding, and the inconceivable. The furthest that I personally got along this line of thought was realizing that everything I think I know, especially about spirituality, is completely founded upon a certain type of consciousness which in itself may be (and probably is) entirely off the mark. Nonetheless, our time learning with Colin was excellent, full of stories and ideas that despite the incompleteness of English, still managed to impact me deeply.

Now to take a step back, there is something critical to understand, which took place over the course of Colin's teaching us. It in fact has nothing to do with who Colin is as an individual

or as a teacher, but rather what he came to represent based on the longings of the group. That is, he as the traditional knowledge-bearer came to serve the function of the class (and the wider college community) as the Indigenous Savior, in that the collective intention of the group seemed to be that he was there to ferry us back across the ocean to our own place of indigeneity and truth. I would even venture to say that more than being the indigenous voice, he became the voice of Africa. For many of us, he was the closest we've even come to touching the notion of Africa, and so in this way became the representative of an impossibly larger story, which seems to be a common and inevitable phenomenon when someone comes from a far away place to speak of their own culture. Based on the needs of the group however, there was not just a desire for any form of Africa's voice, there was an unspoken request for a more palatable form of Africa—familiar enough to identify with sufficiently, and yet just alien enough to hold the mysterious and romantic projections of the group. In other words, because the group was coincidentally (or not so coincidentally) entirely white-passing, Colin's whiteness made him the perfect Africa, in that racial-tension was allowed to stay comfortably outside of the room for another day in paradise.

Tension however, did not always manage to stay out of the room. It came in multiple occasions, one of which I'd like to highlight here now based on its relevance to wider patterns within the discourse on indigeneity. It happened on day one, in the very first teaching session with our program director, Andy Letcher. Andy was taking an approach to the topic from the standpoint of analysing the ways in which the Western imagination has constructed an image of indigeneity based on its own fixation with the primitive and archaic. He framed this phenomenon with the case study of Robert Gordon Wasson's popularizing of Native Mexican Shamanism and mushroom ceremony, and specifically, the fictionalization and popular consumption of the native woman, María Sabina. Before reaching the end of the presentation

however, the suspended tension within the room shattered into an emotional and angry outcry launched against Andy, who perhaps in that moment came to represent for the room the antithesis to people's notion of indigeneity. With no shortage of vehemence, Andy was charged with the crime of heartless critique. His unemotional presentation examining and even humorously teasing our own culture's state of spiritual extractivism was not to be tolerated. It was at this point in the class that something was made exceptionally clear; most people were not in fact there to question the notions of indigeneity, they were there to more profoundly become indigenous.

For the sake of a working definition of indigenous, I'd like to cite José R. Martinez Cobo's description which is used by the United Nations in their involvement with Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations:

Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sections of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system

(2009)

It is evident that this definition lacks some of the glitter often prescribed by the Western notions of what indigeneity is supposed to mean. However, while it doesn't adhere to romantic constructions of Shamanism and wilderness, it still places indigeneity within its own purpose-driven framework, the nature by which it may be essentially flawed in its dependency upon functionality and the institutionalization of indigeneity. Despite its limitations, it manages to describe some of the struggle inherent to indigenous communities' continued existence in the modern world—and it is this struggle for existence that I believe is most subject to being silenced when we fall into common patterns of the romanticization of indigeneity (Wallis 2003). In other

words, by confining indigenous populations to an idealized and impossible state of 'oneness' with themselves and all of creation, we render ourselves unavailable to see or respond to the desecration of cultures brought on by colonialism, or even to the very 'normal', unglamorous lives that many indigenous people live today.

Personally, I work and spend time with Unangan (Aleut) tribes in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. When I get off the plane however, I don't find the magical villages of people dressed in furs, eating whale fat, hunting in kayaks, and drumming evil spirits away. What I find, in the case of Popof Island, is a salmon fishery which employs all the men, I find packaged everything, shipped-in everything, including the vegetables which are overpriced and gmo, I find obesity, depression, rising suicide-rates, trauma, alcoholism, addiction, the Russian Orthodox Church, and a trash incinerator which burns all the waste, blowing black smoke back into the village when the winds are just right. This is not even the original island that the tribe is indigenous to; everyone was moved to Popof Island when the salmon fishery was established, a new school set up just as the school on the original island was shut down. So when we get together to explore our ideas of what indigeneity is, I can't help but wonder what we're really talking about, because it doesn't resemble what I've seen when I've gone out into the world to meet indigenous populations on their own terms.

Even until recent decades, the discourse among many scholars has managed to remain in the imaginal. The anthropologist, Alice Kehoe, writes how popular philosophers Eliade and Hultkrantz "...have fed the romantic demiurge presenting American Indians as primal survivals husbanding an archaic ecstasy that may yet save the White millions who suffer, in Hultkrantz's words, an 'inability to lead authentic lives'" (1996). Similarly to my own experience of Popof Island, Kehoe goes on to write of the moment Hultkrantz actually went to the Wind River Reservation "...in the wide green valley below snowy peaks, only to find politics and fry bread"

(1996). I don't write any of this without compassion for the state that we in the West have found ourselves in. Our own false perceptions are fed from the moment of our birth by the simulations and agendas of our society. Even the stories that emerge from some place of resistance to the mainstream are still entangled in unfounded notions of a long-ago 'fall from grace' (Graeber & Wengrow 2018). However, when exploring our own truths, I believe we must recognize that spirituality is political, and that in a consumerist culture, everything comes at a cost whether it is made explicit by the price of tuition, or made invisible by our own unconscious sense of entitlement.

This takes us to the final week of class, led by Pat McCabe, a Diné woman from New Mexico. It was a beautiful session; many of the participants in tears and clearly changed by the end of it. My interest in the week however, is that it also clearly managed to demonstrate the dynamic between the European/Euro-American seeker of knowledge and the Native American holder of knowledge. While also holding the possibility for a very real potency, this is perhaps one of the most common archetypal pairings that the 'New Age' seeks to cultivate, and so should therefore also include cultivating an in-depth ability to self-critique the origin of our intentions for engaging it. I firmly believe that Native voices must be centralized in the inquiries that we undertake, however, it is as Colin Campbell would say, a 'tricky business' to do so well and honestly. The danger becomes that the process by which native voices are granted space can unconsciously be driven by the vacant practice of [insert indigenous person here]. That is, it becomes less about the individual themselves and what they have to offer, and more about the archetype that they fulfill. This process has the potential to undermine its own good intention by stripping the teacher of their many human layers and flaws, and casting them in bronze where every word is heard as truth. Robert Wallis highlights that ". . . real Native Americans are not a part of most Euro-Americans' lives. Yet non-Indians feel that their own lives are increasingly

‘unreal’ and ‘inauthentic,’ so they imagine a pre-industrial, pre-European America where things were ‘real’ and ‘authentic . . .’” (2003). Similarly to Colin, I believe that Pat was at times set into this role as the ‘pre-European,’ free from critique based on the projections, longings, and admirations of the group. Furthermore, I believe that this notion of an indigenous messiah who will alone teach us is far off the mark, and that even “. . .among the Pueblo . . . one individual cannot possess complete knowledge . . . community is reciprocated and reproduced, each person’s office sanctioned, and individual participation contributes towards the complete ritual” (2003).

The question then naturally becomes, what do we do? How do we come together to talk about indigeneity without stumbling forth across the minefield of modernity? My first proposition, would be to release our grip on the word ‘indigeneity’ as a means of describing what it is we’re hoping to achieve for ourselves. The word itself tends to be more of an invocation of distance between who we are and what we would like to become, than it is a tool of actually getting us there. I believe that the discourse itself is caught up in a mythologized hunt for something that we’ve only heard about in stories but doesn’t really exist, and only serves in distracting us from the very real work that I believe we can be doing here now. I believe we can learn much from *Post Colonial Studies*’ definition of anti-colonialism, which is not about going back to anything, but rather is about cultivating a discourse where there is “. . .no sentimental or mythologized attachment to an idealized pre-colonial condition. The local is perceived to be fully corrigible and involved in an inevitable *process* of historical change. . .” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2013). The work is about recognizing the transitions that have taken place, and meeting them in as real a way as we can. And that if we want to talk about and explore our own sense of indigeneity, we must first locate ourselves in the context that we’re truly positioned within, with all of its pain, its anger, its grief, and its absences.

I believe that when we use the word ‘indigenous’, what we are really attempting to speak about is our truest selves, as actualized and integrated members of our communities, human and non-human alike. And though I believe it’s much simpler than we make it out to be, it unfortunately won’t happen over the course of a three-week intensive, but rather is a continued renewal of vows to what we hold as true. It is a returning, again and again, to the spot under the tree where we sit, getting to know the birds as individuals rather than just species, tracking ourselves and our impact on our surroundings as we move from place to place. I believe that when we walk to the sweat lodge, trembling with excitement to finally do something ‘indigenous’, but in walking there step over the edible and medicinal plants that we can neither name nor even recognize, something essential is lost. Perhaps what I think we paint over with a word like ‘indigeneity’ has to do with presence, with laughter, with listening and speaking, with play and welcoming our childness. Perhaps it has to do with the bringing together of prayer and action, and the ability to walk in the mind and the heart both at once, not as two separate processes but as one fluid entity. I even dare to wonder if what we might one day hope to achieve in a class like *Indigeny Today* is actually not so glorious, but rather rests subtly just beneath our knowing of one another.

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