

An Academic Take on “Indigenous Traditions and Ecology”

Peter Cole, In-SHUCK-ch/N'Quatqua Nation, British Columbia & Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

The form of this article/review is closer to the oral style of my Nation than standard academic format, more in the storytelling mode. The line breaks and the spaces are important as places of breathing and pivoting. The slashes come from my poetry background rather than from a post/xxx place. I see them as places where meaning can be created by the reader —morpho/sites trans/verse fault lines line breaks within or between words or sounds. I see meaning as accretive equi/poly/multi/vocal isomorphic saltatory tectonic meteoro/logical terpsichorean. Like weather. Like life.

I see genealogy epistemology and etymology as re/co/wright/ings of one another. For me language is topology topography geo/graphy. Holding up two aerial photos of a territory shot from different angles seeing the forests and ridges and plateaux rise Story is a place a time to be entered for experiencing the world via multiple/nomadic subjectivities chance operations trickster-and rhizomatic-lineations/discourses. Whorling in directions which language has not yet named which it has not yet grammar for or which cannot manifest into a languaged reality. I see the words the stories as writing me. Coming from a playwrighting and poetry back/ground, I write with the idea that my words will be read aloud by a reader/performer—thus sound and rhythm are very important for me.

Résumé

La forme de cet article/étude se rapproche davantage de la tradition orale de ma nation que de la présentation universitaire courante; elle s'apparente davantage au conte. Les fins de lignes et les espaces importent pour la respiration et le changement de perspective. Les barres obliques viennent plutôt de ma formation en poésie que d'un endroit post/xxx. Je les vois comme des endroits où le sens peut être créé par les morpho/sites du lecteur, les césures les lignes de faille à l'intérieur ou entre les mots ou les sons. Selon moi, le sens est accréatif, équi/poly/multi/vocal isomorphe saltatoire tectonique météoro/logique terpsichoréen. Comme la température. Comme la vie.

À mon avis, la généalogie, l'épistémologie et l'étymologie se ré/co/écriv/ent l'une l'autre. Pour moi le langage est topologie topographie géographie. Tenir deux photos aériennes d'un territoire saisi selon différents angles voir les forêts et les crêtes et les plateaux s'élever L'histoire est un endroit un moment à pénétrer pour faire l'expérience du monde via les subjectivités multiples/nomades des acvitités aventures d'un Filou— et des linéations/discours rhizomateuses. Tourbillonner dans des directions que le langage n'a pas encore nommées qu'il n'a pas encore grammaticalisées ou qui ne peuvent se manifester par une réalité exprimée par la langue. Les mots les histoires m'écrivent. Issu d'un milieu de dramaturges et de poètes, j'écris en imaginant mes mots lus à voix haute par un lecteur/performeur— donc le son et le rythme comptent beaucoup pour moi.

Oren Lyons speaks of having a strong “collective memory of place”
he speaks about consensus the “blending of minds”
“our white brothers and sisters have only been here for 5 days”
and look what’s happened”

he goes on
the driving force in today’s world is unregulated commerce
it takes place in an arena where societies aren’t even in the conversation
three trillion dollars exchanges hands every day including on the internet
“meanwhile we’re walking on the earth”
Wall Street is dealing in futures all right our futures our children’s futures
at Cape Cod they’re crying about the lack of fish
but they go out every day and fish
what they call resources are our brothers
the economic boundary is very fuzzy these days

you look for legal economic scientific technological answers
to the ills of society but you cannot see that
only a moral solution can lead to a better life
get the sand out of your head america
you cannot deal with the problems of the world
until you clean your own house
“respect and you will be prosperous”

“I am a ‘citizen’ of Haudenosaunee not a ‘member’
we are a Nation not a band not a tribe
when I travel it is on an Onondaga passport
I say to my relations ‘I see you carry American passports
you call yourself American citizens
I ask you—how can you have a treaty with yourself?’”

there are 377 treaties in this country and they’re all about losing land
for 125 years there have been no more treaties
and you talk about bringing Native Americans into the mainstream

they took the children away
to the residential school in Carlyle Pennsylvania
today there is a graveyard there filled with our children

your laws speak of the “right of christian lands” the “doctrine of discovery”
your laws say we had only the “right of occupancy”
but you don’t see it is the land that occupies us
we have always lived here
yet in 1843 your government invoked ‘manifest destiny’
this is not your “promised land”
nobody discovered us we were not lost
we were not misplaced displaced replaced until you came

in the 'africanist' agenda academes swirls and I wonder
where are the voices of the common people the non-academics
there is talk of "directed cultural change"
"the emergent cultural " "the anatomy of world views"
"reservoirs of indigenous knowledges"
then at last the first sounds of earth words
about earth space sky ancestors reincarnation
recombinant deities the supreme being lifting the sky
the earth speaking spirits pervading
the umbilical cord buried in a calabash
becoming land again
children put into the forest singly
to survive in symbiosis

UCLA Davis speaks of the sun carrying supplications
to the Supreme Being of the 615 deities
of "lower" and "higher" animals
of offering palm oil to tree spirits
the default discourse is academes

the woman in Teresia's story asks "Mr. Minister
who did you represent at that conference in Europe?"
"the Masai" long silence there is nothing
traditional about Mr Minister he is a coconut kenyan
black on the outside white on the in
"God owns the land" she says "others have user rights
everybody is entitled to land but you ask for permission
to use it to plant you 'own' land by working on it"

who is benefitting from cash crop cultures
why is there no talk of shell oil and starbucks
where is the collective accountability of commercial enterprise
why should globalization mean poor people in kenya go without rice
because of a war in iraq
she used a cup metaphor saying "culture is not given thus"
she spoke of north atlantic technological culture debris
comparing ideals ethics from different cultures
the colonists used religion government and education
to destroy indigenous ideas overnight kenyans became squatters
on land they had been on for millenia
now they are squashed together in a commodified system of land tenure
monocultures were introduced subsistence survival became a memory
the mau mau event was reported in Western papers
as terrorism not as a land and freedom movement a holy war
who's doing the interpreting of cultures

Pashington speaks of technologies and identities
he says that technology tends to disengage us from identity ideology
he speaks of the polyvalent nature of mythology
how for him modern technology is qualitative
consisting of the multiple timeframes and spaces that people occupy
he speaks of borrowing from precolonial and the colonial emergent
everything has become academized anthropologized even indigenusness
the cult of white-expertise permeates who validates whom?
"Nigeria has always been a subsistence market economy
now thanks to the world bank it has become a bureaucratic centre
indigenous people have become tenants in their own lands"
white people are the toxins the toxic waste that they produce
there are no ecological policies for multinational companies
external values come into the village
now they want radios tv's and fridges too

the visiting uoft nigerian spoke of the modification of oral tradition
a diviner insists that all drink from the common cup
to catch thieves and witchcraft people
traditions and new technologies mix together
land back home is communally owned not individually
back home the first person singular is not so all important

lunch little evidence of Turtle Islanders
Teresia joined us we spoke of the technologies of racism
the indigenizing of nutrition
of churches using wheat flour for communion
not millet not corn not rice
I think about the origins of hexaploid wheat
not africa or australia the western hemisphere
sure it occurred in nature but not like this

the Pueblo man speaks of the worlds we bring with us
creating spaces for dialogue
he prefers to speak of 'spiritual ecology' rather than religion
Look to the Mountain he says his book
sometimes I cannot listen to my relations speak
our language has been disemboweled by the newage movement
filled with saccharine cliches
all I can think about his paintings is [what is it to paint a pipe?]
his talk of cultural schizophrenia and healing
I wondered [why heal?]
is being unwell not a natural state too
the words came as from a selfhelp book
"guiding myth of our emergence" "it is said..."
"we have a saying among my people"
"life is an interdependent whole" "we must preserve at all costs"

I balk to hear him call food 'a resource'
"we're all kernels of the same corn cob"
"elders are repositories of culture tradition and languages
then come the slides of children and elders
my mind retro/spectates edits in and out of the presented images
of course all the kids in the clips are cute as black and white beans
he turned down a dartmouth scholarship to work with his own people
not knowing if there would be anything left when he returned
he never went

Donna is from the Dineh Nation
she calls harmony a way of being
she speaks of the difficulties of dualism—chaos and order
"I am not me without you you are not you without me"
she speaks of no ego or beyond ego
she speaks of a tree with the name of its pollinator embedded in it
she speaks of maintaining her values her ethics
using trees in publishing
closer to home she says institutions are moving
in opposite directions to sustainability [I think to myself 'beware of dualism']

2:21 pm she asks why it isn't working
snow slides off the south side of the roof like thunder
"there's your answer" an avalanche of laughter
"so what's one more book that's just going to just sit in the library
with the other books?"
2:24 pm more snow falls in a great roar from the north side
more laughter quickly subsides when she speaks of economic racism
the omni-presence of toxic dumpsites on Native land
we know the sensitive areas we know about conserving
we know too about the harvesting of information
the sharing of information with others working on PhD dissertations
who then leave to never return
"all of you are indigenous" she motions
showing a picture of a water molecule
the snow stops sliding listens

Ines who is Apache says language is the most important
though it might not save us from technology
"Americans are concretizing our mother
and at the same time downsizing
getting rid of more people getting more technology"
then she talks about the deadwood in academia
not engaged in teaching or in publishing their work
she speaks of having enough of a struggle without having to help others
3:04 pm snow rumbles off the roof again from the north
"it provides a sense of place burying the umbilical cord back home"

she speaks of "the common good" then about the Lacota idea of the camp circle
about mutual respect and multi-media
"who are the Native people here?" she asks
nobody looks around because they know
she speaks of the sacred white mountain
of winnowing four times the cattail pollen
"the beautiful beautiful shimmering substance"
she speaks of ritual transformation
of "person into holy being and back to person"
she then falls into psych-talk
then goes back to calling her people "consultants" rather than "informants"
she criticizes anthropologists for asking questions
and not even listening to the answers
she criticizes the taking of photographs
you can see a lot of people think about the man
who is a member of the conference organizing committee
who is constantly taking pictures without asking
a smile on his face like he's doing everyone a favour
she goes on about "every Native American scholar in America is a walking miracle
when you consider what we've had to go through"
she talks about "initiation into adulthood" "how to be human beings"
then the emotion comes with "there are so many violations against the spirit world"
you can feel the shivers when she says "imagine crawling up
next to an Indian woman at night to keep warm
it's beyond worrying about your career"
then she goes on about savagism christianity manifest destiny western expansion
"unpack those concepts" she says
and in speaking of clearcutting the forests "that should make your heart ache"
in the end she reads a poem by laurence ferlinghetti A Buddha in the Woodpile
which seems appropriate and tact ful sort of

oh wonderful! another all male panel
indigenous Indian men (the real ones columbus was looking for) and a Nepali
for such a small group they take up a lot of space especially during question period
one speaks of his people's full flowing and the growing intolerance to pluralism
the devaluing of the sacred
the anthropologist who is moderator speaks longer than anyone
Pradip manages to get words in edge/wise
"you belong to the land the land does not belong to you"
"ecological understanding is not rooted in the intellect
but in the desire to understand the process of life"
he speaks of the need to create a space that protects the national interest.
the need to create define and expand that space
he speaks of the disjuncture between power and knowledge
he says that anthropologists are now doing what his father was doing
he speaks of the relation with one another through ecology
of having an ecologically specific identity

he speaks of "the semiotic expansion of capital"
about putting the preconditions on the table too
he says that one religion claiming to be superior to the others
is where the dialogue stops "civilizational envisioning"
the white anthropologist quotes Marlene Dietrich
in Shanghai Express "Welcome to Asia..."
he goes on about the politics of language about organizing translocally
the euphemism he uses for 'anthropologists' is "scholars of other cultures"
nobody is fooled

the government is damming the Narmada River giving in to 'development'
he speaks of defining indigenous people there are 70 million in South Asia
and the government of India says there are no indigenous people in South East Asia
there is talk of the white grammar of conquest
of translation and conversion of the politic/s of translation
suddenly someone starts talking about the riverland
as a repository for past events "the supernatural"

Panang says if this is your land where are your fathers' holes for honey?
if this is your land, why do you keep asking us the names of the rivers?
he goes on about "mythological significance"
'who is we?' 'who is the we who ascribes?'
I can only think about how racist the word 'myth' is
where it came from its lingering

the man from Sarawak from the forests of Borneo is humble respectful
there is not much belief (re:) moon and stars
but birds flying left to right is maybe a bad omen
you have to align yourself with the power of the gods through the eagle
certain trees where the spirits are living certain pools in the river
places of the wild boar the dark places of the river fallen trees
these are important
others come and destroy these areas
we have great respect for animals and are not allowed to make fun of animals
we do not waste food a rice kernel floating in river is asked by an insect
why it is crying it responds because the family threw me away they don't want me
now people align with the power that felled the trees with bulldozers
we invited visitors into our area treated them as equals
now they have the power of the government behind them and missionaries
we feel like fish on land
if people break into your home you have to defend it yourself
it is our house and we know it intimately
if we can respect the place of our origin and respect the houses of others
when we visit

the white anthropologist from McMaster U speaks of the encapsulating society
the man from Kazakhstan speaks of huge energy and mineral deposits

of ecological devastation of 90 years of sovietization
he speaks of the influx of non-indigenous populations
the shooting of antelope with submachine guns for Chinese medicines
so old men can get it up it up
I never knew an impersonal pronoun and pre/sup/position
could destroy so much animals fish stones plants air water

a white man with a lot of respect about him
speaks of the North Atlantic mind
someone else speaks of cartographizing via the written word

Mr Kaplan who with his colleagues bankrolled this whole
series of conferences on religion and ecology speaks
of the industrial-science community
of weather and nature prediction and control
of moving ideas he speaks with passion and great respect without notes

one white woman said for those present who were not to have papers published
in the proceedings of the conference to not ask questions
except in private because of the book/publication
nature of this whole thing because it was being transcribed
from the audio/ and video/tapes many are traumatized at this
there is almost a mass exodus of FN people

Javier speaks in Mayan and Spanish and English
of meanings beyond Western rationality
of agriculture and the supernatural
of myth of reading nature of singing praying planting
of singing to the corn his brothers and sisters
“we know how to read the iconography of nature
when the news hasn’t arrived yet”
Javier speaks of mulch and wheat and corn inter-rowed

there is talk of this conference as a “feast of information”
Garcia speaks of the calabash the gourd the logogram
he tells us about the word for turtle and about homophones
and toponyms a gourd-vase-dimpled boat
gilded tobacco gourds cities shaped like gourds
he speaks of glosses and hiding inside a barrel cactus
with the head sticking out of
looking for a new place together
Victor is Mayan an academic
he speaks of ritual in daily life
so begins many sentences with “I argue that...”
he discusses the Popol Vuh and its relationship to Judeo-Christian testimonies
he speaks of the umbilical cord between earth and sky
the blue bowl (inverted cupola) green gourd of earth

he speaks of creating guardians
"we must understand respect have compassion for all
animals and food and stories"
the man from Guatemala says "you should never urinate into the water..."
you will be searching everywhere for little drops of urine forever
he spoke of contamination and pollution stories for children
their roles and responsibilities
he spoke of the value of powerful teaching
of the supernatural domain
of the interconnection of all things
"these should be inculcated at early age
in our culture the mother in the field talks to her child
from the first moment (of pregnancy)"
he speaks of the mountain as mother as sacred
he speaks of water and mountain

the political refugee from Victoria Mutang is very humble
as he speaks of deities always being with us
he speaks of collecting plants on certain days
at certain times you have to ask permission first

one woman speaks about those on the outside
having to decolonize themselves because of anthropologists
the man from Nicaragua is here speaking
even though his son just died a few days ago he has a great spirit
he came to share the First Nations man with the phd who teaches in california
who translates for him he doesn't want anybody to talk for him
he says Mayan priests are not witch-doctors
one of the africans asks about ritual and efficacy in pharmacopoeia
the response is that before collecting plants
they present themselves to you.
the potency is different in the same herbs
you have to be part of it for it to work
you do not just pick them

the moderator speaks of loren miller as persona non grata
as Amazonia's enemy about the hallucinogens patented by him
we are not the antlers of these indigenous people
we are their employees how do you manage a forest
certainly not with the imperative mood
he speaks of politically usable belief systems
in Nicaragua the government affirms the rights of indigenous peoples
but they are non-entitled to lands that go to the state
another white man speaks of the Awas Tingni
the korean owned plywood factory the logging firm
he speaks of conflict management devices
of which using the GPS satellite system is one

it costs \$100 and can pick up satellites
and GIS mapping system software can locate precisely in any geography
he says it's Indians vs loggers in Nicaragua

Julio says the mellifluous words in Spanish
Frederique makes poetry of them in English
he says the stars are alive they are persons and plants are companions
he was trained in systems theory
and was the co-ordinator of a very large team
in a small village in Peru for three years
he learned about the practices of these farmers
there is no room for feelings in science for agricultural feelings
he spoke of chakra an Indian crop
about corn and kinua growing together many varieties
there is also a mixture of potatoes
diversity is essential to the continuation of life in Andes because of weather
in the Andes we work in community
farmers converse with plants and stars with the Pleiades
"we converse with plants and animals and all that is in nature.
there is a ritual for every agricultural task
there is always asking permission making offerings
we put in our hat the flower of the potato
so we can be like our sister the potato
we paint our faces white we dance rather than pray
there is a combative state between the Shining Path terrorists
and the high pastureland of Andean agriculture but we go on
in that great mixture of grasses the llamas our sisters
carry bells on their necks to call on the spirit of food
for without spirit corn does not nourish
the llamas they are on loan from Apu the mountain one
our vision of cosmos does not go through the market
we have ceremonial sites where the path of sun comes
to the four corners the four seasons
at the equinox the sun rises at its very entrance
we burn our offerings rather than bury them
always we ask permission of the mountains
I was blinded by practices of science for many years
23 years as a plant geneticist
the modern way is unique in not respecting nature
the religion of modernity is science and it is the market"
what could be more beautiful than these two people
one speaking Spanish the other English
both speaking from a world of spirit

Nelly A J from Venezuela is an anthropologist
she speaks of demarcating the land
speaks of branches of the tree of life caught in heaven

with the fruit as heavy as stones
she speaks not of national indigenous organizations but local ones
where agreements are made where they threw out sacred narratives
which were not indigenous to that village hearsay
the question forms of who has the right/maturity
to undertake the accumulating of religious knowledge orthodoxifying
now over five consecutive decades the people haven't allowed the presence
of evangelical religions
when originally it was one of the most assimilated areas forty to fifty years ago
the talk goes to the right to ancestral land
after the public speaking
the quiet/unparticipating indigenous people speak up complain
she spoke seven hours with church officials
with a priest and a missionary
but they were unwilling to see accede concede
she said spirituality is most important
Donna says most groups can't afford to hire anthropologists etc.
and who would want to?
[the technology we need is to learn about the topology topography of legal loopholes]
"we're supposed to be happy just to get territory"
Nelly spoke of the court not being a traditional tool like guerillaism

talk went to genetic campesinos
and roads through the forest footpaths
during political blockages there was sharing
but it was called 'smuggling' because the enemies of the state
get harnessed with all the bad verbs
the geneticist says the peasants share everything
he said don't compare a way of being in the world
a way of life with others
when you start to compare is where you run into trouble.

he said the standard in the recent past was western ways
the western point of view
he spoke entirely in Spanish very aggressively
he said that in Peru to say 'peasant' is to say indigenous
it does not have a pejorative connotation
Lima has denied the presence of indigenous people in it.
they are invisible to officialdom

Teresia then went on about spheres of missionary influence in Kenya
then the Maori man stood up and spoke his language
then continued on in a very western way
about the metaphysics of philosophy and culture
he spoke of corn in New Zealand
of his country's isolation 12 hours to Singapore nonstop or LA
he spoke of his people travelling the Pacific for thousands of years

“for many cultures the ocean is an impediment
for us the sea is not a problem the Pacific is our backyard”
travelling by canoe is very important even today,
in his language 747 and canoe share the same word
he says that Maori religious thought does not begin in New Zealand
it is in the Cook Islands in atolls
he spoke of tidal waves
saying that his name is ‘tree’ (of a particular sort)
using western academic discourse he says
it’s in nature that we find all the answers to the philosophical questions
he speaks of his gods of Io Matua Kore who has no appearance
saying there are many names for one god father sky mother earth
we don’t need scientists to tell us about these ones
one of his stories was about kids conspiring against parents
with one child separating parents from eternal (nonstop) intercourse
“if there had been a psychologist present
s/he would have said keep the parents together”
all his sacred genealogies go back to children of two gods
koru of ethics ethics of te ao moroma
wholeness cosmos like a spiral
he speaks (with graphics) of hurihuri change and tradition
wairuatanga spirituality Maori life essences and creation
tapu being potentiality and sacredness mana power authority and common good
hau spiritual source of obligatory reciprocity in relationships and economics
the ethic of whanau or the extended family as the foundation of society
“biologists, architects, engineers, lawyers, can’t understand this kind of stuff”
now we have bicultural courts
because the court forgot how to think like this

the two Christians speak
one indigenous the other an anthropologist from Melanesia
they speak of traditional environmental knowledge acoustemology
we opt to go to harvard square for lunch

Nick the California indigen is slow and respectful
while the Australian anthropologist speaks patrony
“thank you for your ceremony this morning
I’m already drawing strength from it.”
constantly we are reminded of those larded with phd’s
in anthropology speaking with author/ity expert/ese

now the First Peoples of Australia will speak
until very recently there was virtually nothing in the literature
about Aboriginal women only the written word was privileged
“our laws and traditions were called hearsay evidence
oral cultures were scorned and derided”
Tom speaks of the need to break sacred law

relating oral traditions in court in order to save their land
confidentiality was not promised
the newage movement has appropriated everything
for the sake of healing and selling whatever people will buy
Tom speaks of standing with people in their fights
against dizzy pocahontas movies which do real harm
caricaturing First Nations people what is it
but blatant racism?
Tom begins by saying "I give you all my respect
we are all brothers and sisters all belonging to the land"
he had a vision of the camp in 1985
that he and Ellen have in the south
"we see and feel the land as our own body
it is like our body and named after its parts
it is like our mother it cools warms feeds comforts
it will always be our land and we must protect it
the umbilical cord the navel the stomach miwi
these tell us a person is good or bad
a woman being followed by someone with wrong ideas
feels it down there the power is in the stomach
not the heart not the brain
in the 1820s european sealers and whalers brought smallpox to Australia
they poisoned our people and used them for sexual purposes enslaved them
the people thought all bad things that had already been happening might stop
if they listened to the newcomers"

all the while Ellen worked on her basket
"we were forced to stop speaking our language
made to live in missions in towns religion was forced on us
our sacred sites were desecrated
women's secret knowings were put in trust into an envelope
there is women's business and there is men's business
the women's business was violated by the state
a male minister opened the envelope in parliament
got an Aboriginal man drunk had him tell lies
that were put into a newspaper
the racist commission had no evidence to support its claims
except by dissident women (who knew nothing)
end of political picnic
the politicians said we have been conspiring with environmentalists
reading their books"

Ellen brought material from her land to help her speak
it is a meditation
there are many problems collecting materials for weaving
there is pollution pesticides water drainage is poor
the welfare department took our children away

if they didn't go to school
beginning 16 years ago we began to learn from our elders

Tom said in front of three score (of same)
"we tell anthropologists something just to get rid of them"
he goes on to speak about the lack of authenticity in that profession
nor has he kind words for religious studies and linguistics
"between us we have six children"
the generations must continue

after greeting the assembly in Tl'at'imx
wishing happiness and prosperity
I mention the preceding conferences on shinto buddhism confucianism
I say 'there are anthropologists in my village today
digging up the bones of my ancestors taking pictures videos
I only hope that in the three upcoming conferences
on christianity judaism and islam there will be
an equal percentage of anthropologists as speakers as there are here'
that would be about fifty percent
equal amount/s of applause and silence
re/sounds

the organizers then promise to include the oral discussions
in the upcoming conference publications
thirty-seven hours of tape to transcribe
wouldn't you know it it was mostly the First Nations people who spoke
without paper or notes

the brahmin in the burgundy turtleneck
said he would be happy to reduce the number of pages he contributes
so oral discussion can be transcribed into the proceedings

the key that winds the conference slows in its turning
there is an exchange of numbers and addresses
promises of future coming together
and the people drift away
like memories.

Notes on Contributor

Peter Cole is a member of the In-SHUCK-ch/N'Quatqua Nation of British Columbia and is a doctoral candidate at Simon Fraser University in Curriculum Theory and Implementation in the Faculty of Education. Peter has spent many years in theatre: acting, directing, writing, etc. He is currently living in upstate New York and teaching at a university in New Jersey. He is anxious to return home and complete his dissertation on First Nations knowings as legitimate discourse in education.