

Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints

FROM THE SERIES: [The Human is More than Human](#)

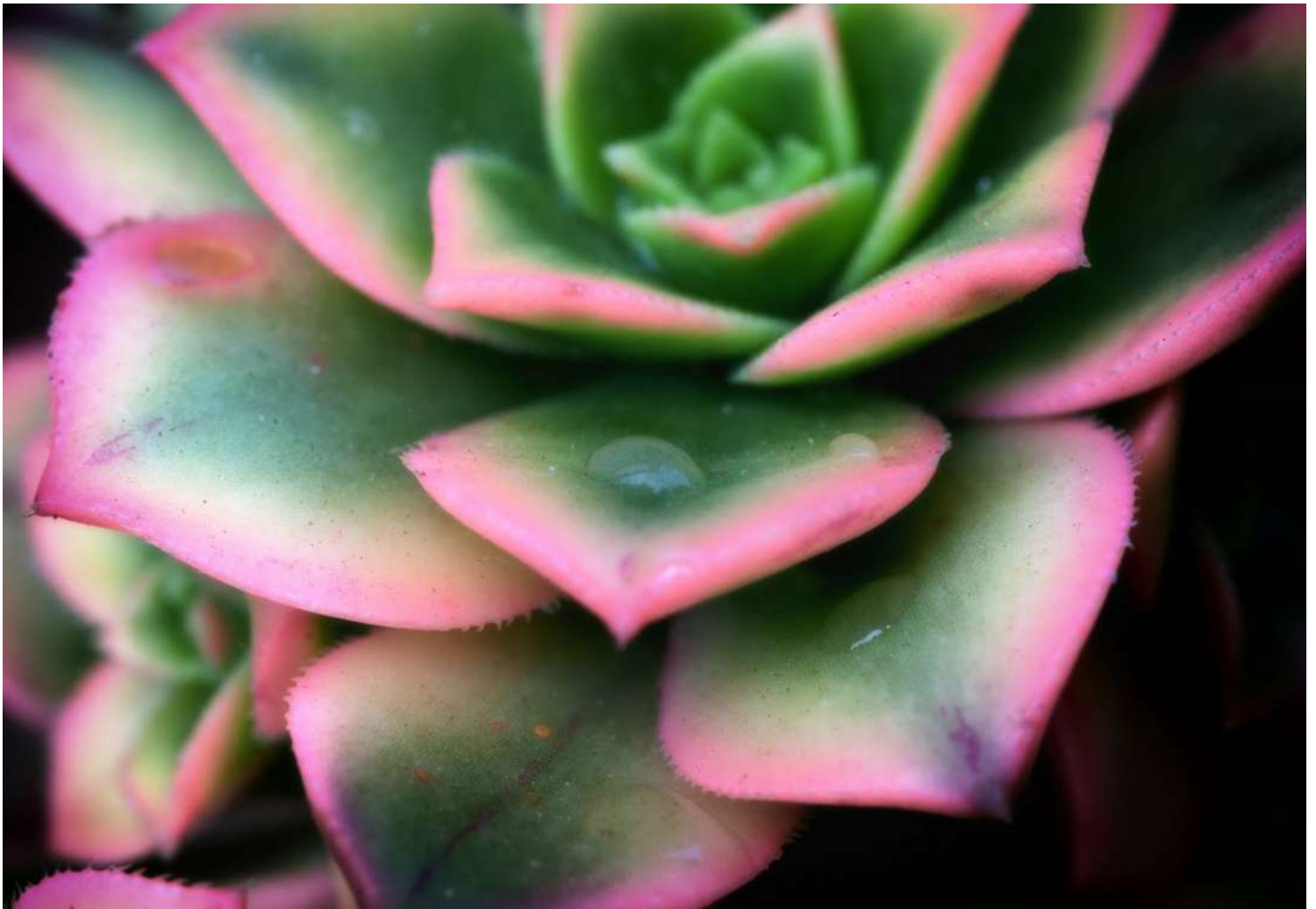


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In April 2011 I organized with Cori Hayden and the Science, Technology, and Society Center at the University of California, Berkeley a symposium: "Why the Animal? Queer Animalities, Indigenous Naturecultures, and Critical Race Approaches to Animal Studies." [2] I have begun to think about such issues more systematically during the past several years as I bring together feminist and indigenous approaches to understanding technoscience and the environment in my teaching and research.

In the Western academy, but fortunately not only here, there is a growing conversation around this idea of human and nonhuman relations, of "interspecies communities" as Dorion Sagan puts it in his thought-provoking paper, "The Human is More than Human: Interspecies Communities and the New 'Facts of Life'." I like the term "interspecies communities," although it does not capture all of the beings I see myself as in relation with. I'll come back to that. Within this field of inquiry, as we see in Sagan's paper and his critique of too-linear evolutionary narratives, thinkers aim essentially to dismantle hierarchies in the relationships of "westerners" with their non-human others.

What intrigues me is that I see similarities—both in Sagan's paper and in the broader field of "animal studies"—between the voices of "westerners" and some other folks that I want to bring into this conversation, indigenous or aboriginal voices. First, let me note what is similar between these groups. In speaking of symbiogenesis, or "the evolution of new species by symbiosis," Sagan notes that:

"We are crisscrossed and cohabited by stranger beings, intimate visitors who affect our behavior, appreciate our warmth, and are in no rush to leave. Like all visible life forms, we [humans] are composites." (6)

This account of symbiogenesis tickles me. It sounds to me like "we are all related." I read in Sagan's looping and not linear account that we are all of us—humans and nonhumans—a networked set of social-biological relations. He calls us "interspecies communities." That resonates with what Vine Deloria, Jr. called an "American Indian metaphysic." [3] And by

“metaphysics” Deloria meant a “set of first principles we must possess in order to make sense of the world in which we live.” I would have to include in an interspecies community or networked set of social-biological relations living beings that are both material and *immaterial*, and therein is a key difference. But I will come back to that. I am still attending to the similarities between Dorion Sagan’s thinking, this field more broadly, and indigenous thinkers. In his 2001 essay “American Indian Metaphysics,” Deloria wrote that the best description of that term is:

"the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately everything was related."

Is it too easy a comparison to say that Western thinkers are finally getting on board with something that is closer to an American Indian metaphysic?

Now, on to what is different between indigenous and Western standpoints, and I think this is a key and not easily bridgeable difference. In his opening paragraph to “The Human is More than Human” Sagan turns his attention to “life,” a “specific part of” the universe. He indicates therefore that there is something that is “not life.” He opens:

"Well it is to this universe that I want to turn again, and to a specific part of it. I want to turn to life, and within that part a fascinating subsystem, the one in which, of course, we are most interested. That is, humanity, ourselves."

For Sagan, life is limited to things that are more or less organismically defined. This is true of science studies folks engaging in animal studies as well, not just of biophysical scientists. That is why you need us—indigenous, or aboriginal, thinkers—at this conversational table.

Also conveying what Deloria would call an American Indian metaphysic, Charles Eastman, another Dakota notes in his 1911 book *The Soul of the Indian*[4] that:

"The elements and majestic forces in nature, Lightning, Wind, Water, Fire, and Frost, were regarded with awe as spiritual powers, but always secondary and intermediate in character."

We believed that the spirit pervades all creation and that every creature possesses a soul in some degree, though not necessarily a soul conscious of itself. The tree, the waterfall, the grizzly bear, each is an embodied Force, and as such an object of reverence."

As I make these brief comments, let me be clear that in order to be coherent and in order to not make sweeping claims, I revolve my analysis around not an “*American Indian* metaphysic” as Vine Deloria, Jr. called it—but a Lakota/Dakota (or “Sioux,” as you may know us) ethic. I draw on sources from this broader cultural group, which is my tribal background and which constitutes luckily for me some of the most prominent literature out there that is useful for thinking about these things. Both Vine Deloria, Jr. and Charles Eastman get classed as “American Indian” intellectuals, but in fact, they were also Dakota and so they wrote “American Indian” things out of a disproportionately Dakota cultural background.

But in terms of Western sciences, including social sciences, and indigenous or Dakota thought coming together—a prime example is the recent move to “*multi-species ethnography*” by anthropologists, geographers, and other social scientists. Scholars apply anthropological approaches to studying humans, to the social relations (not simply “interactions”) between humans and nonhumans, located in their social and physical habitats. As S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich comment in the introduction to the recent *Cultural Anthropology* special issue on the topic, new anthropological accounts increasingly appear in which nonhumans (animals, plants, fungi, and microbes) previously relegated to the status of “bare life” or “that which is killable” are now appearing “alongside humans in the realm of bios, with legibly biographical and political lives.”[5] In short, “multispecies ethnography centers on how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces.” Aha! Organisms have livelihoods. Vine Deloria’s words pop into my head:

"Today as Western science edges ever closer to acknowledging the intangible, spiritual [we need to find a better word to speak to scientists...] quality of matter and the intelligence of animals, the Indian view appears increasingly more sophisticated." (3)

This work, work is both methodologically and ethically innovative. But like Sagan’s work, multispecies ethnography has starting points that only partially contain indigenous standpoints. For example, in his study of the Kluane First Nation and other Arctic hunting

peoples, anthropologist Paul Nadasdy documents reciprocal exchanges (sometimes coupled with domination and its elements of coercion, deceit, and danger) between northern hunters and nonhuman persons who they know to be “thinking beings.” Sometimes these beings “consciously give themselves to hunters,” sometimes they have to be outwitted. Very importantly, Nadasdy explains hunting societies’ *ontologies* (what they know) rather than their *beliefs* about the world. And he calls cultural anthropologists to beware of their own discrediting languages that would see animal gifts to humans as metaphor rather than reality. [6]

A second contribution to this growing subfield that Aboriginal thinkers can make is to extend the range of nonhuman beings with which we can be in relation, as Eastman indicated in 1911. Again, these conversations in the academy tend to restrict our attention to beings that “live,” e.g. dogs, bears, mushrooms, microorganisms. We speak of *animal* studies after all. But for many indigenous peoples, our nonhuman others may not be understood in even critical western frameworks as living.

Nadasdy is primarily concerned with human and animal prey, but he also acknowledges for the Kluane today (as Eastman did for the Dakota) relations among northern indigenous people and other “objects” and “forces,” e.g. trees, stones, thunder, etc., which are known to be “sentient and intelligent persons.”[7] Like our methodological choices, language choices are ethical choices and are key in this project of constituting more democratic relations and worlds. Indeed, *animal* studies or the rhetoric of human/nonhuman may be an inadequate construction for capturing relations between beings and across cultures, be those Aboriginal, national, or disciplinary cultures.

I also want to pick up on a footnote in Sagan’s paper, even though it is just a footnote. But it reveals something important about our difficulty in communicating across these disciplines. My fellow commentator, Myra Hird is quoted in the footnote. In it she characterizes the social sciences as “smug” in a way that “licenses the false impression that natural scientists are largely ignorant of philosophical and social studies of science.” Science studies folks mistakenly assume think they/we can “gain sufficient understanding of phenomena by studying what we distinguish as social aspects of materiality.”[8] I want to speak back to this footnoted point because I think that same assessment also informs the broader paper. I agree

with Hird that scientists themselves are not ignorant of [the existence or extent of] social studies of science. But do they totally get our analyses? Hird seems to think they do get them. I do not agree. To quote Sagan:

"I have talked about how the "facts" of symbiogenesis can in some sense be considered superior to the theory of neo-Darwinism. But since I am speaking about scientific facts to anthropologists I should probably be careful, as there is always the possibility that I am projecting cultural ideas into the data, and that all that we see or seem is but a culturally refracted dream." (11)

This quote reflects the way in which we speak at cross purposes. Again, there is no "projecting cultural ideas into the data." The data are sought, understood/named, sampled and resampled, studied and re-studied, calculated and re-calculated within particular conceptual rivers or currents, and *not* others. To say "cultural ideas are projected," is to again assume not a *co-constitution* of our cultures and our apprehensions of the world, or maybe I should say it assumes not a symbiogenesis of those things.

As an aside, I also think we should dump that word "genesis" from our scientific vocabulary. Does it not indicate an emergence from nothing rather than the articulation of different pieces to make a new kind of whole? This is the same reason that I dislike the word "origin" that gets thrown around in genetic narratives of world history. "Origins" seem to belie the very concept of evolution that is about change over time. Where is the point of discrete beginning? Unless we are talking about the Big Bang, we probably should not use these terms. Like "genesis," Sagan's use of "projection" seems to represent the very kind of linearity that he argues against in his critique of evolution, an argument that I have enjoyed reading and re-reading and in which I am positively invested.

As for social scientists thinking we can distinguish social aspects of materiality, we don't think that because we don't think—or at least the theoretical crowd I run with—does not think that there are "social aspects of materiality." We think the material and the social are co-constituted. There is no social cream to skim off the top or to squeeze from the sponge. We see sociality and materiality as more akin to how Sagan, I think, sees "human" and bacterial

cells, as together making “composites,” as cohabiting one another, or feeding one another, or making and re-making one another.

There are so many threads coming together for me at this moment, as both a Dakota and as a social scientist who studies the bio-sciences. I will give a talk at this same meeting about Native American bio-scientists, a research project I conceived of because I need to care for my subject. I grew demoralized studying non-Native bio-scientists whose projects I felt antagonistic towards for an array of complicated reasons, not one of which is that I have trouble with the genetic knowledge point that I share markers in common with individuals living in Siberia. That is not my problem with their work. A hope I have for Native American scientists is that they will bring some of this “American Indian metaphysics” into the laboratory so we are not stuck with only “smug” social studies of science. (I don’t completely disagree with that assessment of Hird’s) as a strategy for challenging science to change. I want it to change from the inside. I want the bio-sciences to be “colonized” (and I mean that term as a genetic scientist and not a political scientist would intend it)—inhabited by those who were formerly only the food (or subjects) for science.

I also want to give a “poke”—not even a real analysis yet—to the work of Adrian Mackenzie of Lancaster University in the U.K. A UC Berkeley postdoctoral scholar, Benedikte Zitouni, just arrived from Belgium. She told me recently about her new interest in Mackenzie’s work on wireless networks. Our conversation thrilled me. I have not yet looked at his work or others like it, but I understand that his thinking on wireless networks in a sense looks at how human bodies, networks, and place all propagate into one other, thus perhaps making it more difficult to say what is life and what is not life. The academy is now being infiltrated by *non-indigenous* voices articulating the idea that life/not life is too binary and restrictive. This indicates greater scope at this moment in history for bringing indigenous voices to the conversational table. Vine Deloria, Jr. it seems was just ahead of his time.

Finally, it is not just indigenous voices, but queer voices that help us expand this conversation. Mel Chen has a new book coming out with Duke University Press, with a chapter entitled “Queer Animacies.” Chen uses the concept of animating and de-animating certain beings. We have seen some humans de-animated or made to seem less alive in order to justify hierarchies. And we see it in our classifications of nonhumans. That human/animal split

engenders a lot of violence. And therein lies a key intersection between queer theory and American Indian metaphysics—an aversion to the human/nonhuman split because of an explicit understanding that it engenders violence. There are some really important—not new voices—but new-to-having-a-real-voice-in-the-academy voices that have important insights to offer this field. These voices can help us make our sciences more multicultural and thus more rigorous.

Thank you to the audience for your attention, and thanks to John Hartigan for inviting me. Also thank you to Dorion Sagan and my co-discussants for all being here in Montreal to have this conversation. I am honored to have been invited to sit here and converse with you all.

Endnotes

(2) <http://www.kimtallbear.com/1/post/2011/05/conference-why-the-animal-queer-animalities-indigenous-naturecultures-and-critical-race-approaches-to-animal-studies-april-12th-uc-berkeley.html>

(3) Vine Deloria, Jr. “American Indian Metaphysics.” In V. Deloria, Jr. and D. R. Wildcat, (eds.), *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2001: 1-6.

(4) Charles A Eastman. *The Soul of the Indian*. Bison Books, 1980.

(5) S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25(4): 545.

(6) Paul Nadasdy, “The Gift in the Animal: The Ontology of Hunting and Human-Animal Sociality,” *American Ethnologist* 34(1) (February 2007): 25-43.

(7) Ibid. 29.

(8) Hird in Sagan, 4.

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