Ontologies of Eco Kin: Indigenous World Sense/ing

Esme Murdock*

Abstract: In our global neocolonial and neoliberal present, so-called solutions to settler-Indigenous conflict are often framed as a reconciliation achieved through a multicultural democratic society. However, this conception of resolution frequently adopts a superficial understanding of culture that ultimately understands cultural difference as reconcilable in the sense that *other* cultures can be folded into or made compatible with dominant cultural norms. On Turtle Island (North America), especially within the settler colonial context, such reconciliation as resolution becomes a differently fashioned form of domination as assimilation especially from the vantage points of Indigenous nations and Afro-descended peoples. This essay explores the ontological incommensurabilities of cultural difference that resist assimilation or translation into dominant Euro-Western cultural frameworks. It does this through examining the way culture and ontological orientation, or world-senses, are made and live on through various modes of cultural preservation and practice. I examine these ideas through Indigenous practices of orality, origin stories, ceremony, and cultural revitalization.

Keywords: culture, reconciliation, original instructions, world-sense, indigenous philosophies

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*Corresponding author: Esme Murdock, San Diego State University, USA, E-mail: emurdock@sdsu.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

In our global neocolonial and neoliberal present, so-called solutions to settler-Indigenous conflict are often framed as reconciliation or harmony as achieved through a multicultural democratic society. However, this conception of resolution is frequently framed with a superficial understanding of culture that ultimately understands cultural difference as reconcilable in the sense that *other* cultures can be folded into or made compatible with dominant cultural norms. On Turtle Island (North America), especially in the context of the settler colonial nation-states of the United States and Canada, such reconciliation as resolution becomes then just a differently fashioned form of domination as assimilation especially from the vantage points of Indigenous nations and Afro-descended peoples therein. What these proposals of resolution as reconciliation refuse to acknowledge or embrace is that cultural difference is not a superficial difference, nor ultimately a problem of translation, but instead ontological differences inform differing cosmologies and world-senses. I am using the term "world-sense" as Nigerian scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí defines it. World-sense is used in contradistinction to the Western concept of worldview, which privileges sight or the visual. World-sense is "a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups" (Oyěwùmí 1997, 3). World-sense has the capacity to embrace other cultures (such as Yorùbá, which is Oyěwùmí's purview) "that may privilege sense other than the visual or even a combination of senses" (Oyěwùmí 1997, 3). This essay explores the ontological incommensurabilities of cultural difference that resist assimilation or translation into dominant Euro-Western cultural frameworks. It does this by examining the ways culture and ontological orientation, or world-senses, are made and live on through various modes of cultural preservation and practice. I examine this through Indigenous practices of orality, origin stories, ceremony, and cultural revitalization.

Here, I want to share my positionality as an author as well as how I come to this work. I am a Black woman descended from enslaved Africans and European settlers in the context of what is now called the United States. Due to the transatlantic slave trade, human trafficking, and hundreds of years of the unimaginable terror of slavery and its afterlives that account for the presence of my African ancestors on Turtle Island (North America), I am alienated from much of the knowledge of my African ancestors' tribal nations, cosmologies, and world-senses. While these are alienated from me, they are not irrecoverable. I access them through the lessons and teachings I have inherited from my family, kin, and living spiritual connections to my ancestors. My family has

always taught me and instilled in me a deep responsibility to be a good relative and learn continuously how to live with Indigenous peoples, Native nations, and tribal communities as an Afro-descended person on Indigenous lands that are not my ancestral territories. This article is written from a standpoint of deep solidarity with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous lands of what we know call the United States and Canada. I want to also address that Indigenous world-sensing and Indigenous world-senses are incredibly diverse and dynamic. In this article, I have endeavored to focus on specific examples. I selected these examples for a variety of reasons, but an important reason is that they have been shared with consent by their tribal knowledge keepers. While Indigenous world-senses are diverse and non-identical, careful analysis can reveal important connections and similarities that I feel are worth investigating. It is never my intention to overgeneralize, or in fact universalize, in a way that causes harm, as my work is committed to self-determination, liberation, and sovereignty. Any mistakes herein are my own and I am accountable to them. Asé.

1.1. "Reconciliation is Dead, Revolution is Alive"

Story is a universalizing practice that humans use to make sense of worlds. There is never just one story or one interpretation of a story. As Esselen and Chumash scholar and poet Deborah Miranda reminds us:

> Culture is ultimately lost when we stop telling stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, our imagining of the future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every single second of our lives […] Culture is lost when we neglect to tell our stories, when we forget the power and craft of storytelling (Miranda 2013, xiv).

Thus, story is a living practice and relational ecosystem that not only constitutes and grows our world-sense but is also itself the lifeblood of cultural continuance. So much of the attempted murder of cultures through colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism is tied to reorientating and attempting to replace the reference points by which our originary world-sense is anchored and living. As such, I want to begin with a story, a story that is still unfolding and though it is specific to geographical and geopolitical space, the lessons contained in it, and the rage-filled resurgence and resistance expressed in it, have implications and resonances the world over.

On February 10, 2020, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) illegally invaded unceded Unist'ot'en territory without the consent of the

Hereditary Chiefs. A group of Unist'ot'en matriarchs, chiefs, and land defenders including Freda Huson (Chief Howilhkat), Brenda Michell (Chief Geltiy), and Dr. Karla Tait gathered at the Unist'ot'en camp in ceremony calling upon and honoring their ancestors. The RCMP forcibly removed and arrested the Unist'ot'en women, doused their sacred fire, removed red dresses honoring stolen sisters (murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls), and trashed their resistant signage ("Reconciliation Is Dead. Revolution Is Alive.," n.d.). Importantly, reconciliation was painted on the gate marking the beginning of the camp and Unist'ot'en territory meaning that the RCMP would have to actively destroy the true meaning of reconciliation if they were to proceed and enter. A Canadian flag with "Reconciliation is Dead" painted on it was thrown onto the sacred ceremonial fire and burned. The Unist'to'en in their own words state:

> Canada invades. Invades on behalf of industry. Invades during ceremony. Canada tears us from our land. Tears us from our families, from our homes. Takes our drums away. Takes our women away. Jails us for protecting the land, for being in ceremony, for honouring our ancestors [...] We have had enough. Enough dialogue, discussion, negotiation at the barrel of a gun. Canada comes to colonize. Reconciliation is dead [...] It is time to fight for our land, our lives, our children, our future. Revolution lives ("Reconciliation Is Dead. Revolution Is Alive.," n.d., Paragraphs 1 and 3).

Within this powerful statement, the Unist'ot'en reject the settler colonial "solution" Canada offers wrapped up as reconciliation or "negotiation at the barrel of a gun" ("Reconciliation Is Dead. Revolution Is Alive.," n.d.). From the seat of cultural memory and history, reconciliation is just a different word for continual settler colonial violence which hopes to "reconcile" First Nations to the everlasting hegemony and dominance of settler colonial rule. What is striking here, and especially for the purposes of this essay, are the ways in which resistance both exists in an Indigenous world-sense and fights to maintain that world-sense and world. This practice of ceremony is the living relationality of a particular world-sense which does not accept or normalize settler colonial and extractive violence. It is quite literally a practice to preserve the conditions of the possibility of life on this planet for us all. The proclamation that reconciliation is dead signals the death knell to settler colonial violence on the part of Indigenous nations. There is no coming to the table anymore, the terms of an allegiance to settler colonialism are a failed and rejected world and worldview.

Over the past 30 years, political reconciliation efforts carried out by settler colonial states has taken on a particular framework. Political reconciliation projects such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–2002), the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–2015), and the ongoing California Truth and Healing Council (2019–2025)[1] are all models that rely on liberal political forms of recognition involving settler colonial state actors and peoples, nations, and communities who have been harmed at the hands of state malfeasance. These practices of political reconciliation have been roundly critiqued especially by Black, Indigenous, and scholars of color for their insufficiency. The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), for example, was brought about by over 15,000 individual litigants against the state of Canada for the trauma, harm, and violence First Nations' people experienced in Canadian Residential Schools (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Given the length, cost, and need to revisit the trauma of such harm, Native scholars, activists, and Indigenous studies scholars have critiqued the process as well as the consequences of this process embodied in the ongoing recommendations the report generated (Stanton, 2011; McGregor, 2017; Younging et al., 2009; Corntassel and Holder, 2008). One prominent critique is that these political reconciliation processes work in ways that attempt to draw rigid boundaries around the harm and place it in a discrete chronological and irrecoverable past (Coulthard, 2014). In this sense, these political reconciliation processes are very much embedded in settler colonial projects to ensure the futurity of settler colonial nation states and "reconcile" Native nations and communities to that reality. Often the recommendations these state led settler-Indigenous frameworks of political reconciliation generate are not concerned with actual radical change in relationships or circumstance, but are rather window dressing on the settler colonial present. For example, take one recommendation from the Canadian TRC to "Indigenize" Canada's universities and higher education. This recommendation gave no context for respecting the inherent sovereignty of First Nations and no provisions or resources for rematriating lands. Instead, much of how "Indigenizing" universities has been imagined is a shallow form of liberal multiculturalism where Native dispossession is spoken but not addressed in concrete or material ways (Keeptwo, 2021). These forms of political reconciliation do not require concessions difficult enough to fundamentally alter, beyond acknowledgement, the ongoing violence of settler colonial worlds that target and undermine Indigenous world-sense.

1 For more on this please see The Governor's Office of Tribal Affairs (n.d.).

In part, the proclamation that "reconciliation is dead" profoundly emphasizes the fact that settlers and Indigenous nations live in incommensurable worlds.[2] These worlds cannot and will not be reconciled, as 500 years of resistance in and on Turtle Island attest to. Land, too, is a concept that is incommensurable between these worlds and world-senses as I have argued elsewhere (Murdock 2018a; 2018b). A concern I have observed from reading non-Western scholarship on reconciliation is the overdetermination of understandings/conceptions of land, by dominant groups of would-be reconcilers, as object, commodity, and private property. This overdetermination transports an assumption that what needs to be reconciled in interhuman land-based conflict is simply humans' more equitable access to the "good" of land as commodity; land as a commodity that begets more commodities and, thus, capital. However, this assumption is violent and fundamentally misunderstands or refuses to perceive or *sense* the ways in which different human groups have various and incommensurable conceptions of, and relations to, land that go beyond this largely Euro-Western prescription. In this way, part of what reconciliation means, especially for Indigenous and Afrodiasporic peoples, is a framework attuned to the *agency* of land as wedded to the identities and survivance of peoples. This is precisely what distinguishes definitions of reconciliation between those wedded to the reproduction of settler colonialism and those who are fighting for its end. Land is not a thing, but a context and process of and for relationality Simpson (2017). Land, and what we say about and practice with land, is a world-sense, otherwise than and in direct opposition to the violent dominance of coloniality.[3] Thus, an investigation of what the land says to us as we speak and advocate for ourselves as belonging to and responsible to land is a profound site and practice of *longing for land* outside of the imaginaries of dominant capitalist and colonial structures, perhaps a way of being and healing that coloniality could and cannot imagine.

Often the pre-understandings built into Western Euro-descendent frameworks of reconciliation are only made apparent once there is a conflict or lack of fit to the situation in which these allegedly "universal" and "objective" theories and models are applied. This is evident in the utter refusal of the

2 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that there is much in our dominant contemporary society under the label of "decolonization" that is incommensurable with the true meaning of decolonization as an ending of settler colonialism. As such, many "goals of social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives" do not in fact decolonize, but rather make decolonization efforts metaphorical while leaving settler colonialism intact (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1).

3 For more on decolonial notions of "otherwise," see King et al. (2020).

Unist'ot'en to accept the Canadian imposed process of reconciliation as settler colonial violence and a targeting for extinction of both their world and world-sense. One such epistemic misfit or mismatching, as I call them, occurs when reconciliation is attempted between groups who have long and complex histories of land-based conflict such as settlers and Indigenous peoples as well as between settlers and racialized minoritized groups such as Afrodiasporic peoples. Both Indigenous and Afrodiasporic groups have distinct and diverse world-senses that articulate different conceptions of land and land relations. These conceptions of land and land relations are informed by various and robust ecological histories, ecological heritages, and ecological identities. As many theorists and practitioners of repair via reconciliation are coming to understand, Western Eurocentric models and theories of reconciliation are not universal or universalizable to all situations (Murdock, 2018a; Khader, 2018). In fact, Indigenous and Afrodiasporic communities globally are protesting and rejecting the imposition of Western understandings of healing and moving forward as further continuous instances of refashioned familiar violent relations such as neocolonialism and neoliberalism, just as the story of Unist'ot'en clearly attests.

2. ORIENTATIONS TO THE WORLD, ORIENTING WORLD-SENSE

A critical site of incommensurability between settler colonial states and Indigenous and Afrodiasporic communities concerns land and land relations. This incommensurability involves distinct cosmological assumptions and understandings. Increasingly, with the blatant awareness and unavoidable evidence of the harmfulness and violence of the allegiance between capitalist accumulation and the killing of our planet, Indigenous and Afrodiasporic peoples are refusing to accept the precondition of relating to land as object and property as a requirement for healing through reconciliation. "Reconciliation," as a settler colonial project, does not mean either healing the land or healing ourselves, because the non-western cosmologies and world-senses I am interested in exploring do not presuppose such a separation in the first place.

Cosmology refers to more than a worldview or perspective. Cosmology refers to the relationality and narratives implicated in the creation and workings of the cosmos. Cosmologies embrace and include all of the –ologies we, as humans, consider to be important and indicative our relationships, meanings, and existences such as epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, ethics, science, and the like. Cosmologies are often accompanied by narratives that give meaning and guidance to the ordering of our worlds and perspectives usually

taking the form of origin or orienting stories and creation stories. These origin/orienting stories and creation stories often include much important information that is helpful for guiding and orienting relations not only among human communities, but also among humans and the rest of the cosmos. Many times Indigenous origin stories contain and reference what are called Original Instructions (Kimmerer, 2015; Nelson, 2008; Bauer, 2016; Akins and Bauer, 2021). As Anishinaabe scholar Melissa Nelson elucidates

> Original Instructions refer to the many diverse teachings, lessons, and ethics expressed in the origin stories and oral traditions of Indigenous Peoples. They are the literal and metaphorical instructions, passed on orally from generation to generation, for how to be a good human being living in reciprocal relation with all our seen and unseen relatives. They are natural laws that, when ignored, have natural consequences (Nelson 2008, 2–3).

You might think of these Original Instructions as relational blueprints for interacting and relating rightly or blueprints for right relations. Importantly, they are literal and metaphorical instructions because as Vanessa Watts (Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee) explains "these events [origin stories] took place. They were not imagined or fantasized. This is not lore, myth or legend. These histories are not longer versions of 'and the moral of the story is …' This is what happened" (Watts 2013, 21). This leads Watts to refer to origin stories as "creation histories" (Watts 2013, 21)

Importantly, these relational blueprints are embedded in the land and the way land is storied and stories itself. Watts describes the convergences between both Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee origin stories as constituting a more encompassing orientation to the land, what she calls "Place-Thought":

> What constitutes "society" from these [Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee] perspectives revolves around interactions between these worlds rather than solely interactions amongst human beings. Both of these accounts describe a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment—*Place-Thought.* Place-Thought is a non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts (Watts 2013, 21).

In this way, Watts articulates Indigenous Place-Thought as a fundamentally distinct paradigm to what she terms the Euro-Western paradigm of the

Epistemology-Ontology Divide.

I have often struggled with writing about Indigenous frameworks within the context of Western dominant academic philosophy precisely because distinctions between epistemology and ontology are taken as self-evident. In this sense, Watts urges us to resist the abstraction, classification, and separation of that which is inseparable in Indigenous Place-Thought. In this way, complex theories and frameworks, as "designs of understanding and interpretation" are "not distinct from place" (Watts 2013, 22).

However, it is important to keep in mind that these original instructions are conveyed in narratives that can be and are interpreted differently in different contexts, settings, and times. As Gregory Cajete (Tewa) reminds us, "As co-creators with nature, everything we do and experience has importance to the rest of the world. We cannot misexperience anything, we can only misinterpret what we experience" (Cajete 2003, 52). So, while the general thrusts of the instructions are similar, the relational blueprints they convey and articulate are not static or unchanging. Interpretation changes within the context of experience and different contexts prompt different interpretations. This implies and indeed requires a flexibility and openness to change attuned and sensitive to changing conditions, especially ecological conditions. For example, it is told that the Anishinaabe were instructed in the first prophecy to journey to an ecological setting or land where food grows on water. These instructions initiated a migration journey westward where eventually the Anishinabek came upon the ecological bounty of manoomin (wild rice), food that grows on water (Vizenor, 1993). This interpretation of instructions and migration facilitated a relationship to what we now understand as Anishinaabe lands, commonly referred to as the Great Lakes Basin of the United States and Canada.

The Haudenosaunee creation history emphasizes adaptation to changing conditions as movement between worlds, which similarly requires right relations. The Haudenosaunee origin story narrates Sky Woman falling from the Sky World to earth and being aided in making her new home by a whole family of more-than-human relations such as geese, turtles, muskrats, and others. Sky Woman brings seeds from Sky World and importantly was also pregnant. She relied on the gifts she brought with her and worked to facilitate relations and responsibilities to the other people she encountered in the new world below (Kimmerer, 2015). Specifically, the geese help slow Sky Woman's fall to the watery world below and a great turtle allows Sky Woman to land on their back. Various more-than-human relatives dive down below the water to try and bring up some mud so that the watery world of earth can accommodate

the need for land that Sky Woman and her unborn progeny require. Many fail, but ultimately muskrat succeeds, though they sacrifice their life in the process. In some versions of the story, Sky Woman dances on the turtle's back to spread the earth and sow the seeds, which creates land amongst the vast watery expanse of earth (Simpson 2012, Onondaga Historical Association n.d.).

This story is why the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous nations in North America refer to this turtle-shaped continent as Turtle Island. In reflecting on this origin story, Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) stresses details of the story, notably, that Sky Woman was a stranger and migrant who nonetheless practiced responsibility, reciprocity, and generosity which was also modeled to her by the relatives she encountered on Earth. It is also a beautiful example of how difference is a gift and entails diverse responsibilities and relationships, as all the more-than-human relatives in the story help in distinct ways according to their distinct embodiment and positionality. These details importantly convey a set of original instructions for how humans and the more-than-human world should and can interact to work toward right relations and balance (Kimmerer, 2015). Watts explains:

> When Sky Woman falls from the sky and lies on the back of a turtle, she is not only able to create land but becomes territory herself. Therefore, Place-Thought is an extension of her circumstance, desire, and communication with water and animals—her agency. Through this communication she is able to become the basis by which all future societies will be built upon—land (Watts 2013, 23).

Importantly this creation history also emphasizes the agency, spirit, and choice that resides in all more-than-human beings as well.

> It means that non-human beings choose how they reside, interact, and develop relationships with other non-humans. So, all elements of nature possess agency, and this agency is not limited to innate action or causal relationships […] Thus, habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies (Watts 2013, 23).

Similarly, in an iteration of a Yorùbá creation history, land or earth is created through a collaboration of gods from the originary conditions of sky above and water or marshland below. Through collaboration and gifts the gods come together to craft a plan and bring together materials to create dry land. The materials are a gold chain, a snail shell filled with sand, a black cat, a white hen, and a palm nut all carried in a sack. The eternal, Obatala, descended

on the chain and when they were close enough to the water and marshland below and was instructed to pour sand out of the snail shell, which created dry land. Once Obatala was on dry land, they planted the palm seed, and the earth began to populate with flora. They harvested and drank palm wine and created other beings to keep Obatala company, which would come to populate the land. However, Obatala's drunkenness created conflict with Olukun, god of all below the sky, who was not consulted and did not give consent for Obatala to populate the land in this way. When Obatala returned to the sky world to visit, Olukun summoned powerful waves to surge the dry land drowning many beings. Through sacrifice, entreaty, and compromise between the gods and other earthly beings the waters retreated and the land of Yorùbá emerged after the recession of the floods (Anderson, 1996).

Here we find important details that emphasize ceremony, permission, responsibility, and gifts as well. The primary role of collaboration and communication for right relations that maintain harmony and balance are paramount. The eternals have different responsibilities related to their gifts such as water and sky. The land and waters' conditions can also change rapidly when relations are out of balance. This unbalancing can occur when conflict arises through the drunken neglect of communication, collaboration, and the need for permission. As Nelson states, when natural laws are ignored, natural consequences follow (Nelson, 2008).

In both iterations, respectively, of the Haudenosaunee and Yorùbá origin and creation histories the narrative and relations between worlds and beings serves as a direct experience and blueprint for right relations. Each of these teachings are grounded in cosmologies, world-senses, and Place-Thought that conceive of land in distinct ways as alive. Land is alive not only in the sense of ecological or physical connections or systems (although that applies too), but also in the sense that these frameworks of world-sensing propose and understand land as the material (human and non-human) as well as the spiritual (different worlds and realms) bases of our shared existence. In this way, the worlds, while distinct, are also importantly coterminous with each other and fundamentally related and relational. This is deeply significant because it reveals a conception of land and land relations that is greatly distinct from European enlightenment conceptions of land and earth as scientific object as well as global capitalist economic conceptions of land as fungible commodity. In this way, the non-dominant and non-Western conceptions of land and land relating embedded in Haudenosaunee and Yorùbá cosmologies (among many others not mentioned here) point to incommensurable frameworks of land and existence that cannot and should not be separated into the Western ontology-

epistemology divide. Lands are distinct and have their own circumstances, desires, and communications that cannot and will not be reduced or mastered in dominant Western cosmologies deemed universal and trafficked across the globe (Mignolo, 2000). The implications of this incommensurability for transcultural processes of reconciliation are profound.

3. IRRECONCILABLE RESURGENCES

What I mean when I say that conceptions of land and land relations are incommensurable across cosmologies and traditions is not merely the colloquial understanding that they are incompatible, but that they are distinct ways of being and knowing that cannot be interchanged (Lugones, 2010; De La Cadena, 2015; Méndez, 2018). Within the dominant frameworks of Western eurocentric and raciocentric ways of being and knowing, a singular and place-based system has been deemed (falsely) universal and trafficked around the globe through processes (historical and continuous) such as colonialism and imperialism. In this way, Western frameworks have become enmeshed with other cultural frameworks, but they have never subsumed or assimilated them out of existence. A key misunderstanding and false premise of these same Western dominant frameworks is the idea that everything therein is ultimately translatable or reducible to this model. Oyěwùmí describes this as a failure "to distinguish between universals and Western particulars." For example, "[t]hat human groups have a remembered past is a universal; that the Sumerians developed writing and produced written history at a certain period of time is *a particular manifestation of this*"(Oyěwùmí 1997, 22, emphasis added). In this way, dominant Western cosmological purviews are not understood as one of many but as *the* cosmological purview through which all else must ultimately submit and be known. However, the Western worldview is a particular one and a provincial one at that. This framework has included within it assimilationist and identitarian logics to land such that land is understood as an object or commodity that is inert and without agency. Under this understanding humans (the subjects) relate to land (the object) as agents, thus superiors, and no matter the variance or difference of land in its actual qualities, the relationship of dominance is prescribed as unchanging and eternally so. As Malian philosopher Amadou Hampate Ba emphasizes "it may baffle the Cartesian mind accustomed to dividing everything into clear-cut categories" but "[i]n oral tradition [...] spiritual and material are not dissociated" (Hampate Ba, quoted in Oyěwùmí 1997, 28). Thus, subjecthood defined in the Western tradition as exceptional

agency, understood as dominance and superiority, is coded into the dominant paradigm as an ontological presupposition and fact.

As we see from the Haudenosaunee and Yorùbá origin stories land, how we relate to land, and what is required to relate to distinct landscapes is not a certain or eternal prescription, but a relational, changing, and unfolding process that is never complete. This is both true of lands that one is familiar with over time and seasons as well as of lands that one is unfamiliar with or relatively new to. These non-dominant cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies give space to both the agency and indeterminacy of lands and relations. As the origin and creation histories live through telling, their directions are called upon to adapt and change to the process and context of land. This requires flexibility and dynamism that stands in stark contrast to the thingification, objectification, and universalization that many Western cosmologies and frameworks hope to achieve.

A key understanding, I receive from the teachings and instructions of both the Haudensaunee and Yorùbá orienting stories is precisely this dynamism and necessary changeability of land and thus relations to land. The Euro-Western conception of land as object or commodity, that understands the trafficking and imposition on many parts of the world through colonialism and imperialism, attempts to reify or fix land and relations to land as modes of domination, where only domination becomes natural, objective, and eternal. The foundational quality of this understanding as built into Western dominant/master cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies has led and continues to produce harmful and wrongheaded ideas about what justice or reconciliation requires.[4] Land justice within this paradigm is often thought of as just giving those to be reconciled access to the same *stuff* of Western domination: access to territory, freedom to relate to land in the only way it conceives of land as valuable, as commodity. But if we orient ourselves differently, from say Haudenosaunee and Yorùbá cosmologies, this mode of relation can be understood as a poor one that enacts harm in itself by the myriad other relations that are surrendered to the master ideology of dominance.

4 Obviously there has been dissension and revolt ideologically and philosophically even within the Western epistemological tradition. I am thinking here specifically of the Frankfurt School and the critical theory and critical social theory that emerged post World War II in Europe. However, this movement within the Western/European tradition is significantly late to the party, as it were, and narrowly confined to the Western, Eurocentric cosmology. Indeed, there is constant debate within what we frame and name Western discourse, much of which has been and continues to be actively suppressed such that practitioners of dominant Western culture rarely know their own histories of dissent and non-cooperation, their own world-senses that are otherwise.

What this means is that reconciliation is not and cannot be a thing or commodity that we achieve or obtain through the business-as-usual routines of colonial and neoliberal relations. This means that there is no one-size-fits-all reconciliation or that simply going through the motions of prescribed reconciliation processes (made and enacted by the same systems that caused and continuously cause the harm) and checking boxes will get the job done. Rematriation of land is indeed a fundamental requirement of reconciliation processes stated and enforced by the sovereignty of Indigenous nations (Gray, 2022; The Red Nation, 2021). However, rematriation is not and cannot be understood as merely a capitalist exchange and means of access to commodification. Instead, the concept of rematriation is opposed to repatriation and is grounded in the commitment of turning away from and refusing both capitalism and heteropatriarchy (Gray, 2022; Clayman Institute for Gender Research, dir, 2023; Baldy, 2018). These latter ideas are wrongheaded precisely because they use the calculus and understanding of value as dictated by the same system (the settler-colonial nation state) to "achieve justice," and in the same breath, pronounce justice as achieved and sufficient. In this sense, reconciliation as a goal, as a dream, as a nightmare, is indeed dead. With this we move onto revolution and how the otherwises and elsewheres of different cultures are kept alive and resurging.[5]

4. REFUSAL, RESURGENCE, AND REVOLUTION

That colonialism, settler colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism are incomplete projects is testament to the diverse, robust, and brilliant powers of Indigenous and minoritized cultural relations the world over nurtured, protected, and born through the work of Indigenous peoples and nations. As mentioned above, a key characteristic of Indigenous cultures is relationality as modeled, learned, and lived through orality and oral traditions. The unpredictability, play, and creativity embodied in oral traditions and oral cultures plants the seeds of culture in many places such that world-senses are reinforced in many different forms and media. Take for example, a story that Kikuyu scholar and activist Wangari Maathai shares about her own introduction to the Kikuyu world and world-sense through ceremony upon her birth:

> In anticipation of the birth, the expectant mother would fatten a lamb that slept and ate inside her home. While the women gathered the ritual

5 For more on radical and fugitive conceptions of "elsewheres," see Harney and Moten (2013).

> foods, the child's father would sacrifice the lamb and roast a piece of the flesh. The bananas and the potatoes would also be roasted along with the meat and the raw sugarcane given to the new mother. She would chew small pieces of each in turn and then put some of the juice into the baby's tiny mouth. This would have been my first meal. Even before breast milk, I would have swallowed the juice of green bananas, blue-purple sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and a fattened lamb, all fruits of the local land (Maathai 2007, 4).

This Kikuyu ceremony is both a literal and metaphorical introduction of the child to the world. Before the child even drinks breastmilk, they are introduced to the fruits of the land and firmly entrenched ontologically in place, in physical and spiritual relation to that place. Belonging to land and place is thus something that is continuously modeled through ceremony. Maathai also refers to culture as "coded wisdom." She states, "[c]ulture is coded wisdom [...] wisdom that has been accumulated for thousands of years and generations. Some of that wisdom is coded in our ceremonies, it is coded in our values, it is coded in our songs, in our dances" (Dater and Merton, 2008). In this way, culture is not a thing, but rather culture lives in the way it is practiced and encoded in and among the lands and peoples who relate to it. The coding of culture in multiple places, media, and practices is critical to the ways that Indigenous world-sense is experienced and preserved through changing conditions, whether bad or good. Indeed, the power of this form of cultural practice is apparent in how desperately colonizers and invaders targeted and target ceremonial practices, languages, songs, dances, and generally any activity that is rooted in a particular form and expression of world-sense. For example, in the United States, it was illegal for American Indians to practice their religions, dance, or perform their ceremonies until 1978, which is but one reason why revitalization practices are so urgent and crucial (Estes 2019, 18). Similarly, certain First Nations' religious ceremonial practices were illegalized in regions of Canada through the Potlatch Ban (1884–1951) as part of the Indian Act (Davidson and Davidson, 2018).

One of the ways of understanding, in part, the revolution encapsulated in the Unist'ot'en proclamation that reconciliation is dead is to understand the unending power and relationality of Indigenous world-senses. Ceremonies are practiced in order to connect and remember and re-member the particularity, the locality, and the world-sense of Indigenous peoples. These world-senses in the context of Turtle Island have been under attack for nearly five centuries and yet persist through the brilliance and creativity of Native peoples. Indigenous

resurgence and revitalization practices capture the understanding that nothing wholly novel has been created *ex nihilo* and point to the ways that practices are not mere recuperations of a static past that settler colonialism and domination presume. In the context of the revitalization of the ceremonial Flower Dance by the Hupa people, Hupa scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy states:

> Bringing this revitalization to fruition was not just a reclaiming of memories, stories, songs, and ceremony; it was also a reclamation of the historical ethnographic record. It was here that Native women would push back against the narrative of the vanishing, dying Indian, demonstrating not only that we are still here but also that the Flower Dance had never disappeared and would never disappear, go extinct, or be forgotten. The ceremony could be none of those things because this ceremony was in the memories of our elders in the records and stories left by our ancestors in the ethnographic record, and being danced for all time in the heavens above, waiting for us to recall it (Baldy 2018, 99).

This is another way of understanding the versatility, creativity, and brilliance of the permeation of cultural practices and values in multiple sites. The Western anthropological and linguistic common proclamation of Indigenous languages and cultures as "dead" or "dying" are not only false, but they are only utterable from a Western framework that relies on an ontological understanding of culture as object, or as something capable of being killed and vacated of agency. In this instance, the Hupa Flower Dance has never stopped within Hupa cosmology and world-sense because the K'ixinay ("eternals") are forever dancing it and only cease when the dance is re-called by the Hupa to earth during their ceremony. As such the Flower Dance does not cease, cannot die, and is never forgotten. This is similar to the way a language spoken by the ancestors and within the spirit world can never die.

Baldy also emphasizes the way in which her Hupa ancestors understood the targeting of women's ceremonies, and Indigenous women more generally, as integral to the project of attempting to kill a people or kill a culture. In this way, she also understands the expert ways in which Hupa people, and Indigenous peoples more generally, navigated the dominant Western anthropological projects of fetishizing, capturing, and "preserving" Indigenous cultures and cultural artifacts in "dying" Indigenous worlds. Baldy argues that Indigenous research partners, especially in the context of state and government sanctioned genocide of California Indians, both refused to imperil their women

and people through revealing too much about ceremonial practices and also testified and performed cultural practices for their descendants to find within the ethnographic archives and practice again in the future (Baldy 2018, 77–8).

Another important contribution Baldy makes in terms of thinking about the ways in which Indigenous peoples have and continue to practice their own world-sense is the central understanding that Hupa people are always called to and in the practice of world renewal. Central to Hupa world-sense and epistemology is the understanding that Hupa people are world renewal dancers. Within their dances are expressions of the culture, of their original instructions, of their aim for right relations and balance with the land, which they both belong to and which longs for them too. What this means is that the spiritual and material union of the world is a fundamental ontological undertaking. The world does not merely exist separate and alone from human people but must continually be renewed and brought back into balance. This is why cultures must be malleable and flexible to changing conditions. It is why Indigenous cultures persist and thrive even amidst the monumental efforts at their erasure and murder. Ceremonies demonstrate through living practice that another world is possible, that another world is already here and on its way. The ceremonial fire of the Unist'ot'en burned that truth, it burned reconciliation as a dead and dying culture, as a culture of death and destruction to Indigenous worlds, reconciliation *qua* domination and assimilation as a culture that cannot and will not continue. Baldy states, "All over California, recognized, unrecognized, even terminated Native people are dancing. Indian Island is not just a place where a bloody massacre occurred; it is once again a place of world renewal. Our landscapes once more feel the stomp of our feet and the warmth of our fires" (Baldy 2018, 52).

To return to the ceremonial fire of at the Unist'ot'en Camp, the work of land and water defense is still going strong. At the time of this writing, corporations like Coastal GasLink, without resistance from the settler Canadian government, continue to violate and harm Unist'ot'en traditional territory. In May of 2023, the Narwhal (a Canadian media site) reported on the extensive damage to Coastal GasLink's invasive pipeline infrastructure had caused to Gosnell Creek, a critical wetland ecosystem and relative in Wet'suwet'en territory. Due to Coastal GasLink's violations of environmental law and Wet'suwet'en territory and sovereignty, massive amounts of sediment have polluted Gosnell Creek and contributed to pollution and erosion of connected waterways. These waterways are critical to Wet'suwet'en peoples and their relatives such as moose, salmon, and to the health of Wet'suwet'en territory overall. Dr. Karla Tait, a C'ihlts'ehkhyu clan member and director of

clinical health at the Unist'ot'en healing center stated, "Now that we're finally getting our people to a state and place where they're healthy and they're able to embrace their identity, their cultural practices, where are they going to actually learn and do those things that make us Wet'suwet'en if what's left of our land is destroyed?" (Simmons 2023, Paragraph 20). The Wet'suwet'en tribal members interviewed in the piece speak of their foresight that this degradation would happen and how that knowledge is connected to their fierce opposition to invasions and degradations of their lands and relatives (Simmons, 2023). It is all deeply heartbreaking and demoralizing, nonetheless. And yet, the struggle very much continues, as it has since the first invasions of Indigenous lands in the Americas almost half a millennium ago. The ongoing struggle and commitment to Unist'ot'en world-sense persists despite colossal efforts to subsume and enfold Indigenous life into settler colonial modalities. As Vine Deloria Jr. reminds us, the land needs time for itself and Native nations stand on the frontlines of those processes to protect the land's time and being. Ceremonies are a way of honoring that land has its own agency and needs its own time, a way of continually renewing a world in balance with natural law (McLeod 2001).

And might it be time to look at the Western dominant cultural framework for what it really is? Might it be time to examine what this culture requires to *make sense?* The attempted and actual death and destruction of so many worlds and world-senses to keep the wheels moving on an unsustainable system. Does it really make sense to deny what we feel, what we perceive, what we sense, to declare that most of the earth is dead, inanimate, or on the way to that state? So, I suppose it is worth asking the question to what ultimately does dominant Western culture ask us all to be reconciled? Unlivable futures for us and for our more-than-human relatives? Might it be time to learn and study the wisdom of Indigenous world-sense and commit to attending to those global Indigenous world-senses colonization and imperialism have attempted to stamp out for centuries everywhere (including Europe)? Might it be time to refuse the violent choices of either attempted annihilation or unethical appropriation of Indigenous world-senses? Might it be time to truly ask if the Earth and the lands and waters of our planet long for the warmth of other fires, of other values, of other relations that we can model and practice as a way of renewing a world that is already here, a world that has been here, a world-sense for the living that sees the sacred in all of our interrelation? Might it be time for all of us to put our bodies, hearts, and spirits on the line? Reconciliation is dead. Revolution is alive.

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